



THE BEAUTY, DIGNITY AND ROLE OF WOMEN IN RELIGIONS IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN SOCIETY AND BEYOND

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined the beauty, dignity and role of women in religions. Its main thesis is that women are by nature beautiful and dignified and that they played crucial role in religion in the beginning of the creation of the world. Sadly, such role has been eroded by patriarchal mentality. Adopting the analytical approach and anthropological theoretical base, the paper used some of the religions of primal society as well as Roman, Christian, Jewish and Islamic religions to drive home the points that women played crucial role in religions in spite of the fact that they have been suppressed, cajoled, ridiculed and suffered all forms of degrading treatment in the hands of men both in religious activities and in secular affairs not only in Africa but the world over. The paper concluded among other things that patriarchy be dismantled, that women's role in religion and other activities should be appreciated and that the world would be a haven if rape, forced marriage, wife battery and the like are abolished.

Key words: Religion, God, Women, Beauty, Dignity

INTRODUCTION

It is regrettable that the world is fundamentally masculine and women are not accorded any visible prominent status in religious and other matters. The superiority of men over women is generally acknowledged. The image of female inferiority has brought about women's liberation movement. The oriental world keeps women perpetually behind the veil and denied them the right to think for themselves. Women Liberation Movement has accused Judaism and Christianity and even Islam of sexism. In this regard, Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow observe: Feminists have charged that Judaism and Christianity are sexist religions with a male God and traditions of male leadership that legitimate the superiority of men in family and society. This new challenge to traditional faiths just confirms the view of some feminists that society has outgrown its need for religion. They agree with Freud and Marx that religions keep people dependent on authority and thwart their desire to improve their material situations (1) There is no doubt that women have played and still play major role in religion. From the time of the creation of the world, God was a female as various creation stories portrayed. At the very dawn of religion, God was a woman. The earth was invariably identified as female. Women are highly irritated "at the quaint archaism of traditional religious sexism". They frown at the enormous sense of injustice against them in the name of religion in society. In this respect, Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow observe: It is precisely this sense of injustice that lies at the heart of the first feminist criticisms of religion. Most of these criticisms originated in an often-inarticulate sense of exclusion from traditional religious practice or theology. Women who felt called to be rabbis, priests, and ministers frequently found themselves barred from these vocations. Orthodox Jewish women who wanted to participate fully in worship were excluded from the praying community and seated behind a screen. Catholic and Protestants women who



wanted to serve communion were asked, instead, to serve church suppers. Women in every congregation heard phrases such as “God of our Fathers,” “Men of God” and the “Brotherhood of man” preached from the pulpit. Everywhere they turned, women found signs reading “For Men Only” (3). Instances are legion with regard to the subjugation of women by men in places of worship. The Jews had a strictly masculine concept of god – the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob. In their synagogue assemblies, women were not counted to make a quorum. In Christianity, the miracle of feeding of the five thousand excluded the figure of women and children (Matt. 14:15 – 21; Mark 6:35 – 44; Luke 9:12 – 17; John 6: 5 – 13). St Paul regarded it as an anathema for a woman to be heard in the church. If there was anything she wanted to know, she should find out from her husband at home. In Islam, women could only lead prayers for a congregation of women. In the mosque, women are debarred to stand in the same row with men but separately behind the rows of men. In organized religion, the greatest enemy of any enlightened society, and especially of women is the organized clergy.

The Make-Up of a Woman’s Beauty

One may ask, what makes a woman beautiful? The answer is not difficult to find. There are certain elements that make a woman beautiful, captivating and adorable. These elements are as follows; First is the physiognomy of a woman’s face. Physiognomy refers to the shape and features of a person’s face. If a woman has a captivating face, her beauty will be highly esteemed. Dark eyebrows and eyelashes and pointed nose as well as well-patterned immaculate homodont set of teeth are excellences in the highest measures that make a woman beautiful. Open teeth is an added beauty but long and protruding ones destroy a woman’s beauty. Another element to be considered is the head and the hair surrounding it. A roundish head is preferable to an oblong one. The hair on the head is another source of beauty. The hair could be fair, dark, straight or curly or even wavy. A woman should comb or brush her hair to her desired pattern. In order to make the hair beautiful, the woman should not leave her hair unkempt but should be well groomed. Nowadays artificial wigs are available for those who do not wish their hair to appear natural. Plaiting the hair also beautifies the woman’s hair and makes the woman pretty and attractive. Next to be considered are the breasts, the hips and the buttocks. The breasts and developed hips are characteristics of women and are indications of functional effectiveness as well as sexual allurements. The beautiful woman is therefore one endowed as Chaucer according to Havelock Ellis expresses it, “with buttocks brode and brestes round and hye” (36). That is to say, she is the woman with a fully developed body, large breasts, and large projecting nates or buttocks.

The woman is obviously best fitted to bear children that suckle the breasts. These secondary sexual characteristics should be either naturally prominent or artificially rendered so. In this respect, Ellis observes: This secondary sexual character represents the most decided structural deviation of the feminine type from the masculine, a deviation demanded by the reproductive function of women, and in the admiration it arouses sexual selection (40). It is indisputable everywhere that large hips and buttocks of women are regarded as mark of beauty. The beauty of the breast among civilized and uncivilized



peoples whether educated or uneducated is usually highly esteemed. According to Ellis "Savages, also, sometimes show admiration for this part of the body, and in the Papuan folk-tales, for instance, the sole distinguishing mark of a beautiful woman is breasts that stand up" (43). In Nigeria and indeed in Africa, ladies do not like flaccid breasts and always make sure their breasts do not sag. So, they do everything humanly possible to make their breasts turgid and erect. They do all these in order to make themselves beautiful. Some do not like their babies to suckle the breasts much so as not to bring about the breasts going flaccid. To ensure that the breasts stand up and be in proper shape gave rise to the invention of brassiere (bra for short) in 1909 as a woman's undergarment to support the breasts. It should be noted however, according to John Ayto "garments serving a similar purpose have been identified in America as far back as the 1860s" (13).

Women who do not have developed breasts very often wear artificial means to enlarge their breasts and the beauty of a woman's developed breasts and pelvis is a universal source of pleasure to humanity. Indeed, a woman of beauty is a joy forever. Tattooing the arms or the belly (abdomen) also makes a woman beautiful. J. Omosade Awolalu and P. Adelumo Dopamu elaborate on tattooing as a mark of beauty: As a sign of general maturity, some girls tattoo their bodies. In days gone by a girl without such tattoos was considered ugly and unprepared for marriage. With tattooing, girls had their names inscribed on their arms or legs, and they used to go about with pride for bearing such scars (178). Confinement of girls to the fattening houses during marriage also makes a woman beautiful. Girls at their nubile age in traditional Igbo society paint their bodies with dyes or indigo, and many files their teeth. The confinement of the girls in the fattening houses makes them beautiful, chubby and healthy ready for conception and childbearing. J. Omosade Awolalu and P. Adelumo Dopamu said it all when they observe that: Some girls in Igboland are confined to the fattening houses for weeks or months between the first menstruation and marriage. The fiancé usually sends them foodstuffs and other presents. During the period, their movement is restricted, and they, therefore, become plump and beautiful. At the end of the confinement, they are given public feast (186).

Furthermore, beauty is also enhanced during a woman's pregnancy. A woman who reaches her full flowering period in pregnancy ought to be most beautiful. "This is so" replied Stratz according to Ellis: If the period of her full physical bloom chances to correspond with the early months of pregnancy, for with the onset of pregnancy metabolism is heightened, the tissues become active, the tone of the skin softer and brighter, the breasts firmer, so that the charm of fullest bloom is increased until the moment when the expansion of the womb begins to destroy the harmony of the form" (41-42). Similarly, a beautiful woman ought to have fitting legs that should support the trunk and shoulders. Her neck with fitting necklace should also fit the head which should also be of moderate size. Smallish, coconut or oblong head makes the woman repulsive. The woman can be black or fair in complexion. Her skin should be as smooth as a bottle. Dark patches on the skin especially on her face destroy her beauty. Effective use of cosmetics can get rid of irritating spots on her face, legs and body. A plump face with chubby cheeks makes the woman good-looking and attractive especially if she has a cheerful disposition. It has to be stressed that one need not spend a fortune in



order to make her black skin white. Black is beautiful. Linda Villarosa said it all when she observes: Black is beautiful. That goes for our dark and lovely skin, our full, thick, and our many-shades-of-brown eyes. But too many of us don't believe this. Our vision has been crowded with images of white women with alabaster complexions, long straight hair, aquatic blue eyes and even white teeth (15).

If one is black, what matters is to maintain the blackness. Try to have a smooth-good looking skin. Black beauty is admired and it makes a woman beautiful. If one is fair complexion naturally, let the woman also maintain it. We should note the encouraging words of Dr Aggrey who said that blackness is not a badge of shame but a symbol of greatness. She/he who is not proud of her/his colour is not worthy to live. Her gait and posture also have added advantages in her beauty. Good posture while walking coupled with the gracious movement of the buttocks enhances the woman's beauty to the admiration of those who care to see. Vibration of the flanks and buttocks is more frankly displayed and cultivated as sexual allurements. Moreover, her clothing more than anything else makes her splendidly and glamorously beautiful. The woman has to wear well-tailored new dress. She should also be moderately dressed but should never overdress or dress to kill. Her dress should be attractive and inviting. The woman should have dress sense. That is, she should know how to dress well. Yes, she should know how to dress fashionably and comfortably. Above all, she should dress as a woman and not like the opposite sex. Above all, her character matters most as a necessary concomitant to her beauty. A woman that is loose, sexually lax and indeed a nymphomaniac does not command respect and honour because of her sexual debasement. Only a man of her type, a satirical person can tolerate her. But a woman of impeccable character is an asset to her parents, husband, friends and relations. "Character is moral excellences and firmness". According to Carolyn Warner, a German proverb says:

When wealth is lost, nothing is lost;
When health is lost, something is lost;
When character is lost, all is lost (56).

Dignity of Womanhood

Readers Digest Word power Dictionary defines dignity as "the state or quality of being worthy of respect" (265). Good character is one of the qualities that make a woman dignified. The influence of character the world over is very great. This is perhaps the reason why Heraclitus of Ephesus to have remarked in his day "character is destiny" and Ralph Waldo Emerson to have observed that "character is higher than intellect". Women are generally known for good character for they are the destiny of any nation. They give birth to children, nurse and nurture them, receive informal education from them and mould their characters for good when their minds are still malleable. Women's dignity lies in their honesty, chastity before marriage, motherly care and guidance, endurance and their ability to tolerate the opposite sex in spite of all odds. Furthermore, women's dignity also lies in their abilities, achievements, and motivation. Janet Shibley Hyde says it has been observed that "females are superior to males in verbal ability" (187). J. S. Hyde also said that women excel men in "perceptual speed". The ability known as perceptual speed according to her



“involves being able to perceive details quickly and accurately and to shift attention from one item to the next rapidly” (189). According to her “Tests of perceptual speed are generally timed, and involve comparison of two strings of letters or numbers to see whether they are identical” (189). According to her, “women are consistently better than men on these tests” (189).

Similarly, Margret Mead found girls to be more verbally precocious than boys in all the diverse cultures she has observed (Hyde, 187). It has also been observed that girls also do better not only at relatively simple verbal tasks such as spelling, but also at more complex tasks such as analogies and creative writing. Women generally learn or master languages faster than men. They are also good at verbalizing their ideas. Chastity raises woman’s dignity but unchastity degrades her womanhood. But it is regrettable that women are raped by men with reckless abandon the world over. In substantiating this fact, Robin Morgan records: In Mexico City, one rape occurs every ten minutes, in the United States, nationally, one rape occurs every six minutes. One out of every five Canadian women is sexually assaulted. In Iran, because of religious-fundamentalist interpretation of the Koran, it is illegal to execute a woman who is virgin, therefore, women who are sentenced to death for “anti-Islamic activity” are, if virgins, first raped and then executed. In Guatemala, specific, “political rape” has been used to punish women in rebellion against government forces; in India, the women’s movement has mounted protests over such “political rape” used by police as a strikebreaking terrorist tactic against women union organizers. ... The majority of nations in the world have no legislation considering rape in marriage a crime, since a woman is perceived as the property of her husband (21). Apart from rape, spouse abuse, woman-beating, wife battery, - whatever its name, this privatized violence against women is endemic in all patriarchal cultures and is sometimes condoned by religious and secular laws. Apart from the inhuman treatment from their male counterpart, women endure such ill-treatment with equanimity. Women also suffer in greater numbers and intensity than men in war, violence, traffic in women and children, poverty and illiteracy.

The Role of Women in Religions

In African mythology, women played great role in the early existence of human beings. In fact, women featured very prominently in the myths dealing with the origin of human beings. In traditional African society God is not altogether masculine. J.A. Omoyajowo noted that “in many parts of Africa, God is conceived as male, but in some parts of Africa, God is conceived as female. For instance, the Nuba of the Sudan regard God as “Great Mother” and speak of him in feminine pronouns” (74). The Akan people of Ghana also have a feminine image of the Earth Spirit. J.A. Omoyajowo also noted that “Although the Akan did not regard Asase Yaa (the Earth Spirit) as a goddess, they nevertheless rank the spirit after the Supreme God and pour libations and sacrifice fowls to her” (74 – 75). Furthermore, the Igbo people accord worship to the Mother Earth – Ala. It is one of the divinities in Igbo-land. Divinities are beings (deities) having divine attributes, ranking below God but above men. In other words, they are gods that are next to the Supreme Being. J. Omosade Awolalu and P. Adelumo Dopamu say they “are gods with small letter ‘g’.” They “are the objective phenomena of African traditional religion”. They are believed to have “emanated from the



Supreme Deity, or they were engendered by Him, or they came into being in consequence of Him" (72). John Samuel Mbiti further observes that:

Divinities are on the whole thought to have been created by God, in the ontological category of the spirits. They are associated with Him, and often stand for His activities or manifestations either as personifications or as the spiritual beings in charge of those major objects or phenomena of nature. Some of them are national heroes who have been elevated and deified, but this is rare, and when it does happen the heroes become associated with some function or form of nature (75-76). In short, divinities are believed to be offspring of God. They are believed to exist with definite functions or duties to perform. The traditional Africans see them as ministers or executive and administrative heads of the earthly theocratic government of the world. Examples are Ala (Mother Earth), and Igwe (Sky god) in Igbo land, Orisanla (Obatala), and Ifa (Orunmila) in Yoruba and Tano and Ta Yao in Ghana. Ala or Ali (the mother Earth) is the arch - divinity in Igboland. She is the earth goddess. She is the guardian of public morality. She gives and administers moral laws. Edmund Iloegwu observes that: Ala, the earth goddess, is the most important deity in Ibo social life. She is the guardian of morality, the controller of the minor gods of fortune and economic life.... It is she who works in conjunction with the spirits of dead ancestors to order the prohibitions and the ritual avoidances (35).

Emeka George Ekwuru buttressed what professor Iloegwu said above when he notes that: in the traditional moral code, immoral conducts like the drawing of blood, adultery, incest, stealing, and murder were considered as offences against the Earth. From this viewpoint, her cult represented a pervasive visible moral code of conduct, and her priests were regarded as guardians of morality. Just as the land was seen everywhere, the earth Goddess as the divine custodian of morality was thought to be everywhere too. Hence any contravention of the law, which was regarded as immoral, was seen as a sin against the Ala, the Earth Goddess, and prescribed rituals of purification were performed (76). Ala is indeed a great divinity in Igboland. John Samuel Mbiti in his book *Concepts of God in Africa* gives more credence to the greatness of the mother earth when he states that: The Igbo have a female divinity, said to be the judge and source of human morality. Offences against her include adultery, homicide, poisoning another person, stealing farm products, and giving birth to twins. She punishes all evil doers, and the departed act as her agents and guardians of human morality (249). Ala restores human dignity and brings about justice to all. She prevents people from killing one another, coveting another person's land to add to one's own, stealing of yams and other farm crops, killing tabooed animals, committing adultery, incest, rape and other abominable acts. Francis A. Arinze extols the mother Earth when he observes that: The Earth Spirit, is the most important spirit after Chukwu. She is the Great Mother Spirit, the queen of the underworld, the "owner" of men, and custodian of public morality in conjunction with the ancestors (15). Ala is indeed a great arch-divinity not only in Igboland but in Africa as a whole because land is all over Africa for planting of crops, rearing of animals, building our houses, for our burials and other innumerable things. In this regard E. Geoffrey Parrinder extols the importance of Ala when he notes that:



one of the most important earth goddesses in Africa is Ala of the Ibo people of Eastern Nigeria. Ala is ruler of men, source of morality, and protector of the harvest. As a mother she gives fertility to the crops, and also to human beings. As queen of the underworld she receives the dead into her pocket or womb. The cult of Ala is shown vividly in sculptures which show, the attitude of the people to divinity and to life in general. Shrines to Ala are found all over Ibo country, but in the Southern Regions of Owerri special houses, called *mbari*, are erected (African Mythology 77-78). The Igbo accord worship to Ala as mother goddess, or queen of the underworld, who is responsible for public morality. Ali is the most-loved deity and the one who is closest to the people. She helps them if they are troubled by other divinities, but punishes hardened criminals.

Similarly, some myths speak about an original mother of mankind, from whom all people originated. John Samuel Mbiti says "the Akposso (of Togo) tell that when Uwolowu (God) made human beings, he first made a woman on the earth and bore her the first child, the first human being" (60). The implication of the role of women in African mythology is to link human life directly with god through the woman. She herself is created by God and in turn becomes the instrument of human life. She rightly becomes the one who nourishes and passes life. At the very dawn of religion, God was a woman. The earth was invariably identified as female – the Mother Earth. Nearly all the female deities of the Near and Middle East were titled Queen of Heaven. In this regard, Merlin Stone in Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow observes: Most astonishing of all the discovery of numerous accounts of female Creators of all existence, divinities who were created with bringing forth not only the first people but the entire earth and the heavens above. There were records of such Goddesses in Sumer, Babylon, Egypt, Africa, Australia and China. In India, the Goddess Sarasvati was honored as the inventor of the original alphabet, while in Celtic Ireland, the Goddess Brigit was esteemed as the patron deity of language. Texts revealed that it was the Goddess Nidaba in Sumer who was paid honor as the one who initially invented clay tablets and the art of writing. She appeared in that position earlier than any of the male deities who later replaced Her. The official scribe of the Sumerian heaven was a woman(121122). There is no doubt that God in the beginning of the world was considered to be a woman. Janet Shibley Hyde lent credence to the above assertion when she observes: The procreative functions of women have been celebrated in myths with the worship of fertility goddess and earth mothers. In Palestinian and Egyptian mythology, Astarte – like her Babylonian version, Ishtar – is the queen of heaven, the mother of all, who gives the power of reproduction and fertility in the fields, to animals, and to humans. By extension, she also becomes the goddess of sexual love and desire. In Egyptian mythology, Isis is the great mother and fertility goddess; in Greek mythology Aphrodite and Cybele are worshipped for their fertility. Even today we acknowledge the goddesses of creativity, the Muses. Women in myth, then, have been worshipped for their creativity or fertility and thus valued and revered (27).

Similarly, from primitive times, the moon has been one of the symbols mostly associated with women (Hyde 29). The association between women and the moon probably arose in the minds of early peoples in several ways. Firstly, from primitive times, the moon like



woman, was thought to be a source of fertility. According to Hyde (29) "some tribes that had not yet discovered the sexual basis of reproduction believed that a woman could become pregnant if moonlight fell on her". Secondly, source of the primitive association between woman and the moon was probably the common phenomenon of cyclicity. Early people probably believed that both the moon and women have a monthly cycle, and therefore must be associated. In fact, the word "menstruation" means "moon change" (men's – refers to both "moon" and "month"). Lastly, women were also thought to derive magical powers from their association with the moon. The moon was thought to control rain, and the functions of rainmaking and of controlling the weather were almost invariably in the hands of women (Hyde 29 – 30). In the Mosaic period the entire nation of Israel was called to love and to obey the Lord and to be a demonstration of his grace. Both men and women possessed civil roles and could partake in commerce, inheritance and government. In the religious aspect, all the Israelites were called upon to enter into a personal relationship with God. All might come to the tabernacle and later to the temple to worship, to fulfil vows and to offer sacrifices. In these areas of service, all were equal. Even some group of women "ministered at the door of the tent of meeting" (Ex. 38:8). However, the Mosaic Law set apart certain men to serve as representatives and leaders in the worship of Israel but according to James B. Hurley "the laws are not sexist in modern terms. The principle was not that men could, but women could not, serve. It was rather that God called out certain men to serve in particular functions" (123). To be Frank, women of the Mosaic period participated very freely in many areas of Israelite life. It was only in the Levitical service in the tabernacle/temple and in the priesthood was there a differentiation. With regard to Roman Religion, women equally played an essential role in the celebration of the religion. It is said that wife shared responsibility with her husband for supervising the household cult. Apart from vestal virgins, whose function was official and important, the wives of two of the major priests were themselves priestesses (Julian O'Faolain and Lauro Martines 71).

According to Roman religion "women had cults and ceremonies from which men were excluded (and vice versa), and some of the speculations to which these secret rites gave rise provided fine fodder for satirists like Juvenal" (O'Faolain and Martines 71). It is regrettable that Christian practice of keeping women away from the altar is a departure from Roman custom. In the New Testament church, women were fully involved in the worship of the community, in the missionary work, in the diaconal meeting of the needs of the people, and in the diaconate itself. However, modern churches have often restricted women more than the apostolic church did. In congregational life there have arisen numerous activities which are seen as 'men's work' or as 'woman's work'. But scripture does not recognize these distinctions. Women in pre-Islamic period lived precarious lives. They were discriminated against. Even the word for women in Arabic society was a word of shame (Mark A. Gabriel 75). Women were looked upon as something shameful and to give birth to a daughter instead of a son was considered bad news. In those days it was common for the parents to take the baby girl to the desert outside the Mecca and bury her alive in the sand so that she dies. When Muhammad assumed the mantle of leadership as the prophet of Allah, he put a stop to the obnoxious practice of burying baby girls alive. However, he did not change the negative attitude in Arab society toward women. He continued to believe that man is



superior to woman. He even believed that Allah made men superior to women. He wrongly believed that Allah made women inferior in intelligence and religion (Gabriel 79). The Quran even says two women equal one man (Surah 4:176, Shakir). Women are also believed to be ungrateful, and are a source of evil. They are equally considered to be toys and a source of affliction. In terms of religious worship, women are not considered to any leadership position. They do not lead in prayers. During prayers they are compelled to stay separately and their voices are not heard.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations should be taken into consideration for the enhancement of women's dignity, full participation in religious activities and the betterment of their lives, health and general well-being so that they will co-exist harmoniously in this planet earth with their male counterpart. Patriarchy which specifically refers to the system in which men as a group are assumed to be superior to women as a group and so have authority over them should stop forthwith. Men and women are created equal. Women are naturally beautiful, chaste, honest, caring and tolerant. More often than not it is men that debase them. Men should desist from all forms of ill-treatment against them such as rape, wife battery, forced marriage and the like. Women's role in religion, as mothers, and home-builders and wealth preservers should be appreciated by the male clergy, their husbands, the governments and the society at large. Let us stop discriminating against women in all areas of human endeavors and by so doing the world will be a better place to live in.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, humanity will be a good place to live in if all existing patriarchal structure is dismantled. The world will be a haven if rape, casting women literally as an exchange of "property", child marriage, forced marriage, and the right of a husband to "chastise" a wife physically is abolished. Rational beings do recognize and accept a common ideal of feminine beauty. These common ideals among others include good physiognomy, dental care, developed breasts, hips and buttocks. Others are smooth skin, fitting legs that support the trunk and shoulders, good posture, neat and well-tailored dress and good character. These factors work hand in hand to make a woman beautiful. It should be noted however, that beauty is often said to be in the eyes of the beholder. A woman one may consider beautiful may be considered to be ugly by another. But generally speaking, those qualities highlighted above among others are considered to be essential in making a woman beautiful. To the writers personally all women are beautiful, although some are more beautiful than others. Personal hygiene matters a lot in making a woman beautiful and palatable to herself and the opposite sex.

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