O. Mowaiye Fagbemi *

Gender Behavioural and Political Antecedents in Pre - Colonial Africa

Abstract

In Africa, before the coming of the white man, and the subsequent colonization, there was in place a political and governance structure. A structure that took cognizance of all citizens, both males and females in each polity. The political structure was a structure that recognized the female's importance in arrangement of things in African societies and empires. Men and women had their different roles to play politically. And these structures gave women positions that made contributory roles in the society imperative. Women were therefore not relegated to the background in arrange of belongings and governance. However, with colonization came new orientations and western education that imperatively led to change, not only in governance but also in the perception of womanhood and the roles assigned to females in the new scheme of things. This paper espoused on historical antecedents in pre-colonial times and what was operational in Africa before the white man's coming.

Key Words: Gender, behavioral flexibility, political structure, social order, androgynous, pre-colonialism, antecedents.

Introduction

In present time, labels of "feminist" woman "libber", female liberation movement and the like, have come to be the tag or the name for any female who efforts a discourse on women. This is so because of the insight that a woman's place is at the background of the actions, to be seen but not overheard. And therefore, not expected to be on any high 'horse 'politically, economically or in any sector as it may, because such are meant to be occupied by a man. This is the western orientation that the Europeans and colonizers brought along to the shores of Africa with their so called civilization. However, in the African situation, before colonial period, every one make up for each other in every sector of the society. Mentally and socially, women were genderless, and they did not feel that they belong from feminine gender. They should not do some things or be seen doing such or not occupy some positions because such are reserved for the men folks. Womanhood was not seen only from the perspectives of "sexual category representation", a phrase and perception that came along with the coming of the white men. So, women were in all walks of life like the military, as it were. Furthermore, women were in agriculture – weeding, gardening, gathering and partaking and so on. They worked gold and iron, pottery and weaving. They proceeded by their men in unalike spheres and happenings of life.

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* *O. Mowaiye Fagbemi, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria.* **grandyg2022@yahoo.com**.

Though, with annexation and westernization originated with new dispensation and orientations and a break in all that hitherto were in existence and operational on, the continent, particularly with the resultant effects of western education and the western culture.

In colonial masters culture, some dispositions for the sexes, male or female was not a given. A culture where women were seen as sex symbols, more of a house trophy. The women were trained much more to please their men rather than to make a successful life outside the home. The educational gap in admission and graduation in university education between the males and females in the colonial master's home countries educational system attest to this fact. And the gap does extend to other areas such as the economic, social and political spheres. Women were to be seen but their voice did not count. Few owned business or sat at managerial positions like their male counterparts and not many held high political positions. Whatever policy, leanings or orientations they were going to take or export or encourage to their varied conquered colonies in Africa was obviously not going to deviate much from that which was operational back at their home base. And they brought in their own perception of females and femininity. Thus their orientation set up would inevitably clash with what was operational in Africa before their coming and that was invariably going to off-set whatever was operational in the colonies. More so when there was no deep understanding of the native's culture nor a willingness to know except just for the colonization agenda and the benefits to their treasury coffers (Mowaiye Fagbemi, O, 2012).

The above skewed orientation would inevitably push the females aside in the scheme of things in the African societies with the new western orientations and was solidified from the beginning with the introduction of the western education. With colonialization, also began the establishment of schools. For most parts, establishment of schools was started by the Christian missionaries before the takeover and supervision of schools by the colonial masters and then the establishment of their own government schools. However, for both the missionary schools as well as the colonial government schools, the modus operandi were alike. And the reception given at the initial period by the natives to the foreigners and their schools was also the same; full of skepticism.

At inception of the new schools, parents were not so keen on sending their wards to the schools more so when it meant that the valuable time the wards could be out helping on varied tasks at home, the farm and so forth, would now be used sitting in the schools. And with no clear cut information on what was to be transmitted to the wards in these schools, the ready acceptance was not forth coming. With the mistrust in place for the white man and his schools, parents could not push forward their kids to go to the schools. For many homes and in some societies, the unwanted child for whatsoever reasons; either due to the child's stubbornness, laziness and the like, were the ones pushed out of the homes to the white man's schools to serve as deterrents to other kids not to misbehave or they get the same treatment. The white man's school became a tool to make children fall into line with the parents (Mowaiye Fagbemi ,2000).

In many societies such as northern Nigeria with passing of time and encouragement, most registered school children were the kids and wards of the local kings and chiefs, scattered with children from the title holders or those

economically viable enough to do so. And even at that, at the early period, only the males were sent to these western schools.

When the natives mistrust of the white man's schooling waned and some could actually send their beloved kids to school, another hurdle to be crossed arose; that of trusting the system in all its entirety ; enough to send the female children to these schools. For many parents and guardians, undertaking such risk was an open invitation for trouble. Such perception was not helped with the activities of the white men on the coastal areas such as the Nigerian coastal areas where women and girls were getting pregnant for white men and after a while, the men disappeared without trace. So, for years in many areas, girls were not enrolled in these schools which left the early set of western educated elites predominantly males.

African female children going to school had its varied challenges at varied periods and times. For those lucky to get in and expenditure on their schooling not perceived as wastage by parents and guardians, came the issue of few fellow females to interact with in the school. Few female teachers to interact with or see as role models. Then came the hidden curriculum; what was read in textbooks and what was depicted , and what was encouraged by the teachers. Most of which skewed to females remaining at the background in the scheme of things. Novels and even movies saw women within societal confines. (Mowaiye Fagbemi, 2021) It was no wonder that for decades after independence of most African nations, women could not find their footing in their nations life and the few who could break through barriers got tags and names for the dare to go beyond what is given.

The emergence of Western influences and trends led to a significant marginalization of women from prominent roles in societal, national, intellectual, and scientific activities. Pursuing careers in science and technology became the preferred path for many nations striving to align with developed counterparts. Consequently, this phenomenon lies at the core of the internal struggle faced by the "modern educated African woman." Despite attaining success in fields traditionally dominated by men, such as science and technology, she often grapples with psychological conflicts stemming from societal expectations and gender biases.

GENDER AND GOVERNANCE IN PRE –COLONIAL AFRICA.

In the traditional African settings, the family , both the immediate and the extended members of the family belong to a family clan , bonded by blood relations. This relationship is further cohesive and bonded in any group of society or village by inter marriages between members of the different family clans. The clans engage in activities such as festivals of varied sorts that further make the bonds a tight knit communal family life. Communalism was therefore central part of the social, economic and political life of the people. Children were trained by elders within the groups and clans. Therefore, the individual, man or woman belongsprimarily to a family and within it he or she moves and has his or her being.And the primary level of governance began from the head of the family clan.

Within the African culture of communalism and extended family groups, are members who at sometimes live together in large compounds and form the first level and basis of group governance. And through which all within a given group

are assigned roles of authority from the youngest to the oldest. Both male and female being given assigned roles was a given and no one was left out.

The African woman has been far from passive, insignificant, or voiceless. African tradition has recognized the importance of a balanced social structure where every individual plays a crucial role in fostering a cohesive and prosperous society. As a result, there's a unique dual-gender power dynamic established, a concept absents in European and Arab cultures. Additionally, in some African societies, there exists a succession system allowing females from royal clans to inherit and ascend to the throne, a practice not commonly found elsewhere. And by the governance structures in place, it was inevitable that the women of any given group would be represented and the female voice within the society could be heard.

The communal philosophy was central to the African social order and the dual-gender system of socio-political organization that Okonjo in Sofola (1991) articulated succinctly as follows:

The core values of communalism and interconnectedness facilitate the development of a social and political framework in African societies. This framework ensures that every individual finds a significant role within a system of checks and balances, ultimately maintaining equilibrium and fostering harmony within the community.

This mechanism originated within the microcosm of the household and extended family, gradually extending its influence to encompass broader political, economic, and governance structures within villages and towns. In this set up, each family unit has a head that represent the family and clan in the political meetings of the village headed by the village head. Other officials are elected and there would be structures of seniority and positions and duties to each identified office. There are identified days and time for village and family clan meetings. The resolutions at the family clan meetings are taken to the village governing council meetings. In some instances, these villages are further bonded into kingdoms with rulers and governing officials over the kingdoms.

In the governance of the state or kingdom, authority traditionally emanated from the head of the family unit. This figure ensured the well-being of family members, maintained control, and fostered peaceful coexistence within the family. Similarly, within the larger extended family unit, leadership fell to the eldest member, respected as the elder. The elder played a pivotal role in conflict resolution and providing guidance and correction when needed. (Sofola, 1991).

Thus, it was rare to see an all-male dominated governing council in African societies or such that there will not be a female voice to represent the voice of other women and children in the community within any form of political structure as may be available.

At least, there will be a female priestess or head of market women or women's leader in the town or village council who can be called in at critical moments to articulate the opinions and wishes of other females (Mowaiye Fagbemi, 2000).

In various African societies where both men and women held governing roles, diverse models of governance emerged. The concept of dual-gender political

leadership stemmed from the foundational principles of familial authority, represented by the father and mother figures. This idea gained further traction through the establishment of the "man or woman of the house" governance system. Consequently, many societies adopted a form of co-rulership, involving both males and females in positions of authority.

The co-ruler-ship concept of governance falls into the following categories according to Sofola (1991):

> (1) Monarchy that evolved on gender line

> (2) Monarchy and co-ruler-ship that evolved on the principle of daughterhood

> (3) Monarchy based on the principle of queen-motherhood

> (4) Priestess and spirit medium principle; these were women who were in charge of the spiritual and religious life of the citizens and had their own niche in the scheme and order of things within given societies.

> (5) Warrior-queen system based on daughterhood representative of the throne in the supreme military council of the kingdom.

> (6) Monarchial co-ruler-ship based on the principle of woman of the house role or the first wife of the king

> (7) Co-ruler-ship based on constituted roles of heads of female professionals (for example, the Iyalode among the Yorubas who is the head of the women folks and holds her own meetings and governance model).

> (8) Co-ruler-ship based on the principle of institution of wives; wives being women who got married into a family unit.

However, the composition of the governing council within each gender arm vividly illustrated the essence and importance of the dual-gender power structure. For instance, in Igbo land of Nigeria, the Obi led the male arm, whereas the Eze-Omu presided over the female arm.

It's important to highlight that unlike in European and Arab cultures, where the term "Queenship" typically denotes the wife of a king, the Eze-Omu, head of the female line of power in Igbo culture, may not have any familial ties to the king. Instead, she is democratically elected to lead her political lineage, along with her own governing council, known as Ndi Olinzele-Omu. Her responsibilities encompass representing the interests of female citizens, overseeing specific domains of power within the central council of the kingdom, and influencing the commercial aspects of the state. Additionally, she holds the roles of priestess and spirit medium, playing a pivotal role in maintaining the spiritual well-being of the kingdom during times of peace and conflict (Sofola, 1991).

Among the peoples of Ijebu land, Owo, and Ondo in Yoruba land of Nigeria, a similar dual political power structure was present, albeit with slight variations compared to the Igbo system. For instance, among the Ondos, particularly in Ile-Oluji, a clearly delineated power structure based on gender existed, with separate ruling monarchs for each gender: Oba-Okunrin (Male king) and Oba-Obinrin

(Female king). Additionally, in nearly every group or town, there was the position of Iyalode, who served as the leader of the women in Yoruba society.

In Ijebuland, located in present-day Ogun State of Nigeria, the governance structure included the position of Erelu, a female member of the council. There existed a female line of power that collaborated with the male line within a joint council of high chiefs, constituting the supreme executive council of the kingdom. Beneath this council was a "lower" house where the Iyalode system was also established. Similar governance structures were found in Ile-Ife, situated in present-day Osun State, Nigeria, and across most states in Yoruba land. However, the intrusion of European and Arab influences, including colonialism, disrupted this longstanding governance system.

As mentioned, gender-based lines of power governed kingdoms, each with its own governing council overseeing its respective gender among the citizens. Periodically, a joint council convened to address matters of mutual concern. In certain kingdoms, upon the king's demise, a female regent would assume reign until the enthronement of a new king, a practice still observed in Ile-Oluji, Ondo State, Nigeria, and other parts of the country. The council of high chiefs, comprising both genders, reflects the Yoruba and western Nigerian peoples' historical governance structure, wherein each line of governance held sway. Hence the adage persists that regardless of a king's power, he cannot assume the roles of an Omu or Iyalode (Sofola, 1991; Mowaiye, 2000).

Till date however, the title of Erelu, Iyalode and Iyaloja among other titles are still held and used to honor outstanding women in these societies, even though their political powers have been significantly diminished and most often than not, now just an honorary title.

GOVERNANCE AND HEROIC AFRICAN WOMEN

In pre-colonial Africa, formidable women emerged as skilled politicians in their own right, ascending to rulership positions. In the kingdom of Ile-Ife, the birthplace of the Yoruba people in Nigeria, historical records mention Ooni Luwo, also known as Oba Obinrin or the Female King, whose reign marked a period of significant development for the kingdom. Notably, she contributed to the embellishment of the palace with decorative adornments that remain in place to this day in Ile-Ife. Her artistic sensibility led her to intricately tile the palace grounds, showcasing the rich cultural heritage of African civilization. Sofola (1991) extensively elaborated on her unique focus on the craftsmanship of the palace, making her the first and last monarch in Ile-Ife to do so.

In contemporary times, despite the influence of colonialism, positions like Iyalode and Erelu still endure in certain regions of the Yoruba kingdom. However, their authority is not as formidable as it was in the pre-colonial era. Nevertheless, women who hold these positions continue to command considerable respect within their communities.

Among the Edos of Nigeria, prior to the Oranmiyan era and its Yoruba influences, there existed a hierarchy of high chiefs where women held positions of power. It was within this framework that female Ogisos, or kings, emerged as formidable rulers in their own right, demonstrating astute political acumen. One notable example is Lady Emose, whose reign was particularly remarkable. Sofola

(1991) observed that the rule of these female leaders, especially Ogiso Emose, seemed to evoke fear among men due to its spectacular nature. And that there had always been an inclination on the part of men to tag female leaders and rulers as severe and even wicked from time immemorial. These female monarchs, Ooni Luwo of Ile-Ife and Ogiso Emose of Beninempire were all castigated as wicked by terrified men and strongly resisted as female monarchs (Sofola ,1991).

According to Fagbemi (2000), numerous women heroines in governance are evident throughout history. For instance, Emotan of Benin bravely endangered herself as a spy to safeguard the kingdom of Benin during a perilous period when its throne faced severe threats. Similarly, Moremi of Ile-Ife volunteered to risk her life to protect the beleaguered people of Ile-Ife.

Another notable figure is Queen Amina of Zaria (Nigeria), renowned as a warrior queen. Acting as her father's representative on the supreme military council of Zazzau (Zaria), she ascended to power during a challenging period for the kingdom. Through her exceptional military skills, leadership, and strategic mobilization of warlords and soldiers, Queen Amina expanded the kingdom extensively. The ancient city of Zaria, which flourished under her leadership, stands as a testament to her remarkable achievements (Fagbemi,2012, Sofola, 1991).

In Angola, there was Queen Warrior Nzingha who literarily spat fire on the Portuguese who were after her kingdom and needed her out of their way by any means. It was her acceptance of European culture through Christianity, her new religion that mellowed her down over time. Yet, the sheer force of her presence prevented the Portuguese from taking over Angola until after her death.

Another notable figure is Yaa Asantewaa of Ghana (1863-1923), a monarch (female king) who valiantly fought against the British and ultimately sacrificed her life in an effort to protect her people. Additionally, there was Mbuya Nehanda, a Priestess and Spirit-Medium from Zimbabwe, who organized her people and resisted the British invasion. She faced execution by hanging at the hands of the British for her steadfast defiance against imperial rule.

In old Borno Empire of Nigeria, the (Queen mother) or (Queen Sister) or the Gumsu (the king's senior wife) were influential in the state affairs, especially the Queen mother; the mother of the king. They were regarded as special advisers to the king and those curing favors from the king had to go through them. Knotty issues and unresolved were usually referred to the Queen mother (Fagbemi, 2000).

Notably, there existed influential Queen mothers like Queen Idia of the Benin Empire and the Queen-Mother of Mai Idris Alooma of the Borno Empire. These maternal figures of African kings held significant respect and authority. In certain kingdoms, they wielded more power than their sons. Queen Idia of the Benin Empire, for instance, earned favor from Oba Esigie for her successful military campaigns in defense of the throne. This led to the cessation of the ritual killing of Queen-Mothers during their sons' coronation ceremonies. Similarly, among the Edos of Nigeria, prior to the Oranmiyan era, powerful women politicians like Emose and Orhorho ruled over their people.

A notable event from recent history is the Aba women's war, commonly referred to as the Aba riots of 1929, in eastern Nigeria. During this uprising,

women vehemently opposed the taxation imposed by British colonial authorities through violent protests. Despite facing the threat of force from the colonial government, the women's resistance successfully halted the introduction of taxation in the Eastern part of Nigeria for an extended period.

In western Nigeria, Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome Kuti effectively organized the market women of Abeokuta in the 1940s, compelling the king of Egba land to go into exile for several years in response to their grievances. Meanwhile, in nearby Lagos, Iyalode Tinubu of Lagos, with strong support from Efunsetan Aniwura, the Iyalode of Ibadan, fiercely opposed the signing of a treaty that would have ceded Lagos (Nigeria) into a colony. Despite her efforts, she was betrayed by the Oba of Lagos, leading to the eventual signing of the treaty. In protest against the betrayal and the loss of their rights, she chose to die in exile, rejecting the consequences of the decision made by the men. (Sofola, 1991).

In recent Nigerian history, there was Omu-Ako of Issle-Oligbo of Aniocha who, during the Nigerian civil war, assumed leadership as the head of the Omu, the women's council. She effectively took control of the traditional government, unifying both male and female lines of power. Omu-Ako courageously confronted both the Federal Nigeria army and the Biafra army to defend her citizens. Madam Okwuanyi Okwumabua, who was a member of that governing council, played a significant role in these events.

THE AFRICAN WOMAN: THE OLDAND THE NEW DISPENSATION.

Many African part, women neither feel themselves as irrelevant in political works nor in in any other area of life. They did not only feel confident in casual way of life but in complicated period kingdom as well in history, particularly if a king was getting authoritarian. Even in now, women in some areas of Nigeria and Ijumu kingdom in Kogi State as well (Central Nigeria), the old age tradition of foisting out an unpopular king from the throne, when all else has failed to make the king see reason or change his ways and fails to tow the line of popular opinion of the people, by still protesting naked round the kings area of abode. Such drastic methods are rarely used but when used, it resonates round the kingdom and the result is the same, the king is to leave the throne and to commit suicide. In some other parts of Nigeria even into the 20th century, such drastic methods still gets invoked on some kings even though monarchs in present day Nigeria have lost their powers in governance and their activities only within the confines of what is given by state and the federal government. However, the effects and results of such methods differ from kingdom to kingdom; while some kings commit suicide, some others just vanish while others go into exile. To date however, it is rare to see a king on whom it is invoked remain on the throne to rule and it is also one action that the women don't just use. Such kings were usually warned beforehand and may even be informed that as a last resort, such an action may be taken against him. To the testimony of good governance and feminine dexterity and prowess, there is no known history of any female monarch on whom such action was invoked on (Fagbemi, 2012).

African women were no weaklings in any area of endeavor. They were part of the political structures and governance in their respective societies. Institutions of wives, daughters and women societies also served as checks on despotic leadership aside from other checks within the various political institutions.

As succinctly put by Sofola (1991), it was from the recognized gender based power lines with proper check and balance mechanisms that old-fashioned African heroines in history left their footprints on land of time.

The European son coming to Africa were keen on acquiring territories and the economic benefits that came with that. They were not interested in any political structure that were in existence then as such could not have served their purpose. Moreover, the Europeans not having a system of power akin to that of the natives and the traditional political structures met on ground neither understood such structures nor be bothered to understand them. Furthermore, the Europeans, did not have power line system of dual nature or gives womanhood its due in the scheme of things aside from wifehood. Also, they could not understand the roles of powerful female characters and institutions such as king's wives or the Queens; mother of king and Queen. Consequently, they refer high rank women such as Queen Mother and so on. (Sofola, 1991).

The Europeans and the Arabs arrived on the African shores and introduced their own home base way of life of women lower position in arrangement of things and in their societies, and thereby inaugurated the men's authority; and the monopolistic intolerance of male psyche. Chaos sets in and women were removed and made irrelevant, a fact that is now full-blown in today's European-Arab government system was of contemporary Africa nations that followed their system of governance even after gaining independence (Mowaiye Fagbemi, 2012; Sofola 1991).

Change was inevitable as a result of the contact with unfamiliar Europe cultures and the Arab world which destroyed virtually everything about traditional governing structures in Africa and left African female citizens irrelevant, ineffective and pushed aside of main governance stream except for tokens of positions that women occupy in some nations even till date.

The European way of life, model of governance, the curriculum and system of education introduced by the European to the natives, did its own damage to the feminine psyche aside from the colonial masters bringing down the natives' political structures.

CONCLUSION

Africa had her system of governance and political structure before colonialism that displaced the hitherto structures that were in place. The females were not push overs nor pushed aside. They were given their place in the scheme of things and given their dues. The European, on coming, had more interest in their mission and objectives, and were not keen on understanding the native political structures except as it suited them to use. And they don't have system of dual control line could not appreciate such systems. Nor could they understand the concept by which a woman could hold power that is not within the realm of being a wife and could therefore not understand powerful female positions such a king's wives, king's mother; Queen's mother (Sofola, 1991).

By African females reflected in preceding and arrangement of African heroines, Sofola (1991) opined that one would not have expected any less from female in the present day world order particularly by offspring of history keepers

who continue to break over the so called glass ceilings as it were in all walks of life.

It is obvious that African's power and politics did not match with western and eastern dispensation in terms of authority and political structures. An erosion, that has left the African women out of the mainstream of political governance and females only get tokens of positions to hold within the present day governance dispensation.

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