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WOMEN IN THE TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SOCIETIES

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Women in Traditional African Societies

Generalizations about the role and status of women in traditional African societies, as for other aspects of African life, are not easy to make because Africa is not one cultural area. It is marked by great cultural and linguistic diversities, and any statement which can be made about one tribe may be altogether inapplicable to another, even in one geographical sub-region. A proper understanding of the status and role of women in traditional African societies therefore involves an appreciation of the different cultural patterns within which they are brought up, and of the family and tribal customs in each of those multitudinous societies which decree the exact place given to each member, the respect due to each and the duties and privileges which membership of a family confers. It is within this context that the woman live and move — "honoured and honouring, giving and receiving services, their exact place known from birth to death".1

As in all other societies, women play their significant roles as mothers, and in this position they bear and teach children, are loyal and loving to their families and in many cases subordinate themselves in the service of their husbands, children, families and clans. In this, however, African women are not distinguished from other women in the world.

There are, however, certain factors which are particularly true of African women in traditional societies which are of immense importance for a proper appreciation of their role in African societies in general.

It is generally true that in African societies, women are, in terms of tribal law, perpetual minors, i.e. they are always under the guardianship of the men. But this general rule is modified considerably by the kind of structural principles which exist in different social groups. In Africa there are two principles of structural organization which are of crucial importance: the patrilineal and matrilineal principles of descent with the accompanying rules of residence. As a general rule, in societies which are patrilineal in descent and patrilocal in residence, the position and status of women is

definitely inferior to that of men. She is treated as a minor before and after marriage and must always be under the guardianship of her father before marriage and her husband after marriage. Theoretically, an anomalous situation might even arise where a young man, who has inherited his father's social and legal position would be in a position to decide about his mother's remarriage. Not only is a married woman under the complete control of her husband but by the marriage contract entered into when she marries, she comes under the control of her husband's kinsmen and may be "inherited" according to the rules of the levirato which operate in many parts of Africa. There are many tribes where a wife could not visit in any part of the village without her husband's permission. She cannot dispose of her property, even of the basket she made without his consent; and her husband has the right and power to beat her if, in his opinion, she has misbehaved or has dared to go counter to his wishes.

A woman cannot normally occupy an hereditary lineage position or any public office. There are known exceptions to this as, for example, the queen among the Lovedu; the queen mother's important position among the Swazi, and the powerful position of the Amazon soldiers in Dahomean traditional society. The few examples we have given, however, and others that could be added, do not affect the basic position of social and legal disadvantage which is the lot of women everywhere.

Generally, also, the moral and legal sanctions which apply in the different African societies discriminate against the women. Thus, for example, a woman caught in adultery is not only beaten but could face the death penalty in some societies. There are few, if any, sanctions against men who have committed the same offences. Desertion by a wife immediately raises the presumption of her guilt and not her husband's. Similarly with barrenness. It is considered a blomish in a woman to be barren and in fact, she is considered to have failed in her marital duties. The presumption again is that she is barren, and the possibility of the husband's impotence is often discounted.
This general position is modified somewhat when we get to matrilineal descent groups. These are societies in which descent is traced through the woman, whose property is inherited by men through women and where, as a general rule, residence is matrilocal or with the woman's group. The legal position does not change very much; however, for although authority is vested in her mother's brother rather than in her husband, she still remains a minor and is dependent on many things on her male relatives. However, she has a stronger position in relation to her husband. In the first place, women have more independence in these societies and, in many cases, a higher status than in patrilineal ones. This is fairly obvious from the fact of their structural importance. Whereas in the patrilineal societies the increase in the clan depends on the men who recruit women from outside as wives, in matrilineal societies the increase in the kinship group and clan depends on the women whose reproductive powers are used for their patrilineal groups instead of being used for the benefit of strangers. The husband's function is no more than that of "a bull" as it is sometimes crudely phrased among some people and he is a stranger in the group. If, on top of this, residence is matrilocal, it is the husband who must tread circumspectly for, in any dispute between him and his wife, she can always count on the support of her relatives while he will find himself isolated and without any sympathy whatsoever. The position of the husband is that of an outsider and is somewhat humiliating. Whereas in the patrilineal, patrilocal situation the wife is made to feel an outsider, and is the butt of jokes, in a matrilineal, matrilocal situation, the husband is on the receiving end, as is called, as among the Yombe of the Congo, "a billy-goat", "a rooster", a "borrowed thing", one "who just begets children and goes" etc. He is not in a dominant position and if he should forget his manners or try to exert his authority, or if he should be lazy, he is very quickly "brought to book". According to Raymond Apthrove, some matrilineal tribes, as, for instance, the plateau Thonga, have egalitarian and competitive ideologies.

\[2/\] Women's Role in the Development of Tropical and Sub-Saharan Africa, pp. 159 ff.
so that equality of individuality predominate and women are eligible for political office. Women also enjoy religious equality for they can approach the ancestors on their own behalf - a rare thing among other African peoples. Among these people, the household is not a unit with corporate responsibilities and husbands are not held responsible for actions of their wives. Besides, women, especially among the Thonga, have greater control over the products of their labour.

The position of women in the Northern parts of Africa which are predominantly Muslim is different from the other parts which are pagan. The fundamental difference which marks the position of women between North and South is the practice of "seclusion", especially in the Arab World. As Professor Fawzi of the Sudan puts it: "seclusion" ... refers to "the relation between women and strangers or outsiders. The expression of seclusion is seen, for example in the dress of women when they go out. They must be veiled, i.e. expose no more than their eyes." The layout of a typical Arabic house with its two yards is designed to enable the women to disappear into the back yard as soon as strangers of the opposite sex appear. Friendships exist between families, but visits are exchanged only between members of the same sex; and a girl who goes out with a boy does so at her peril. Her reputation is ruined and she may never recover respectability". It is felt, however, that the basic economic dependence of women contributes to their socially inferior status both at home and in the society at large.

In West Africa, the legal and social position of women is generally the same as for most African countries. The women are legal minors; the social conventions are all in favour of men; in marriage they must accept polygyny and all that this system of marriage entails. However, West African women have had much economic power concentrated in their hands due to the considerable incomes that they make by trading, and this has given them an important leverage against the dominance of the male. Because of this, they wield considerable

\[3\] Women's Role in the Development of Tropical Sub-Saharan Africa. Brussels 1959, pp 249 ff.
power and responsibility in the household. Thus, for instance, Zaria women in Nigeria assumed responsibility for their daughters' dowries and cases are reported of their contribution to the marriage gift payments for their sons. They provided themselves with household utensils and clothing for their children. They would also buy luxuries and adornments for themselves. This, of course, is the general situation in many parts of Africa in spite of legal theory and social expectations.

Foreign observers have made statements to the effect that African women were used as beasts of burden and that they are in a state of servitude. This is, of course, a gross exaggeration. What it does underline, however, is the fact that for most parts of Africa, women have been the people most burdened with the responsibility for earning a living. The production unit in African societies is a household which is headed by the woman. She must provide food for the household and is often away from dawn to sunset labouring in the fields while the husband attends to some less strenuous tasks. Not only is she responsible for production of food to fill the granaries but she is also expected to draw water from the well or the river, carry fire-wood and other burdens with her child slung on the back. But for the labour of women, many an African home would not be in a position to provide food for itself and hospitality for strangers. One of the strongest appeals of polygyny to men in Africa is precisely its economic aspect, for a man with several wives commands more land, can produce more food for his household and can achieve a high status due to the wealth which he can command.

Another matter of importance in considering the status of African women has to do with a woman's rights in deciding whom she will marry. In traditional societies, e.g. among the Zulu, a woman was forced to marry an old man if she had the misfortune to get pregnant before marriage. There are cases in Africa, where the possibility of death for premarital pregnancy was not excluded. Many examples can be quoted from present-day Africa where women are given in marriage without their consent. Marriages are arranged between families and the woman is supposed to accept the husband given to her. This practice
has been so widespread in Africa that many colonial governments passed laws forbidding any kind of forced marriage, i.e. a marriage entered into without the specific consent of the woman. In this connection, it is perhaps appropriate to consider also the position and status of widows. The practice of the levirate, i.e. inheritance of a dead man's wife or wives by his kinsmen, is an important matter which affects very directly the position of a woman. There is a sense in which a woman is regarded as "a principal asset" of her husband's estate; especially if she still has child-bearing capacities. The sociological reasons for the levirate were very clear. The practice was meant to provide not only for the children but also for widows, so that it could be said with a measure of truth that African societies in pre-colonial days had neither orphans or widows. This was also in keeping with the general African approach to marriage that it was a contract between families rather than between two individuals. The net effect of the practice of the levirate, however, was to deprive the woman of her rights as a human individual to decide about whom she would marry and to that extent made her a tool in the general arrangements between two families. Her status came very close to that of a "bonds-woman" to the family of her husband in that she lost all rights and was completely under their control and they could dispose of her in marriage, after the death of her husband, as they pleased.

Polygyny and "bride-price" are two other matters which, in one way or another affect the status and position of women in African societies. They have been, and continue to be, subjects of heated debate in which women are found on both sides of the fence. There are those who justify these two practices on the grounds that they are part and parcel of African traditional patterns of living and that therefore, they are sacrosanct and must not be interfered with. Perhaps we may be permitted to say that those who put forward this argument impress more with their livid fervour than with their logic or even consistency in their attitudes towards other cultural aspects of African life. Another school of thought, which is closely related to the first, argues that both these practices, particularly "bride-price", do in fact, enhance the status of a wife and ensure that she will be treated with
respect and care. The argument goes on to say that men would think very little of wives for whom they did not give the "bride-price". Others argue that the payments are a "thank-you" gift to the woman's parents. This, of course, overlooks the fact that often the people who receive "bride-price" payments are not parents at all but some other relatives who did not share in the raising of the daughter.

The main argument against those two institutions, and the practices connected with them, is that they compromise the dignity of the woman and make her a convenient tool for the man from the point of view of the labour necessary to work his fields or the inconveniences to the husband if he only had one wife. The argument has even been seriously put forward that a man would find it difficult to satisfy his sexual urges with one wife when she was either menstruating or had a small baby, when the cultural taboos against any sexual union between the spouses are operative.

Problems of divorce and the custody of children again loom large in the general picture of women's status in African societies. In many African societies, divorce, according to traditional law can be effected by extra-judicial arrangements. Even where the courts have anything to say in the matter, there are not any precisely defined lists of "grounds for divorce". One of the problems in this connection is that more often than not, what are considered good grounds for divorce do not hold for husband and wife alike. A man may legitimately divorce his wife for adultery, while a woman cannot, because the system of polygyny does allow for a man to have extra-marital relations. Similarly, a woman may be divorced for laziness, for "witchcraft and sorcery" whereas, particularly in patrilineal societies, a wife cannot accuse her husband of witchcraft. In many cases, a woman can be divorced for barrenness, for the presumption is that she is impotent. This condition may be reversed in matrilineal societies where the presumption could be that it was the man who was impotent. However, the odds in these cases are heavily loaded against the woman.
Guardianship of children in traditional African societies, is regulated generally by the systems of descent obtaining in different tribes. Thus in patrilineal societies, children go to the father's people while in matrilineal societies they go to the mother's people. It has been customary, therefore, following this arrangement, to put forward the facile argument that no problems exist in terms of guardianship and that the traditional social structures have solved all problems. But for the woman who is the mother, very acute problems of a personal nature, and, for the children, grave emotional and psychological issues arise; especially where the marriage is broken up either by a divorce, by death or by separation. As a general rule, in patrilineal societies, children are taken away from the mother although courts have intervened now and again and decided that very young children should remain with their mother, at least for a short time; although the final entitlement to them is always granted to the father. There are also known cases of woman's children being claimed by her deceased husband's relatives, even though they were born long after the husband's death, on the grounds that the bride-price was not returned and therefore the woman's procreative powers still belonged to the family of the deceased husband's kinsmen. Thus cases of inhumanity and complete disregard of the woman's rights and position as a person with feelings, arise.

In conclusion, it can be said that the position of the woman in African traditional societies as a wife and as a mother has generally left much to be desired. She is subordinated, not only to her husband's will, whims and fancies, but also to the will and power of his kinsmen. In matrilineal societies where the power of the husband is modified by reasons of descent and residence, she is still under the effective control of male relatives. She is legally a perpetual minor; only in a few societies can she hold important positions or inherit property; divorce practices apply double standards of morality which favour men and in matters of custody of children in the event of the break-up of the marriage by death, divorce or separation, her rights as a parent, are in many cases completely denied.