

# OUR GRANDMOTHERS, EXCLUDED FROM HISTORY, PRESERVERS AND TRANSMITTERS OF INDEGENOUS VALUES: ECO-MATERNALISTIC APPROACH

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## Abstract

*The phenomena of sexism and patriarchal structures in many part of Africa have received robust attention in literature especially within the feminist theology, an offshot of liberation theology. The dehumanizing potency of sexism and injustice and domination of women and natural environment have also been widely discussed. Women as the 'voiceless' or 'nameless' in many traditional societies has been made manifest on their exclusion from history despite their roles on sustainable development. This has hitherto been observed to have contributed to the seemingly lost of African indegenous knowledge and values in this era of globalization espercially in Igboland. Respective of the foregoing orthodoxy, this paper using the ecomaternalistic theory by Swila (2014) and Talitha cum theory by Dube (2002) retracts the instrumentality of African women in fostering the preservation and transmission of indegenous knowledge and values which has been excluded from history due to patriarchal structure. It further calls for the retrieval of the said hidden histories of women which would hopefully be a lesson for the contemporary and future women.*

## Introduction

The phenomena of sexism and patriarchal structures in many part of Africa have received robust attention in literature especially within the feminist theology, a 'daughter' of liberation theology. Sexism is viewed as a prejudice backed by power directed against women and strengthened by the structure of patriarch. From a Latin root pater, meaning father, the word patriarch is derived. In patriarchal system, which is witnessed in many parts of Africa, especially Igboland of eastern Nigeria, the male is the norm and the female is inferior in every sphere including anthropologically (Clifford, 2001).

The historical development of patriarchy can be traced to a Greek philosopher- Aristotle (384 - 322 BCE). He (Aristotle) described human society as a series of hierarchical relations. He opined that it is natural for the superior (men) to govern the inferior (women) in all things and at all ways. His hierarchical dualism in which he divides all things into two – sacred and profane, superior and inferior, good and bad, reason and emotion, body and spirit and so on can be said to be the cause and root of sexism (Rokoczy, 2004)

Ezenweke (2014) observed that there is abundance and undoubted literature that the feminine gender suffered gross dehumanizing and oppressive social structures especially in the past. A great percentage of these structures still exist in varied degrees across culture.

Women in diverse cultures and work places believe that the nature and power of women were initially, grossly marginalized and misinterpreted. The African culture to a large extent enhances the subordination of female gender. In Africa for instance, it is believed that this problem was

incubated by some cultural instincts (Ezenweke, 2009), and heightened by religion. Scholars have observed that the Western sexist element did fuel the cultural sexism of traditional Africa. Thus, African men with the androcentrism and the patriarchal order of the biblical cultures, have felt their views confirmed by Christianity (Oduyoye, 1995b; Rakoczy 2004).

Ezenweke (2014) in discussing the issue of marginalization of the female gender in a paper titled – *The Internal Problems of Women*, highlighted sexual degradation and exploitation, exclusion from access to and control over national and international resources, gender discrimination and pervasive projection of maleness, exclusion from decision – making and leadership, education disparity, obnoxious widowhood practices and genital mutilations. To show the endless list of injustice against the female gender, the present study deals with the exclusion from history in a society they perform much for its future.

Worse still, it is more painful when one dwells on the fact that women form one-half of the world’s population and do three- fourths of the world’s work yet, they receive only one-tenth of the world’s salary, and own one-hundredth of the world’s land. Or recalls that two- thirds of illiterate adults are women and where over three fourth of starving people are women and their dependent children (United Nations Statistical Department, 2000; Uchem, 2001; Ezenweke, 2014), yet, their exclusion or at best their insufficient representation in history has been noted by scholars.

The above background therefore, poses some questions: Do we actually need to trace the roles ancient women played on sustainable development? What is the need for retracing the footprints of our ancient mothers in the sand of history? In other words, why do we need to recapitulate the roles played by our foremothers in nation building. These questions call for study and have formed the conception for the present study. This paper therefore, using evidence from literature and ecomaternalistic and *talitha cum* theories expounds the need to complement existing history by retracing the roles played by our foremothers in Igboland in particular and Africa in general. The remaining part of this paper will be discussed under the following sub-headings;

- The exclusion of women from history explained.
- Theories of ecomaternalistic and *talitha cum* and their relevance
- The roles of women as preservers and transmitters of indigenous values
- Recommendation and conclusion

### **The Exclusion of Women from History Explained**

This unit attempts to expound the fact that due to the patriarchal structure in many traditional societies, Igboland inclusive, women were rendered ‘voiceless’ and ‘nameless’ as a result, their roles were not recorded in history or omitted. The absence from history brings a gap in indigenous knowledge and values; where as the knowledge of the roles played by ancient women would serve as a lesson to the contemporary and future women. However, with the growth of feminism and liberation theologies, women have started to speak for themselves, thus, the call for the inclusion of their roles in history.

As had earlier been stated, there is ample evidence from scholars that the noble roles of ‘our grandmothers’ or foremothers were excluded from history. Phiri, Govinden & Nadar (2002) in discussing the need for complementing African Church history revealed that “ although much

has been written about the church in Africa and the roles that males played in building the church, very few histories contain the roles women played. P.4. This assertion resonates well with the absence of the roles of ancient women in the history of African traditions and values.

Cachet (2013), in discussing the role of women in Europe lamented that:

When it comes to the role of women, it seems as if we Europeans are in a big trouble. We do not even know really what was in fact the role of women in our history, and certainly not in nobility.... Since ancient Egypt, the role of noble women is directly linked to the divine; they are responsible for ensuring that the rites and traditions are respected. They are responsible for preparing rituals and studying the past... Writing which is considered a male thing appeared with the extinction of the woman's duty. The classical European tales got lost when they were written down. Before, it was no need to write them down as they were told from generation to generation from women to their children and from queens to kings (online).

Rootweb.com revealed that:

Those who are famous have, until recently, often been overlooked by mainstream historians.... There are an even greater number of women who ... managed to lead very interesting lives. The fact that they survived at all is a credit to their courage and stamina. ... who risked their lives traveling in tiny ships across the ocean, living on the frontier and giving birth to numerous children. Most were uneducated. Many of their lives went unrecorded.... The lives of some women are known to us only because of the historical circumstances that pushed them, often unwillingly, into the limelight, such as the colonial women who were accused of witchcraft or taken captive by warring Native Americans. Let it be to us, then, the family historians and record-keepers of this generation to uncover the long-hidden stories our female ancestors and to share them with our families, other genealogists, teachers and historians (online).

From the above sources, one finds out that the story of the role of women and their experiences relating to history are very much similar. As we shall notice later in this work, the ancient Igbo women, our 'grandmothers' played some roles –knowing the tradition and passing them to their daughters and to the future generation. They were actually in the fore front of rites and rituals. They were great teachers of traditions and values. These they did without appreciation if at all they were noticed. If not our foremothers, our much cherished values and traditions would have been irretrievably extricated in this era of globalization.

### **Theories of Ecomaternalistic and *Talitha cum* and Their Relevance**

This paper uses two related theories as its framework; eco-maternalistic theory by Siwila (2014) and the *Talitha cum* theory by Dube (2001). Eco-materialistic theory originates from eco-feminism which is a term often viewed differently within varied contexts. In this context, it reflects the perception of interconnectedness of women, nature and spirituality. It further confronts systems of patriarchy, race and class in traditional societies and gears at rediscovering the holiness of matter-woman and nature in many indigenous cultures.

The main thrust of eco-feminism is that women and nature are connected conceptually, culturally and symbolically. These connections are evident on the Western structure that organized ideas

about the world in a hierarchical and dualistic manner. Thus, the dualisms of reason and emotion, mind and body, culture and nature, heaven and earth, man and woman and so on. In that case, women are identified with femininity, the body, earth, sexuality, and flesh; and men with masculinity, spirit, mind, and power. The implication is that men have innate power over both women and nature. This dualistic structure originated in the west and strengthened by various religions and cultures (Lorentzen, L. N. & Eaton, H. 2002). Women and nature share same domination from men.

Eco-maternalistic theory is relatively an extension of eco-feminism. It was developed within matrilineal context where grandmothers played very important roles to define a girl's womanhood. A grandmother's presence created an opportunity for girls to observe how indigenous knowledge embedded in nature is held worthy by indigenous people and passed on from generation to generation and the way in which these women responded to feminist spirituality. This theory took bearing from the works of other great ecologists such as Hildegard of Bingen, Isabel Phiri (1996), Chirongoma (2005) and Rakoczy (2006) on the connectedness between humanity, nature and spirituality (Siwila, 2014).

Ecomaternalistic theory is simply a maternalistic tendency to address the social construct of women in relation to the feminine virtues of care, connectedness, non- violence and earth sensitivity to women's socialisation under conditions of marginalisation and domination. Both the women and nature (environment) are under the oppression and domination by men (Siwila, 2014).

This theory is however, closely related to the present study. It reflects the domination of women –despite her enormous role on the society she finds herself, a guardian, teacher, mother, wife, friend, custodian and transmitter of culture and yet, excluded in the history of development. The maternal approach resonates with the roles played by our foremothers who set proper channel for the preservation and transmission of African values and knowledge through rites and rituals. It also calls for the retrieval of their footprints in history for a brighter future.

The theory of *Talitha cum* is a Christian oriented theory, documented in Mark Chapter 5 and has great relevance to the present study. It is a theory that is based on the call of Jesus to the house of Jairus to heal his 12 years old daughter 'who is at a point of death'. On his way, another woman who had been bleeding for twelve years felt with faith that only if she would touch his garment that she would be healed. The bible recorded that she pushed through the crowd, touched his garment and the bleeding stopped immediately. Jesus noticed that power has gone out of him and inquired to know who touched him despite the fact that a thick crowd was pushing and following him. We know the eventual healing of the woman and raising of the daughter of Jairus from death. This theory has a lot to discuss in connection to feminist theology but in the context of this paper, we shall highlight the basic principles related to this work.

Firstly, all the key actors in the episode were mentioned by their names and even their position in the society. For instance, Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, a father and a husband was clearly identified. Only the two females who were key characters in the episode and the mother of the girl were the ones whose names and identities were not mentioned.

In a nut shell, as these women, though key characters in the episode were “nameless” and their professional identities not recorded so does the patriarchal system in African culture render the female gender nameless and classless. However, as Jesus took pity on them and healed them so does feminist liberation theology heal the misery of women and encourages them to believe that they have been freed to explore for their full actualization.

Furthermore, it is closely related to the present study because likewise their names and identities were not mentioned in the episode, so were the names of our ancient mothers omitted in the history of development despite the zeal they exhibited for the preservation and transmission of the much cherished African values and knowledge.

Both theories therefore reinforce the present study; while ecomaternalistic theory exposes the injustice, *talitha cum* gives hope that womanhood has been freed from the injustice and domination and should therefore, stand up to explore her full humanity. In the next unit, we shall attempt to justify how women are the preservers and transmitters of indigenous knowledge and values.

### **The Roles of women as Preservers and Transmitters of Indigenous Values**

In the previous unit, we analyzed two theories relevant to this study and will in this unit expound the roles our foremothers played as preservers and transmitters of indigenous. We shall do this with reference to their roles in traditional rites of passage. Thus, a glance on the rite of passage in African ontology.

### **Rites of Passage in African Traditional Ontology**

Rites take a glaring place in African traditional life and it is an issue that forms the African lifestyle. Religion and culture in Africa is very complex in nature and it appears in different features and stages in life. Every stage in life or every activity in life has a formal procedure it takes. While rite refers to a set of given religious activities that are usually prescribed and performed for particular purposes, rites of passage are a set of such activities that are performed to mark or ritually celebrate the various stages of transformations in the life cycle of an individual. This cycle of life starts right from conception of a child and ends at death.

In other words, rites of passage are sets of ceremonies or events that mark important stages in one's life. It is a formal procedure for transition into a next stage of life (Hornby, 1999). Fairchild (1965) averred that “Rites of passage are the ceremonies which cluster around great crisis of life, or periods of transition from one status to another, notably birth, puberty, marriage and death. (p. 262). Victor Turner (1967) rather talks of life-crisis rituals as a change of physical or social positions.

The various stages of human development starting from birth, puberty, marriage and death are all very important and need to be celebrated. They involved crossing from one stage of life to another. Ray (1999) noted that in this phase, people are metaphysically and sociologically remade into new beings with new social roles. Newborn infants are made into human person, children are made into adults, men and women are made into husbands and wives, deceased people are made into ancestors, princes are made into kings and so on. This remaking of man

involves the symbolic destruction of the old and the creation of the new. On the process, one is momentarily stripped of former self and status and recreate to something new, with new roles and expectations.

Having said that it centers on transitions from one phase and assimilation into another, it invariably involves three main movements which includes; separation from old self, transition to new self and incorporation into a new group. The separation phase is symbolically a detachment of individual or group of persons from former stage or group on a satisfactorily attainment of given conditions. The second phase is symbolically a jump or movement to another stage after which one is integrated to a new stage of life which is the integration phase. This third phase brings the initiate into a new life, roles, status and expectations.

They do not only mark the transition between an individual's life stages but they reinforce the dominant religious views and values of a culture. In other words, they reinforce the world view of a people. Remarkably, women are at the fore front of all these yet, they are excluded from the history of the socio-religious development of their people. In the context of this paper, we shall cite only two rites to expound the role of women as preservers and transmitters of indigenous values. These would include the rites puberty and pregnancy rites.

### **Puberty Rite**

Puberty is the movement or transition from childhood to adulthood, from relatively unproductive life to productive citizen and from dependency to independency. Because of its very important impact on community development, it is an occasion of considerable ritual. It is primarily to welcome or introduce the new adult into the adult world with its rights, privileges and duties. One is recognized as an adult and fit for marriage only after a successful puberty rites.

Puberty is the period of life at which a person attains the biological maturity necessary for reproduction. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defined puberty as a stage when a person's sexual organs are developing and he/she becomes capable of having children. In some communities, puberty rites are mainly celebrated for the girls while in some it is for the boys as well. Some of the Igbo of Nigeria call puberty rites for girls *iru mgbede* which means the seclusion for purposeful preparation of eligible girls for marriage. The period for this training varies from place to place ranging from three to six months or even more in some places.

*Irumgbede* is an integral part of puberty rites in many parts of Igbo culture area since it prepares a young woman for marriage. The important place marriage institution occupies in many traditional societies is very glaring. This is so because the family, which is the microcosm of the society at large, is instituted through marriage. Invariably, the woman who is the font and acm of the continuity of the family is well equipped with the societal norms and values. Mathias and Miriam (2014) echoed that "the woman occupies an important position in the family. This is because; it is the woman who makes or mere the family"( p.161).

During the period of exclusion, the girls are given separate huts where they stay and restricted from going out during the day except at nights when they go to the village square to learn some dances, songs, folktales and orientations on women status and roles. During the day, they beautify themselves with calm wood dye, plaiting their hair and lavishly feeding them. At the

closing stage, they assemble at the village or market square where they parade themselves at the full admiration of friends, relatives and prospective husbands. After parading to display their beauty and costly costumes, they display their dance. It is a period for exchange of gifts from loved ones. They finally return to their daily routine life, fully prepared for marriage. The basic principle in these rites is to formally welcome the child into the adult world which in turn boasts her morale to accept adult roles. The whole process is also to reenact the human-spirit encounter and relationship thereby ensuring the continuity of the relationship between the living and the dead (Ezenweke, 2012; Mathias & Miriam 2014).

During the period, the initiates are confined to a seclusion designed for training and beautification purposes and are attended to by elderly matrons. The act of seclusion symbolizes the death of old childish life while the reappearance symbolizes the resurrection into full adult ready and willing to assume adult status and responsibilities. In a nutshell, puberty rite is loaded with great significance. The youths are ritually introduced into the act of productive and communal living. It is a gate way to participating in the governance of ones community with other elders in line with the Igbo adage - *nwata kwochaa aka, o soro okenye rie ihe* ( a child who washes his/her hands clean eats with the elders).

The elderly women also help the young women to improve on their overall domestic and interpersonal skills, which include trading, cooking, decorating the home, cloth weaving, hair plaiting and/or braiding as well as knowledge of certain crafts. Through this act of transmission of social values, the young woman to acquire knowledge from the past from older women and further use same knowledge for both in the present and the future tutoring other young girls in due course.

### **Pregnancy Rite**

Pregnancy in many African cultures is connected to life itself and so held with great care and respect. Marriage is often not fully recognized or accepted until pregnancy occurs. It is a sign of the completeness of the man and the woman and the presence of the gods. Mbiti (1969) observed that:

Pregnancy becomes therefore the final seal of marriage, the sign of complete integration of the woman into their husband's family and kinship circle. Unhappy is the woman who fails to get children, worse than committing suicide. She has become the death and of human life, not only for the genealogical line but also for herself when she dies, there will be nobody of her own immediate blood to remember her to keep her in the state of personal immortality. She will simply be "forgotten" the fault may not be her own but this does not excuse her in the eye of sociality. (pp.143-144).

Pregnancy which is a transitional period between conception and childbirth is therefore, so preserved at all cost to ensure safe delivery. Hence, pregnancy and childbirth together constitute one whole (Metuh, 1991), as childbirth is the end product of pregnancy while the latter is the means to an end. Pregnancy attracts series or rites but in the context of this paper we shall briefly discuss the general phenomenon of pregnancy to portray the role of women as preservers and transmitters of indigenous values, in other words, if not our grandmothers, our indigenous values would have been totally lost.

Rites of passage start as soon as a woman misses her monthly period. Oracles are consulted immediately to know the minds of the gods and the appropriate sacrifice or sacrifices that should be offered. The purpose is mainly for appreciation and protection from the malignant persons and forces throughout the period of the pregnancy. Often promises in form of votive sacrifices are made to the gods to win their favours.

The expectant mother is placed on diets that will boost her health condition. In many parts of Igboland, she will be advised to be eating fruits like udara that signifies *omumu* (fertility). They are equally advised against eating certain meat like, grass cutter which is widely believed to be responsible for hard and prolonged labour. The men are not allowed to sleep with their pregnant wives at the early stage of the pregnancy to avoid miscarriage. Pregnant women are also advised to avoid a lot of things such as seeing ugly sights like monkey, chimpanzees, masquerade, ugly paintings and human beings alike so that the child will not take after them. There are a lot of prohibitions and many if not all hinge on myths associated with such issues.

With this brief note on rites of passage, puberty and pregnancy rites, let us deduce from them the role of women and justify their status as preservers and transmitters of indigenous knowledge and values.

### **If not our Grandmothers- the Role of Women**

This unit will x-ray the roles our foremothers played in history as would be construed from their presence in puberty and pregnancy rites. As captioned above – ‘If not our grandmothers’, our traditional knowledge and values would not have been kept alive. It is important to note here that in the traditional societies and still in some places today, it is viewed as a waste of resources to send girls to school. In such scenarios, the only education available to the feminine gender is as would be provided by the elderly women, hence, the often reference to them as our grandmothers. It is usually the bride’s mother, grandmother, mother-in-law, the aunt or any other related elderly woman that would initiate the consultation of the oracle and other education that will follow.

During the smearing rite, which is one of the sub-rites during pregnancy, many objects and acts loaded with meanings are employed. It were the old women who interpreted the symbolic meaning of the acts and objects to the young pregnant woman. For instance, they would educate her that the local white chalk is a constant reminder that she should be pure in all things especially in safe guarding her body which is solely for her husband. She is further educated on the various taboos and consequences associated with defilement. With the sense of sacred with which these laws and taboos are clothed, the traditional laws are highly respected. In this regards, it helped to reduce sexual promiscuity unlike in recent time globalization has desecrated many of these taboos. Again, the rubbing and sprinkling often attract multiple interpretations varying from consecrating from and warding away of evil spirits to a reminder that motherhood and child rearing often attracts dirt. This also contributes to attainment of knowledge on child rearing.

Furthermore, if it was not for ‘our grandmothers’ a lot of indigenous norms and values would have been irretrievably lost. They served as the preservers and transmission channels of the indigenous knowledge and norms from one generation to another while their male counterparts were at the field. They were the teachers of their era notwithstanding the total absence of



Information Communication Technology (ICT). They would protect and emphasize the “dos and don’ts” with appropriate taboos associated with them. They were the great supervisors and police of their era, ensuring the young mothers master and adhere to the norms before they would be allowed to operate without close monitoring. Effiong in Mathias & Miriam (2014), in discussing the phenomenon of *iru mgbede* in Akwete Ndoki community in Abia state of Nigeria affirmed that:

They were the custodian and transmitter domestic and interpersonal skills, which include trading, cooking, decorating the home, cloth weaving, hair plaiting and/or braiding as well as knowledge of certain crafts. Because beauty constitutes a key aspect of the process, they are also taught to dress themselves flamboyantly and to apply makeup in a manner that constantly ensures their attractiveness. Regarding their health and the health of their future offspring, they receive instructions on how to achieve sexual fulfilment, how to adopt proper nutritional habits at the natal and post-birth phase, how to stimulate milk production for breastfeeding and how to identify herbal remedies for labour pain. They also receive training and/or retraining on the moral values, customs, mores and taboos of their community. (p. 162).

It was the elder women, having gone through life experiences that preserved and transmit indigenous value to the coming generation. This unique informal kind of education was the only available source of training for the girl-child since as earlier reiterated, it was considered as a waste to send them to school where formal school happened to be available. Matthias & Miriam opined that:

Young women are educated on subjects that cover biology, psychology, sociology, culture, home management, cosmetology, fashion design and other skills enhancement. The reason is to prepare the young girl for her sacred duty of a wife and a mother. Thus, she is trained on every thing that will aid her to adapt to the wider society. The teachers are elders who are experienced in the different fields they teach. It is the only education a young girl acquires since it considered a waste to send the girl child to school. (p.162).

We may at this stage, base on the above review, rightly say that our foremothers were great educators, facilitators, councillors, Supervisors, police officials, dieticians, designers, home economists, psychologists and in a nutshell, the preservers and transmitters of knowlegde, norms and values yet, history was unfair to them.

## **Conclusion**

The paper highlighted the continual injustice to womanhood as shown by exclusion of roles of women in history. It used the contributions of women in rites of passage to justify that they are the preservers and transmitters of indogenous knowledge and values, though the patriarchal structure witnessed in many indogenous society kept these roles out of history. The paper concludes with a recommendation to retrace the roles of our ancient foremothers to complement our history which is deemed necessary as it would hopefully serve as a lesson and guide to the contemporary and future women. If this is not done, the much cherist indegenoue knowledge and values may be irretrievably lost to the air of globalizatization.

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