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### **An Enquiry into the Religio-Cultural Experience of Women in Nigeria: Towards a Philosophy of Reciprocity**

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#### **Abstract**

*Scholars have accused religion of defending class society and patriarchy. This has become increasingly emphasized to the extent that religion is now seen as one of the instruments of oppression rather than redemption. This paper explores the religious and cultural elements that affect the dignity of the Nigerian woman, like the Sharia Law in Northern Nigeria, the case by some feminists against marriage rituals and the use of exclusive language in the liturgy. While not suggesting any intention to trek all the allies of the religio-cultural experience of women in Nigeria, it adopts a new method to tackle the problem, by focussing on the ethic of reciprocity as a tactic for restoring the dignity of women.*

**Key Words:** Religio-cultural, experience, women, ethic, reciprocity, Nigeria

## **Introduction**

Religion has been accused of defending class society and patriarchy by feminist thinkers (Echem 2008; Oduyoye 1986; Daly 1968; Ruether 1982; Uchem 2001, Salaam 2003). This has become increasingly emphasized to the extent that religion is now seen as one of the instruments of oppression rather than redemption. This piece attempts to explore and expose those religious and cultural elements that affect the dignity of the Nigerian woman. However, while not suggesting any intention to trek all the allies of the religio-cultural experience of women in Nigeria, it adopts a new method to tackle the problem, by focussing on the ethic of reciprocity as a tactic for restoring the dignity of women

### **Women and the sharia law in Northern Nigeria**

The introduction of the sharia law in Northern Nigeria in the perspective of Salaam (2003) does not in any way advance the interests of women; this is because it gives central place to a paternalistic interpretation to women's appropriate roles and socio-political arrangement of the society.

Akiyode-Afolabi (2007) flawed the implementation of Sharia Penal Codes in northern Nigeria in several respects. Firstly, he argues that it does not adequately protect the rights of women. Therefore abuse, violence and discrimination against women go unpunished as they are wrongly considered to be socially acceptable. In addition, the testimony of women is devalued and treated as that of a minor or person without necessary legal capacity. Often, these biases and attitudes also affect judges and therefore the judgment of the Sharia Courts.

As a result the implementation of sharia in Nigeria has placed some restrictions on the rights of women in Northern Nigeria.

The sharia law considers sex out of wedlock a crime punishable by death, and under this law, pregnancy is a sufficient evidence to convict an unmarried woman of the crime. However, if a man takes an oath denying having sex with a woman out of wedlock, it is often considered sufficient proof of "innocence" unless four independent and reputable witnesses testify to seeing him take part in the act. As a result of this, most of the culprits of the sharia law have been women. Akiyode-Afolabi (2007) further observes that,

These ... suggest that the thinking of the court and supporters of sharia is that only women can be guilty of the 'offences' of adultery or fornication. What happens then, in the case of seduction of minors, or rape? This suggests that men living under sharia have been given a license to rape women and seduce or assault minors, or even impregnate them in the course of a relationship and then deny responsibility and watch them face a death sentence (p.11).

Below are a number of cases legislated by the sharia court:

- In August 2000, Amina Abdullahi was sentenced to 100 lashes in Zamfara state for engaging in premarital sex.
- In November of the same year Attine Tanko, who was 18-years-old was found guilty of having sex out of wedlock after she was discovered to be pregnant. Tanko's 23-year-old boyfriend, the father of the child, was also flogged 100 times and sentenced to jail. The court ruled that it would allow her to wean the baby for up to two years, that is, after giving birth before she would receive the punishment of 100 lashes.
- In January 2001, Bariya Ibrahim Magazu, 17-year-old, was given 100 strokes of the cane for conceiving a child out of wedlock the previous year. At the time she received the lashes, she was already breast-feeding the baby. At the court, she had no representation, but she revealed that she was impregnated by one of three middle-aged men with whom her father pressured her to have intercourse.
- In October 2001, a court in Sokoto state convicted Safiya Hussaini of adultery, she was sentenced to death by stoning, because she became pregnant out of wedlock, even though the 35-year-old mother cried out that her daughter was raped by a neighbor. In the case of Safiya, Akiyode-Afolabi (2007), raises questions of gender bias on the following grounds:
  1. "Her pregnancy constituted the main evidence against her, but no scientific efforts were made to establish or disprove the paternity of the child.
  2. The onus or proof of adultery was just pregnancy.

3. The man named in the case was allowed to go free after denying responsibility for the pregnancy” (Akiyode Afolabi, 2007, p.12).
  - In Katsina, during the month of March, in 2002, Amina Lawal Kurami was sentenced to death by stoning for bearing a child out of wedlock. The man she identified as the child's father denied the accusation and was acquitted for lack of evidence.
  - In Zamfara, there was a time women were prevented from travelling in public transport, the reason being that women are not supposed to be seen in the public spheres of life; it is worst when found in the company of a man not related to them. This led to a protest from women, and the law was amended, however in practice it is evident that women are still discriminated against.

Akiyode-Afolabi (2007), cites another instance under the Sharia Law, in Tarata Mafara Local Government Area, where single women were given a three month ultimatum to get married or face being sacked from jobs in the civil service. Some financial inducements were provided to encourage women to become married. These examples constitute human rights violations under Nigerian law. These and other similar policies also mask a greater problem of growing unemployment. The criminalization of women and their rights diverts attention from the real causes of crime.

Following the Islamic culture, Idyorough (2005) observes that in many parts of Northern Nigeria, women are secluded and are prevented from moving about in the day time. Thus they are excluded from economic activities of the day time. They have to depend entirely on their husbands for supply of their daily needs. In time of loss of husband, they always find it difficult to survive and cater for their children; their children are also more likely to develop delinquent habits.

In December 2008, Thisday Newspaper reported that the Kwara State Sharia Council faulted the purported plan by some members of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in the state to present a woman as the 2011 governorship candidate. It said that such a plan was contrary to the Sharia Law which forbids leadership by women. According to the statement signed by the vice chairman of the council in the state, Sheikh Moshood Ibrahim, “We therefore vehemently oppose this plan in Kwara State where over 80%

are Muslims come 2011 as being contemplated and bandied about by some members of the ruling party in the state” (Thisday, 2008).

From the foregoing, Akiyode-Afolabi (2007) advises that rights campaigners, women's organizations in Nigeria and elsewhere need to work towards law reform, and the domestic enforcement of international norms and standard for the observance of women's human rights such as the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Democracy is not all about elections. The true test of democracy is a nation's capacity to uphold the constitutional, democratic and human rights of all its citizens regardless of ethnicity, race, age, economic and social status, and of course gender.

### **The Case against Marriage Rituals**

Uchem (2008), in her article “Violence against Women Rituals: A Prelude to Domestic Violence” argues that there are elements of violence in the rites of Igbo traditional marriage and Christian marriage. In the Igbo marriage solemnization ritual, Rose Uchem believes that by the bride stooping or kneeling down, the woman is symbolically presented as a subordinate of the man. Agbasiere (cited in Uchem 2008) sees it as “stooping to conquer”. As regards the Christian marriage ritual, Uchem (2008) maintains that the Christian ritual institutionalizes a man's sense of himself as head and first, and the woman's sense of herself as subordinate, unequal in dignity with the man. Uchem (2008) observes four times during church ceremony when inequality is ritualized.

1. “The formula of vows which is worded differently for the woman and for the man. The wife is urged to “obey” and the husband to “love”.
2. A literal use of scriptures without up-to-date interpretation. This is seen in the scripture readings, such as, Gen 12, Ephesians 5:21-6; 9 and other gender insensitive passages.
3. Sermons which largely protect male interests and perpetuate women subordination.
4. Reception ceremonies in which stereotypes of weakness and dependency are foisted on the woman during the cutting of the cake; for example, and the voice of the bride is never heard.

5. The couple's photograph, which often portrays the image of the woman's subordination in the marriage relationship by positioning the man's head at a higher level than that of the woman, even if the reverse is the case in reality" (Uchem 2008).

Uchem (2008) thus concludes that marriage ceremonies in African culture and Christianity only enhance the belief of man's ownership over the woman, which is a preparation for domestic violence. This notwithstanding, the researcher believes that Uchem's observations, were arrived at as a result of a poor concept of the richness of the Christian and African traditional marriage rituals. There are more beautiful things to observe from the Christian marriage ritual and the African cultural heritage expressed in the Igbo marriage ceremony than subordination and violence.

### **Exclusive language in the liturgy**

Language, according to Mullaly (1988) "is one of the most important ingredients in human experience" (p.6). Women believe that their stories in the Church have been written out of the history of man, and that from the beginning, sexist language, have been used in the church as a tool for subjugating them. For feminists, this is a form of racism, sexism and apartheid against half of the members of the church, if not more. The quarrel of feminists is the use of the male generic in liturgical celebrations where both sexes are present. To put the men in the shoes of the women, Mullaly asks that the hierarchy allow the generic "woman" or "womankind" be used for at least a period of three years.

I then imagine an all male congregation ... standing up for the Creed and expressing sentiments like "For us women and for our salvation". If the men of the church could, or, more to the point would refer to themselves as 'women' right throughout statements, documents, liturgies etc., for a sustained period of time, then they might not feel so blasé about making statements like 'But women know they are included when the term *man* is used (p.6).

This protest from feminists, point to the fact that we are living in a socio-cultural context where masculine God language is no longer understood as a generic language by many women, and in this regard the Church's hierarchy need to take a stand on this issue because the experience of the present

community cannot be ignored. It is in this regard that Victor and Raymond (1981) maintain that

Because all are one in Christ, and because through Christ all are God's daughters and sons enjoying basic equality as persons, we ought to use 'inclusive and unitive' language whenever it is feasible to do so in a communal setting, i.e. language that includes both women and men and emphasizes the unity of us all in Christ. For instance, instead of praying, 'O God, look with favour upon man whom you have redeemed,' we ought to pray "O God, look with favour upon us whom you have redeemed," such inclusive and unitive language, whether or not in the context of prayer, reflects the sensitivity of Christ towards women, and it fulfils the right expectations not only of women but of many men as well (p.11).

### **The Ethic of Reciprocity as a Tactic for Restoring the Dignity of Women**

The choice of the concept 'Ethic of reciprocity', otherwise known as 'the golden rule', is a prospective tactic for the "dignitization" of women. It is a significant norm when it comes to maintaining a decent society. Those who break the Golden Rule in order to pursue their own self-serving aim are, clearly, a real danger to the society because they poison the prospect of building a descent society. Also, very crucial to the choice of the term 'ethic of reciprocity' is that it is relatively simple to articulate and understand, especially for moral decision making; it is derived from human feelings and behaviour; it addresses an enormous range of behaviours, such that all the experiences of women can be articulated into it.

The understanding of the ethic of reciprocity employed by the researcher is taken from the Gospel of Matthew 7:12: "Do for others what you want them to do for you", even though it would be analyzed alongside its parallels in other passages of scripture and the history of other religions. This passage of scripture from the Gospel of Matthew is what may be considered a puzzle resolver to the problem of the experience of widows in Nigeria.

### **The Ethic of Reciprocity and Its Parallels**

The passage of scripture on the ethic of reciprocity from Matthew parallels with some other passages of scripture and also some literatures in Judaism and Ancient Eastern Religions. The best known in Judaism is probably that of Rabbi Hillel or Hillel the Elder (Leske, 2004), who in giving an answer to

a question from a proselyte who demanded a precise and good understanding of the law and the prophets: "That which displeases you do not do to another. This is the whole law, the rest is commentary" (Mckenzie, 1965, p.75). In Brahmanism it is expressed thus: "This is the sum of Dharma: Do naught unto others which would cause you pain if done to you" (Mahabharata, 2011). In Buddhism: "...a state that is not pleasing or delightful to me, how could I inflict that upon another?" (Samyutta Nikaya, 2011) In Confucianism: "Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you" (Analects, 2011). In Ancient Egyptian Religion: "Do for one who may do for you, that you may cause him thus to do." (The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant, 2011) In Hinduism: "This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you" (Mahabharata, 2011). In Taoism: "The sage has no interest of his own, but takes the interests of the people as his own. He is kind to the kind; he is also kind to the unkind: for Virtue is kind. He is faithful to the faithful; he is also faithful to the unfaithful: for Virtue is faithful." (Tao Teh Ching, 2011) Similar text is also found in the Old Testament in the book of Tobit 4:5: "Never do to anyone else anything that you would not want someone else to do to you".

As expressed in the gospel of Matthew 7:12, the Golden Rule is a summary of the law and the prophets: "This is the meaning of the law of Moses and of the teachings of the prophets". This is attested to not only by the text itself but by the structure or arrangement of the passage 7:12 in relation to the preceding verses. 7:12 is presented as a summary of all that Jesus has been saying about living in relationship with one another as God's people.

There is a difference in Jesus' presentation of the ethic of reciprocity from others. Jesus presents it in a positive way, unlike the rest which are in the negative. By putting it into the positive Jesus has transformed a wisdom saying into an action of love instead of self-protection. According to William Barclay, when the rule is put positively, a new principle is put to life. In its positive sense, the Golden Rule is a deliberate and chosen policy of life which makes a person go out of his or her way to do to others as he or she would wish them do to him or her. This is more outgoing and difficult than the negative dimension of the rule which involves nothing other than not doing certain things (Barclay, 2000).



### **The ethic of reciprocity and the love of neighbour**

Christ came to teach mankind not only what they need to know and believe, but also what they are to do as persons in a community of people. This is grounded upon the great commandment of love which exhorts that “thou shall love thy neighbour as thyself”. As regards the Golden Rule, a step further is taken. People are not just to love their neighbour but are also to bear the same affection to them as they do to themselves. Matthew Henry believes that the meaning of the ethic of reciprocity lies in three things:

1. We must do that to our neighbour which we ourselves acknowledge to be fit and reasonable: the appeal is made to our own judgment, and the discovery of our judgment is referred to that which is our own will and expectation, when it is our own case.
2. We must put other people at the same level with ourselves, and reckon that we are as much obliged to them as they are to us. We are as much bound to the duty of justice as they, and they are as much entitled to the benefit of it as we.
3. We must, in our dealings with others, suppose ourselves in the same particular case and circumstances with those we have to do with, and deal accordingly. For instance, if I were making a bargain for someone else, labouring under the same infirmity and affliction, how should I desire and expect to be treated? This is a just supposition because we do not know how soon their case or situation may turn out to be ours (Henry, 2007).

### **The ethic of reciprocity and the religio-cultural experience of women**

In the consideration of the liberation of women from the shackles of patriarchy, discrimination, sexism, poverty, violence, etc, the ethic of reciprocity is the puzzle resolver. Men should look at the religio-cultural conditions of women, especially those areas where men have built structures that have confined women thus and ask themselves, “If I were treated in the same way, would I be happy, or if I were to find myself in this condition, would I be happy?” This is very practical. For instance, if in a congregation men are addressed with feminine categories that seem to place them outside the entire show will they be happy? If men will not be happy, and will prefer to be addressed with an inclusive language, then women should be treated as they would want to be treated. If women in cultural societies are treated as nameless pilgrims on earth, the man should ask himself if he would like to be

treated thus, and if the answer is in the negative, then a woman should be treated with equal respect. In the areas of violence and discrimination, men should also be able to ask themselves if they would like to be discriminated against in areas of employment, politics etc because of their gender, if the answer is in the negative, then they should treat women as they would like to be treated. The ethic of reciprocity obliges men to treat women in such a way that they acknowledge to be fit and reasonable. It also reminds men that they must put women at the same level with themselves, and reckon that men are as much obliged to women as women are to men. Men, in their dealings with women, must suppose themselves in the same particular case and circumstances with women, and relate accordingly. This will eliminate the selfish interests some men derive from perpetuating the subordination and oppression of women, thus restoring the balance.

### Conclusion

While this work does not claim to have succeeded in providing a full exposition of the religio-cultural experience of women in Nigeria, it is however, plausible to assert that it will join ranks with the concerned people of Nigeria and indeed the concerned people of the world who have begun an honest and creative awareness about the oddity of patriarchy and sexist cultures both in Nigeria and the world over. If this work succeeds in creating awareness to this threat, and proffering lasting solutions, then it would have made a modest contribution to the ongoing campaign to restore the dignity of the woman for the stability of the family and the Nigerian nation.

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