

CULTURE, RELIGION AND WOMEN'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC NEEDS IN THE 21ST CENTURY NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper on culture, religion and women's socio-economic needs in 21st century Nigeria explores the place of the woman through the two major religions in Nigeria: Christianity and Islam. The two religions permit the woman to own or inherit certain properties either from their fathers or late husbands. A woman is even allowed to buy properties provided she has the means. However, culture restricts the woman from owning certain properties in Nigeria. When culture comes to play the woman is relegated to the background. The woman is only meant to be seen and not to be heard. In some Nigeria's custom and traditions culture is often used as a tool for justifying the violations of women's rights especially in the areas of marriage and property, reflecting deep-seated patriarchal structures and harmful gender stereotypes. The paper is anchored on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Abraham Maslow as a renowned researcher in the study of human needs and motivation, came up with his famous hierarchy of needs theory with a proposal that people are motivated by five levels of needs namely: (1) Physiological needs (2) Safety needs (3) Love and belonging needs (4) Esteem and prestige needs (5) Self-actualization needs. Two additional levels of needs namely: (6) Understanding needs and (7) Aesthetic needs were later included in Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The focus of Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs is now on motivation of people by seven (7) levels of needs in human environment. The emphasis on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs is that there are certain basic needs which must be met before other needs can, indeed, be considered in human environment, especially in the case of women in Nigeria. Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs further focuses on exploration of human desire to address people's needs in order to improve their living conditions in human environment. No man is an

island unto himself in Nigeria. Social groupings, associations, affiliations and belongings which are based on love are needed to enhance harmonious human co-existence in both genders. This gives people the courage and confidence to contribute or stand up to women's needs to improve their living conditions. This paper helps to equip the place of women's in Nigeria with a better understanding of Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs and its application to real life situations of needs among women in Nigeria. The paper reveals that, culturally, women are viewed as inferior to men, and a male-child is generally celebrated and allotted higher portions of properties. However, the tenets of both Islam and Christianity do not disregard the woman in terms of right to own properties.

Keywords: Culture, Tradition, Religion, Christianity, Islam and Nigeria.

Introduction

The 21st century Nigeria, depicts the level of advancement of Nigeria and Nigerians in every facet of its existence; advancement in socio-economic life of women, the place of women in politics, culture, religion, agriculture and technology. The 21st century Nigeria also means that we are following the trend of the new world order and should be able to do away with certain cultural and religious practices that are not convenient for women. It means that the woman should have equal right of socio-economic needs as their counterparts. The woman should not be harangue under religion and cultural disguise.

Uduk (2021) averred that: "In Nigeria, the vulnerable conditions of women are more critical, given lingering gender inequalities, domestic violence, lack of social protection, among several other issues that exacerbate injustice and deprivation limit their ability to reach their full potential" (p. 109). The role of a woman in any sane society cannot be undermine, hence Uduk, (2021) went further to state that "Harnessing the creative power of women holds greater potentials for sustainable national development, and would benefit a nation's society and economy at large and is therefore essential for solving this century's problems in post Covid-19 era" (p. 109). Women should not be as second class citizens in the name of religious doctrines and cultural norms.

Religious doctrines and cultural norms are two forces that bear overwhelming influence on human rights, generally (Abdulla, 2018). As

a matter of fact, all the major religions in the world share a “universal interest and tradition of respecting the integrity, worth and dignity of all persons and consequently, the duty towards other people who suffer, without distinction” (Lauren, 1998, p.5). It is vital to mention that the religious ideas of protecting human dignity eventually provided the philosophical base upon which international human rights’ law was established. To support this claim, Rieffer (2006) as cited in Udoh, Folarin and Isumonah (2020) asserts that, early religious writings presented a moral code that contained the duties and responsibilities of all peoples and, also promoted the initial discussions about rights (Lauren, 1998, p. 9 as cited in Rieffer, 2006). These early religious writings and moral code of conduct formed the foundation of the idea and concept of human rights, which was eventually ratified and incorporated into international law in the twentieth century.

Culture, generally on the other hand, recognises human rights by identifying notions of human feelings, empathy, intuitions and concerns towards specific groups of others (Hunt, 2007). However, different customs and traditions, which reflect various cultures across the world, have to a large extent affected the promotion and protection of the notion of women’s rights. To be more precise, it has been argued that culture is often used as a tool for justifying the violations of women’s rights especially in the areas of marriage and property, reflecting deep-seated patriarchal structures and harmful gender stereotypes. Nevertheless, culture is not an unchanging concept that cannot accommodate current realities (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, 2016). Therefore, despite comprehensive international and national legislations and policies that prohibit discrimination and inequality on the grounds of sex/gender, women still experience systematic denial and marginalisation with respect to socio-economic rights and which are as a result of patriarchal standards that have filtered into different cultures. As noted by Okin (1999) many cultures in the world promote the control of women by men. This paper conceptually investigates the interference of culture and religion and women’s inalienable right to socio-economic needs in 21st century Nigeria.

Theoretical framework

The anchorage of this paper is on Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Historically, Abraham Maslow was a famous psychologist who contributed significantly to the growth and development of human psychology as evidently shown in the study of human needs and motivation in human environment in the contemporary society. Abraham Maslow was, indeed, regarded to be among the founding fathers of human psychology and motivation in human environment (Mulwa, 2008).

Abraham Maslow propounded the theory of human needs which is popularly known as Maslow's hierarchy of needs in human environment in Nigeria. Onah (2015) remarks that in 1943 that Brandeis University professor of psychology, Abraham Maslow as a renowned researcher in the study of human needs and motivation came up with his hierarchy of needs theory with a proposal that people are motivated by five levels of needs namely: (1) Physiological needs, (2) safety needs, (3) belonging needs, (4) esteem needs and (5) self-actualization needs. Two additional levels of needs of understanding needs and aesthetic needs were later included in Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Consequently, with emergence of two additional levels of needs of understanding needs and aesthetic needs, Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs now focuses on motivation of people by seven (7) levels of needs namely:

1. Physiological needs,
2. Safety needs or security needs,
3. Love and belonging needs or social needs.
4. Esteem and prestige needs or ego needs
5. Self-actualization needs or self – realization needs
6. Understanding needs
7. Aesthetic needs.

The central focus of Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs is on exploration of how people's attitude is stimulated by human desire to meet certain human needs. In the case of Nigeria there are certain needs women are being denied of courtesy of cultural belief. Mulwa (2008) states that Abraham Maslow's theory of needs is specifically built on the idea that human behaviour is really motivated by the simple desire to meet specific human needs in the society. The hierarchy of needs which

was developed by Abraham Maslow can, however, be used as a method of assessing socio-economic needs of women in Nigeria.

Socio-economic needs of women: Religion and cultural perspective

In Nigeria, culture and religion determine societal beliefs, norms and attitudes towards women despite the provisions of civil laws and international treaties. According to Abara (2012), culture indeed has a pervasive influence on women's rights in Nigeria. To corroborate this claim, he asserts that in North-East Nigeria, only 4% of land is owned by women while in the South-East and South-South geopolitical zones of the country, they own just over 10% of land. The reasons for this are anchored on customary laws. It is important to mention that inheritance rights differ across the country, given the fact that it is a heterogeneous country with many cultures. Nevertheless, a major feature in inheritance laws across the different cultures is that there is discrimination against women in property sharing (Abara, 2012, Ekhaton, 2018). The role of religion and culture in protecting women's rights to property in Nigeria will be discussed independently, subsequently.

Nigeria is made up of 36 states—19 states in Northern Nigeria and 17 states in Southern Nigeria. The country is made up of three major religions, namely, Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion (ATR). Nonetheless, it is almost generally accepted that Islam is the dominant religion in the Northern part of the country while Southerners are predominantly Christians; only a small percentage practice the third religion. For this study, the focus will be on two out of the three major religions -Islam and Christianity-because they, like most institutions, have larger followership and stronger influence on Nigeria's socio-political and socio-cultural systems.

Religion and women's socio-economic needs and rights in Nigeria

Islam, usually referred to as one of the Abrahamic faiths, has a large followership of about 50% of the Nigerian population (Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook, 2001). Needless to state that Islam is a powerful religious force that shapes the socio-political and socio-ethnic milieu of the Nigerian society. Introduced into the Northern Nigeria in the 11th century, Islam is an Arabic word that means surrender to God or submission to the will of God (Honarvar, 1988). Islamic laws (otherwise, referred to as Shari'a) which are described as

one of the world's greatest legal systems (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2018) border on the principles for the establishment of peace and order, improving the status of women and addressing the question of inheritance and succession on equitable grounds. Also, it propagates the principle of equality of all humans while shunning all inequalities due to sex, race or nationality (Sait and Lim, 2006) since all humans (whether male or female) are created from the same soul. According to Baer (1983 as cited in Sait and Lim 2006), historically, Muslim women were holders of property to enable them earn a living after the death of the breadwinner. In fact, under Islamic laws, a Muslim woman possesses individual legal and economic identity; she also has independence with regards to her access to land under Qur'anic injunctions. Sait and Lim (2006) further emphasize that Islamic substantive law, contained in the Holy Qur'an recognizes women's rights to acquire or utilize property through purchase or inheritance from husband. In other words, under Islamic laws, women have some degree of control over assets they purchase from their personal treasury or received from their parents before marriage or as gifts (mahr) from their husbands upon marriage. This ensures some level of financial independence and security for her.

Nevertheless, her rights to inheritance under the Islamic legal system are limited. While the Qur'an makes provision for women's rights to property and inheritance, the general rule is that her share is half her male counterpart's share in inheritance. To put it more aptly, a daughter is only entitled to half of her brother's share of inheritance. Nevertheless, she has absolute powers over whatever she gets by her labour or inheritance. This inequality is drawn from the assumption that the man has more financial obligations towards the woman and those obligations exceed the woman's. For instance, upon marriage, he is expected to present his wife with a marriage gift, mahr, (this could be an asset) which is her own property that cannot be taken away from her. In addition, the Muslim husband has the responsibility of maintaining his wife and children. The Muslim wife, on the other hand, has no responsibility of such; whatever asset or financial wealth she has belongs to her. Under Islamic law she is not obliged to co-provide for her family except she volunteers to do so. This is the same reason why a daughter from a Muslim family does not inherit property on equal terms with her male counterpart. The question to be asked here however is,

what happens to an unmarried woman who chooses not to marry? When a situation like this arises, the woman is discriminated against based on religious assumptions and contrary to provisions made in international human rights' regimes. It should be noted that traditional (or customary) practices amplify this discrimination. After the death of a husband, the wife (with children), on the other hand, inherits one-eighth of the deceased's property; and if she is without children, her portion is one-fourth. Also, a mother has the right to inherit from her dead son. In Northern Nigeria where the population therein are predominantly Muslims, these religious laws are followed precept by precept except in cases where customs superimpose the provisions of the Qur'an. Therefore, a cursory examination of the Islamic law (or Shari'a law) reveals that Muslim women can acquire or purchase any form of property, and discriminated, on the other hand, with respect to their rights to inheritance (Udoh et al., 2020).

Christianity, which is the second Abrahamic faith, with a population percentage of 40% in Nigeria (Adewole, 2017; Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook, 2001), is the predominant religion in the Southern region of the country. As a religion, Christianity was introduced in Nigeria in the 15th century by the activities of European missionaries and has ever since spread throughout the country with an overwhelming influence in the behavioural patterns and constitutional laws of the country (Kolapo, 2019). Put differently, it is a vital text upon which many now base their entire lives.

Like any other religion, Christians (followers of Jesus Christ) are guided by their religious laws which are well documented in the Holy Bible. The Holy Bible contains direct injunctions and instructions from God, as received by His prophets, on how His followers are expected to behave; and also, teachings from Jesus Christ and His apostles. This body of laws is generally divided into and commonly referred to as the Old and New Testaments. For the purpose of this study, the focus will be on the Torah (Hebrew word for "the Law of God") which is a subset of laws found in the Old Testament. The Torah is a collection of the first five books of the Bible which were given to Moses (Saperstein, 2019), as a body of rules or commandments, for the people of ancient Israel (often called the Israelites). Therefore, historically, the Torah was to shape and govern the lives of the Biblical Israelites. Either from the old or new testament or Torah, no scholars laid claim to any discrimination

against women in terms of properties inheritance (Naznin, 2014). It is very important to lay this foundation that equality among the creation has often been emphasised. Notwithstanding, women's inheritance or laws regarding such have been subjected to different interpretations by theologians, scholars and by local traditions (Radford, 2000). It is also very crucial to note that, the prevailing societal legal systems of those periods were instrumental in the interpretation of these laws (Radford, 2000).

Critical review of the religious books also supported women's rights to property and inheritance. For instance, in ancient Israel, the Jewish land was allotted to male heads of households, in different tribes, who also transferred such allotments in patrilineal patterns (Case, 2020; Murray, 1998; Shemesh, 2007; Verburg, 2019). However, where there was no male head, like Zelophehad case, lands were allotted to daughters (Case, 2020; Murray, 1998; Shemesh, 2007; Verburg, 2019). While women's denial to own property has not been exhaustively established or supported scripturally, there are also no scriptural reference that presents women (wives, daughters or sisters) as property to be owned or transferred as property (Hiers, 1993) contrary to the practices across different cultures, over centuries (Engineer, 2008). Nevertheless, the Torah has only few instances of daughters inheriting from their fathers but replete with various accounts of sons -eldest sons, in most cases inheriting their fathers' tribal property. In addition, widows' rights to property appear to be protected Biblically. This was clearly depicted in Ruth's account where it was alluded that she intended selling the land that belonged to her late husband (Lakama, 2019). As an old widow without sons to inherit her, the intent to sell the land presupposes that she had exclusive rights over the inherited land upon the death of her husband (Hiers, 1993; Lakama, 2019). Other scriptural references corroborate the recognition, promotion and protection of widows' rights to property and inheritance (Hiers, 1993; Lakama, 2019). Hence, the Torah, as spoken by God, does not discriminate against women or deny them of their rights to own property or inherit. Interpretations based on Jewish culture and fostered by patriarchal norms rather affected the implementation of the written laws (Radford, 2000). It is noteworthy to mention that, although these laws were expected to regulate the affairs of the Jews, it is the foundation of Christian laws.

Within the Nigerian context, various Christian leaders have been able to condemn discriminatory laws that impede women's access and ownership rights (Williams et al., 2020). Nevertheless, customs and traditions still prevail over laws of intestate succession as Christian laws are viewed by some traditional societies as foreign to the Nigerian culture. Also, the secularity of the country poses a challenge to the overarching influence of religious laws.

Culture and women's socio-economic needs in Nigeria

Women's experiences in acquiring or inheriting land and other property in Nigeria are filled with narratives of denial and marginalization (Ajayi and Olotuah, 2005). Being a culturally diverse country with well over two hundred and fifty (250) ethnic groups that are divided into three major ethnic groups (the Igbo, the Hausa and the Yoruba ethnic groups) patriarchal customs and traditions appear to be a recurring factor that unifies the experiences of their female population (Ekhaton, 2018).

In furtherance to the above, Ajayi and Olotuah (2005) aver that women's rights to property and inheritance are restricted within the natal and matrimonial families. In most Nigerian families, the natal family lays the foundation for sex-preference. The birth of a son is usually celebrated more than that of a daughter because, above all, a male child guarantees the continuation of the lineage. The female children suffer real discrimination in terms of inheritance after the demise of their father. For instance, among the Igbo and some subcultures within the Yoruba ethnic group, girls are not entitled to have a share in inheritance at all. The first son receives a greater share than the first daughter among the Akure indigenes (Ajayi and Olotuah, 2005). For the Bini and Ishan people of Edo state, the oldest son inherits all the father's property leaving the female child with nothing; the Hausa folks, on the other hand, operate according to Shari'a laws which give twice the daughter's portion to her brother. Within the matrimonial family, the ability to enjoy certain rights to property depends on several factors. One of such factors is the woman's capacity to have children in her husband's house. Traditionally, women are perceived to be sole reasons for their childlessness even though science has proven that in many cases, men could also be responsible. In fact, a woman may be labelled a witch if she cannot bring forth children. In the event of childlessness, such

women are denied their rights to inheritance after the death of their husbands.

For instance, in Edo state, Ajayi and Olotuah (2005) reveal that, even when a childless woman is wealthy and supports her husband in acquiring certain properties, like land or buildings, her in-laws could mount pressure on her husband to divorce her due to her childlessness. The situation would become more precarious when the property which was jointly owned is registered in the husband's name with no legal or acceptable evidence of the woman's contributions. That leaves her with nothing since the property is not legally hers. It is not different when she has children and is divorced. Divorce leaves most uneducated women with nothing other than their personal belongings like clothing, jewelry and maybe kitchen utensils. That is why some Nigerian women prefer to acquire property in their fathers' names. In other cases, the woman and all she owns are considered the man's property to be administered whichever way he deems (Ajayi and Olotuah, 2005). Also, widowhood practices against women in Nigeria put the widow in a disadvantaged position during property sharing. In most cases, a widow may be denied access to her late husband's property and in other circumstances, she is considered part of the property to be shared among old or young male relatives. Among the Igbo, some family members demand an instant inventory of all the husband's assets while demanding that the widow swears an oath of honesty. For the Etulo and Idoma tribes in Benue, property sharing is done along matrilineal and patrilineal lines of the deceased man, respectively. For the Etulo, the implication is that, when a man dies, his property is transferred to the maternal relations of the man who decides whether to give the widow and what should be given to her. Needless to say, that among this tribe, a barren widow has no right of inheritance (George, 2010). Among the Northerners in Kano state, a widow inherits one-eighth ($\frac{1}{8}^{\text{th}}$) of the deceased husband's property in accordance with Shari'a law.

Consequently, in the light of the above, culture and religion are two important factors that are often invoked as a justification for the violation of women's rights generally. In most patriarchal societies, it is often difficult to separate both factors as both are used to support each other even though, they are separable. Put differently, Christianity and Islam are not the main reasons behind discrimination in the country. As a matter of fact, both religions made provisions for inheritance before

the Western notion of women's rights to property was introduced (Lakama, 2019; Sait and Lim, 2006). Although the two religions do not make well-articulated provisions or codified laws for the protection of women's rights to property, it can be inferred from the different religious texts that embody the laws of these religions (the Holy Bible and the Qu'ran) that discrimination on the grounds of gender is outlawed. Culture still has an overwhelming influence on how women benefit from property sharing and ownership.

Summary

Islam and Christianity promote the protection of women considering the responsibilities they bear and their tenderness. Islamic laws do not prohibit women from buying any form of property or inheriting from their husbands and parents. However, it was discovered that property sharing in a Muslim family appears to be one-sidedly skewed in favour of the male-child on account that as a man, he bears more responsibility which includes his wife's. Therefore, a twist to the argument on (discriminatory) Islamic laws on inheritance is that the man gets more share because of his familial responsibilities. Besides this, a Muslim woman can purchase any property from her personal wealth.

Christianity, on the other hand, does not have specific provisions on women's rights to property except for few instances where women were permitted, either to inherit their father's portion of allotted land or sell deceased husband's property. Therefore, religion on the matters of women's socio-economic needs like rights to property is not a factor that engenders discrimination against women. The patriarchal traditions in Nigeria are responsible for the overall discrimination that women experience within the country with respect to their rights to property. A major finding of this study is that cultural interpretations are usually given to religious dogma in order to suit societal expectations of women.

Culture, on the other hand, discriminates against women in the country (Aluko, 2015; Ekhaton, 2018). It is evident in literature on women's property rights that in some communities, women cannot own land (Ekhaton, 2018; Oyelade, 2006) or other immovable properties except through the intervention of male relatives. As a matter of fact, when she eventually buys a property, as a responsible woman, she is expected to get her husband's consent before making any decision on the property (Udoh, 2020). In other communities in Nigeria, women

cannot inherit their deceased husband's or father's estate largely because of son/male preference. In situations where the deceased has no male child, his closest male relative takes over his property rather than his daughters and when she is considered in property sharing, she will not get an equal share with her brother because it is believed that she will be cared for in marital family (Udoh, 2020).

Conclusion and recommendations

The study concludes that religion and culture influence societal behaviour, attitudes and perceptions towards women's socio-economic needs. On one hand, religion makes provision for women's rights to acquire, use or inherit property, while, on the other hand, culture discriminates against them in Nigeria and Africa, as a continent (Adekile, 2010). Nevertheless, women's rights generally can be strengthened and further protected when religious leaders re-orientate the minds of their followers through doctrines and tenets contained in the religious texts. Through the doctrinal teachings of religious leaders that emphasize the equality of all beings, regardless of gender, the human mind will be conditioned to overcome and abolish patriarchal, cultural systems.

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