

The Centrality of Women in the Moral Teachings in African Society

COLLETTE SUDA

University of Nairobi, Kenya

ABSTRACT

This paper is about the contribution of women to the moral health and uprightness of African society. It begins with a discussion of the role of women as moral teachers in African families and underscores the centrality of women in the moral upbringing of children. As part of their traditional care-giving roles, African women have been in a unique and strategic position not only to produce and sustain life but also to instill socio-religious values and moral standards in the family and society. This moral education includes teaching children personal discipline, how to uphold sexual morality, what is expected of them at various stages of their lives as well as the moral requirements of chastity, marital fidelity and family responsibilities for men, women and children.

The discussion next turns to an explanation of the role of women in religion and takes up the twin issues of the role and position of women in African Christian churches and their contribution to community worship life. It is argued that through their healing ministry and pastoral infrastructure, a great number of women in Africa play a key role in bringing love to the continent and a sense of hope and optimism to those who live in despair. This role is closely linked to their involvement in various peace processes and efforts at conflict resolution in and outside Africa, particularly in strife-torn regions of the continent. The author presents some of the subtle and explicit ways in which the dominant male ideology has consistently used female sexuality to reinforce female subordination and devalue women's moral role in African society.

The last part of the paper deals with the issues of moral delocalization, social change and modernization in Africa, and how these processes have re-defined the role of women and the overall moral character of African societies. The conclusion stresses that both the empowerment of women and re-assessment of traditional family values and moral standards must be addressed if the moral health of African societies is to be improved.

INTRODUCTION

The female influence on the moral character of African society is arguably one of the most enduring marks in the history of humanity. Part of the reason for this is women's traditional care-giving roles, which put them in a unique and strategic position not only to produce and sustain life but also to help instill socio-religious values and morals in the family and society as a basis for establishing good and appropriate relationships between members. Through various structures, African women have devoted their lives and time to promote the welfare of all. In conflict situations, they have participated actively in peace efforts. They have helped to

rebuild family relationships and to restore dignity to those who occupy subordinate positions, particularly the poor and the powerless. In addition, many African Christian women have contributed to a feeling of hope and optimism among those who live in despair.

Culturally, women are socialized to be relationship-oriented and this process prepares them to be sensitive about the quality of relationships in marriages, families and communities. As agents of religion and moral education, women's role in promoting socio-religious and political moral order in Africa is more critical now than it has ever been in the past because some African states and institutions have lost their morality and are either in the process of being torn apart by conflict and structured inequality or are already deeply polarized along gender, ethnic, racial, religious and ideological lines.

In most African societies, the survival of the family and the future of marriage depend a great deal on the female population. This is not only because the moral upbringing of young people is at the centre of the female universe, but also because, through their expressive and productive roles, women provide a stable emotional environment that will cushion individuals against the psychological damage of disintegrating relationships. Providing love and care for family members, teaching people to lead morally upright lives, helping transform oppressive structures and working towards peace and reconciliation are some of the ways through which many African women have contributed and continue to contribute to the moral health of society. Of course, women's work transcends these realms but their centrality in cultivating and consolidating moral order underscores the idea that morality is about relationships between people who occupy either similar or different structural positions in society. In many parts of Africa, as elsewhere in the world, such positions have often been used and abused to deny other people their rights and a life with dignity.

1. WOMEN AS MORAL TEACHERS IN THE AFRICAN FAMILY

African women have been in the business of moral teaching since time immemorial. Under the traditional family system, African women played a key role in teaching children social ethical and moral values which were part of cultural standards for evaluating 'proper' behaviour. Much of the teaching was focused on regulating sexuality and family life in general. But under the patriarchal system of gender-power imbalance, African women are under more pressure than men to practice what they preach. In her study of elite marriages in East Africa, Obbo (1987) found that many African wives experience conflicting expectations about the proper moral behaviour pertaining to sexuality. On the one hand, as she puts it, "they must try to prove that their chastity is beyond reproach and that they will therefore be faithful wives while they must also demonstrate their fertility. In other words, women must be 'good women' before and after marriage but they must also demonstrate their

reproductive potential" (p. 265). Although the Christian teaching preaches chastity to both men and women, the patriarchal authority places the moral requirement of chastity and the burden of compliance more on females than males.

In traditional African society, mothers had the primary responsibility for teaching their children certain moral standards of behaviour during socialization. In general, children were taught what was expected of them at various stages of their lives. They were taught the community's customs, values and norms that accompany these roles (Muganzi 1987; Kisembo et al. 1977). Among other traditional ethical values, the youth were taught personal discipline, told to exercise a great deal of self-control and shown how to grow up into responsible and productive members of society. They were also made to learn through proverbs and folktales by older women that as children they are supposed to respect their parents and elders, to take their advice and guidance seriously. They also learnt the adverse consequences of violating such moral rules (Kilbride and Kilbride 1990; Nasimiyu-Wasike 1992). Many mothers also ensure that their children are enrolled in good schools and receive quality education. This responsibility is an important part of parenting and for many poor women is often undertaken with great personal sacrifices.

Among the Luo of western Kenya, for example, young girls were taught by their grandmothers and aunts how to sit down in a proper and decent manner (with their legs together) to avoid possible temptation on the part of boys. They also received advice on how to relate to men (Wachege 1994: 83). Their mothers also told them all that they needed to know about sexuality, including the point that sexual relationships should be restricted to marriage partners. The Tharaka girls in Kenya were given special chains by their mothers to wear around their waists for as long as they remained virgins before marriage. It was a taboo to keep the chain if a girl had lost her virginity before she got married (Kalule 1986). This kind of moral and ethical education was most effective under a system of strong parental authority which is now being systematically eroded, partly as a result of moral delocalization and other forces of modernization.

As part of their encounter with domesticity, Mack (1992) reports that Hausa wives were not only regularly involved in adjudicating disputes between their children but were also frequently consulted over their husbands' and children's marriage arrangements. As mothers, wives and professionals, Hausa women's domestic roles had a profound influence on socio-religious conduct in the family and society.

In his investigations about public perceptions of single mothers in Kenya, Wachege (1994) shows that in every ethnic community in Kenya, mothers had the primary responsibility to ensure that their daughters maintained sexual purity. Adolescent girls were advised to uphold sexual morality until they got married and were ready to raise a family. Such advice was based on the moral premise that sexual morality in general and pre-marital virginity in particular were highly valued, whereas single motherhood was viewed as immoral and brought disgrace not only on the girl but on her family and community as a whole. Having a child

out of wedlock was stigmatized and it lowered the dignity not only of the girl, who was perceived to be 'morally loose', but also of the mother, who was blamed for not having taught her daughter good conduct. In his discussion of how traditional Kikuyu women contributed to moral uprightness in society and shared the blame with their daughters who had children out of wedlock, Wachege writes:

The main responsibility for instilling such moral conduct fell heavily on the mothers. No wonder that when a girl conceived out of wedlock, her mother too was answerable. Both were looked upon with contempt. Both were disgraced. The mother suffered disgrace through her unmarried pregnant daughter (1994: 91).

In most traditional African societies, such girls had difficulties getting young men to marry them. They were often married to older men as junior wives. Adherence to these and other ethical standards, which were part of the society's value system, accounted for the rarity of pre-marital pregnancies and single motherhood in traditional Africa.

Today, these moral standards are being swept away or distorted by the modernization process, resulting in a moral vacuum and the breakdown of family life. Pre-marital pregnancies and divorce are rampant in contemporary Africa and public perceptions of them have changed drastically. There has also been a proliferation of single mothers. At the same time, most modern African families, including poor single-parent families, are becoming increasingly unable to provide adequate care and support for their members. The result has been premarital pregnancies, child abuse and neglect, increased numbers of street children, prostitution, and a tendency towards marital infidelity.

The Kilbrides (1990: 137) report that East African mothers, like all mothers everywhere, use their positive maternal affect either individually or through women's groups to counter some of the negative emotions which emanate from an evil eye, witchcraft accusations, marital conflict and child abuse. They argue further that in societies where collective rather than individual moral responsibilities are emphasized child abuse can be greatly reduced or eliminated altogether. Child abuse was rare in traditional Africa primarily because of the cultural ideology of the kin-based support system.

2. THE ROLE OF AFRICAN WOMEN IN RELIGION

This discussion is limited to the role of women in the Christian church and in traditional African religions. The church is viewed as part of a wider society which functions as a system of structured relationships. Members of various religious denominations are also members of the public who are involved in various aspects of community life. One way to understand the role of women in religion in Africa is to understand their position in society and the church.

Women comprise over 50 per cent of the population in Africa and are the majority of worshipers in the churches, where they contribute to community worship life through the transmission of religious values and beliefs. But culturally and structurally women occupy subordinate positions in the male-dominated structures of religion and society. Many women do not participate in the decision-making process both in and within the church. Their role is primarily supportive (Kayonga 1992).

In South Africa, black Christian women predominate in prayer unions and use this as one of the structures through which they can promote female chastity, marital fidelity and family responsibilities among men and women. Chidester (1992: 104) indicates that members of the prayer union in South Africa often get together with other women's church organizations to pray for the eradication of certain undesirable practices in society, such as witchcraft and superstition, in order to advance a Christian moral order.

Through their healing ministry and pastoral infrastructure African women play a significant role in bringing love to the world. For the women with the gift of healing through prayer it is through this ministry that their special mission to bring affective quality to the world is brought to the fore (Edet 1986: 11). Some African Christian women perform acts of healing and driving-away of evil spirits, or use their divine powers to promote fertility and contribute to positive experiences in the lives of men and women (Edet and Ekeya 1988). In East Africa women have used their spirit mediums to reassert their positions in society and also to restore peace in conflict situations. Although the cults of most spirit mediums have been mainly concerned with female reproductive issues and marital relationships, they have also been used to express hostility against, and to press for changes in, the dominant society. Berger (1976) provides examples of the ways in which becoming a priestess or a diviner enhances the status of Zulu women who have been denied respect and dignity in society because of their gender. The power of women's spiritual healing and other religious work aimed at advancing the cause of human dignity and self-worth can be seen as a collective moral responsibility undertaken in an African culture with a Christian understanding.

The church in Africa is widely seen as a mini replica of the larger social order in terms of its relationship with women. Despite their spiritual strength and acknowledged contribution to the church's finances and upkeep, African Christian women have remained at the margins rather than the centre of both the church and society as a result of their subordination. They mainly play a supportive role, and rarely serve on church boards. Referring specifically to the marginalization of women in the African church, Kayonga writes:

The church is a patriarchal structure allied to those who wield power. Women do not participate at the level of church decision-making (1992: 145).

Oduyoye also argues that women have been denied a voice in the church hierarchy and decries the practice that

Even today, many Christian churches and denominations reserve their priesthoods or equivalent positions for men. Some of the Christian churches see the inferior role of women as part of a divinely ordained natural order (1992: 17).

The full ordination of women in the Christian church remains one of the most contentious issues in gender-power politics both within and outside the church. And, as Oduyoye (1986: 126) further indicates, the discussion is sometimes sidetracked and derailed by those who seek to make a distinction between women's work *in* and *within* the church, arguing that the former is wider and more crucial than the latter. However, critics dismiss this line of reasoning as a classic example of the double standards that pervade male-dominated Africa.

Although women play a significant role in the moral health of African families and communities, their participation in traditional African religious rituals is generally subordinate to that of men. Most African traditional religious rituals are related to procreation. This is based upon the recognition that the survival of the human race depends on its female component. Thus, most rituals pertaining to procreation are performed by women, on women or for women (Oduyoye 1992). Outside of the reproductive universe, however, African women are often excluded from community rituals, some of which are exclusively reserved for men. For example, among the Igbo of Nigeria, Oduyoye (1992: 17) reports that a small boy can be allowed to participate in the ceremony of 'splitting kola', but not a mature woman. Traditional African women have also suffered discrimination based on their being perceived as the source of evil and the belief that they are polluted during their monthly cycles. Mbiti (1969) notes that Nandi women in Kenya were considered unclean soon after childbirth and were not allowed to prepare food for their husbands for about six months or more. During this time the husband would be enjoying the services of his other wives. Under specific circumstances, polygyny served to undermine female dignity, although in some situations it provided a viable support system.

In Kenya, the ideology which links women with pollution, evil and other negative influences is frequently reinforced and acted out when, for example, a crucial football match is impending between two major teams and nobody wants to leave anything to chance. On such occasions, male players are always cautioned not to sleep with women so as to avoid bad luck and losing to the other team. This belief predates colonialism, and a more plausible explanation for it is that the players are advised and expected to preserve their energies for the match by abstaining from any activities which are considered to be physically demanding. This belief was part of the African dominant ideology during the days of inter-tribal warfare. Even the Mende of Sierra Leone believe it is a taboo for a man to have coitus with a woman who is having her menses. These African beliefs represent cultural barriers against women and are part of the male ideology which uses female sexuality to devalue women's moral contribution in society.

3. MORAL DELOCALIZATION IN THE AFRICAN SOCIETY

Contemporary Africa is in a state of considerable flux. There are conflicting conceptions of what is 'right' and 'wrong' and a general lack of consensus on acceptable moral standards of behaviour. The traditional care-giving, home-making and nurturing roles of women in the African family which formed the basis of their identity as wives and mothers have remained relatively unchanged even as they have become increasingly involved in new roles and relations outside the home.

The African family is in transition as a result of urbanization, Christian teaching, formal education, male labour migration, monetization of the economy, feminism and other modern social forces. Talking about the erosion of traditional family values and its consequences for women and children in East Africa, the Kilbrides argue:

that through a process of delocalization, traditional ideas about 'proper' behaviour are frequently replaced by moral imperatives from 'outside'. At the same time, economic delocalization has also weakened the moral power of the clan, extended family and other social groups with moral authority over parents and children (1990: 54).

A process of moral delocalization is evident everywhere in contemporary Africa. Factors such as missionary activities, urbanization, migration and distortions of African family traditions have conjointly produced a new system of moral order and family dynamics which have changed the meaning and character of certain-social institutions such as marriage. Women's moral responsibilities in the family are also being re-defined.

The transformation in the mode of bride-wealth payments from cattle to cash for example, has not only made marriage a private affair but has also minimized the involvement of women in matrimonial arrangements and negotiations (Ngubane 1987). Increased social and physical mobility has also led to a great deal of freedom for the youth and the weakening of the moral authority of parents and the elders. The result is to be seen not only in the generation gap but, in some instances, in the clash between the older and the younger generations. Nowadays there are many young people in Africa who are growing up or working in the urban areas away from the influence of their rural kin, particularly their mothers and grandmothers.

Child-rearing practices have changed considerably with modernization and delocalization processes. Although African women remain concerned about the quality of child-rearing, many of them are now involved in the labour force. As a result, many children of working parents spend much of their time away from home or in environments where the parents have little or no influence over what they do or learn. A growing number of African working mothers leave their infants with baby-sitters when they go to work. The older children go to school and (if they are not in boarding schools) set themselves in front of television when they return

home. Concerned about the limited time many career women spend with their children, one of the elite East African women interviewed by Obbo commented:

I feel that many children are neglected by parents who are too busy advancing their careers or making ends meet (1987: 268).

Owing to increased moral and economic delocalization, many young people get married without the knowledge or consent of their parents. Some parents may get to know only after the marriage has taken place. This trend in modern African marriages reflects the loss of respect for parents and elders required under the traditional family system. It also reinforces the view that the traditional moral influence of the family on its members has been severely weakened.

Cohabitation and other new experimental alternatives to traditional marriage are prevalent in urban African families. And because modern marriages today break up quite easily, many young people are reluctant to commit themselves to a life-long church marriage. Many African Christians do not marry in church even though they are still considered to be 'properly' married. The Christian idea of marriage as a covenant for life, as a sacrament and as an enduring relationship of love and fidelity is becoming more difficult to uphold today in the context of delocalized moral values and increased marital problems (Hastings 1973). The mutual commitment to enter into a marriage and make it work seems to be getting replaced by several options. Today, many young couples hastily enter into a marriage with several options and even seriously discuss what should be done if the marriage breaks up. One of the things which is shown by this trend is that the notion of marriage as an indissoluble union is no longer widely upheld and, secondly, that many couples seem to anticipate marital problems and how to deal with them even before they get married. And when things go wrong with a relationship, as they will always do, the partners quit rather than wait and try to work things out. While there is no moral basis for anyone to stay in a marriage which is deeply unhappy and riddled with violence, it is good for spouses to demonstrate a strong commitment to remaining married. But this effect has become less common in many modern marriages than was the case in traditional society. Under conditions of weak 'moralnets' coupled with an emerging sense of individualism, there is usually little or no attempt by relatives and friends to reconcile the 'warring' partners. Moralnets encompass traditional values, moral responsibilities and ethical standards which not only defined socially acceptable behaviour but, more important, also served to protect the interests of vulnerable groups in society. This moral delocalization accounts in part for the fragility of modern marriages.

In many modern African marriages, monogamous fidelity is a value which is no longer strongly upheld. Increased poverty, sexual permissiveness and growing and growing numbers of single mothers in Africa have encouraged many people to look outside their marriages for sexual fulfilment. 'Outside wives' and 'outside children' are prevalent in contemporary Africa (Karanja 1987). As consciousness occurs among well educated and economically independent African women, cultural practices such as polygyny are seen as oppressive structures and lose much of their

appeal although many African men of all backgrounds continue to marry more than one wife. With increased social and economic empowerment of women, expectations of marriage are rapidly changing. More women are now looking for companionship and respect in their relationships with men than was the case in the past. In contrast, many African men are still looking for wives who can bear children for them but whom they do not consider as their friends, equals or companions. The change in elite women's attitudes towards polygyny is articulated by Bahemuka when she writes:

It is also clear that with women being economically independent, it is not easy to convince a woman to marry a man who already has a wife (1992: 128).

Thus, the pattern that seems to be emerging is that of formal monogamy practised alongside delocalized and clandestine polygyny according to which some middle- and upper-middle class monogamous men keep mistresses whom they support, sometimes lavishly. Some outside wives are divorcees who may have been abused and neglected by their previous husbands and thus are happy to be enjoying the affection and attention of other women's husbands who may have restored their dignity and helped them regain self-confidence. In modern African marriages, when a man has an extramarital relationship his wife may begin to feel guilty and inadequate and wondering whether his behaviour shows that she is inadequate or has done something wrong. Moralistically, 'outside wives' are always condemned by inside wives as 'bad' women who wreck other people's homes. But some mistresses who have been married before tend to respond to this charge by making the claim that their own marriages were also ruined by other women. It is, however, the poor women, some of whom are single mothers heading their own households, who come out of this transition and moral delocalization process feeling most vulnerable, particularly when they have to support their children alone in the absence of any system of moral obligations.

4. CONCLUSION

Relationships within traditional African society were embedded in a system of moral obligations. Women played the central role of transmitting moral values to children through socialization which helped to regulate people's behaviour in the larger cultural milieu.

Contemporary Africa is undergoing dramatic changes with concomitant shifts in the role and status of women and the erosion of traditional family values. The processes of modernization and delocalization which are sweeping across the continent and beyond have had far-reaching consequences for the twin institutions of marriage and family. In view of the transformations that are currently underway, it may be accurate to refer to the African family as an endangered species. However, the challenge to save the species is not to go back to the past but rather to

recast the new moral order in a cultural heritage by incorporating some viable traditional structures for the good of society. The social institutions which emerge from this mixture ought to promote women's self-empowerment in order to make them more effective as agents of moral change in society.

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