

PSYCHOLOGICAL ANDROGYNY AND THE AFRICAN WOMEN IN SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

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Introduction

In recent times, labels such as “feminist”, woman “libber” and the like have come to be the tag or the name for any female who attempts a discourse on womanhood, or excels in any area of endeavour. This is so because of the perception that a woman’s place is at the background of the activities, to be seen but not heard. However, in the African setting, before colonization men and women complemented each other. Psychologically and behaviourally, women were androgynous, and so did not feel that because they were “female”, they should not do some things. Womanhood was not seen only from the perspective of “sex symbol”. Women could therefore be seen in different spheres of life like science and technology, as it were. For instance, women were into agriculture – hoeing, farming, harvesting and partaking in all that it entailed. They were into goldsmithing, blacksmithing, pottery and weaving. They progressed with their men in different activities of life.

However, with colonization came a break in all that, especially, with the resultant coming of western education. The net result was the relegation of women from the main-stream of national activities, intellectual dialogue, and in science and technology. This is the root of the psychological conflict experienced by the “new educated African woman”, who may find herself at the top of a career, in a field like science and technology, which is dominated by men.

The Old Order

In most traditional African societies, women could not be said to have been relegated to the background of activities. They had their place and relevance in the scheme of things. Though one may not say they were on equal pedestal with men, and although their principal roles emanated from functions of their biological make-up, they partook in most activities going on in their particular society. They were productive farmers, traders and they worked with their husbands on other crafts like goldsmithing, and women still perform these tasks most especially in the rural areas till today. Military wise, women went to war. They helped in warfare tactics so that their armies could win. They fought side-by-side with their men. Examples abound in the likes of Moremi of Ife, Queen Amina of Zaria, the Amazons of Dahomey and Queen Nzingha of Angola.

Politically, there were women with titles like Queen Mother and Iyalodes. In some instances, no one could see the king, without seeking the permission of the Queen Mother. Such was the case with the Queen mother of old Kanembu Empire. The views of women could not be discounted in the past, because it was recognized that

some principal female folks in the society could mobilize grass root female support and forment trouble, if their views were not taken seriously. Such was what happened during the Aba riot of 1927. Till date, grass root mobilization among the uneducated women, has never proved difficult.

Among the Ondos and the Ijesas, there were females who were virtually co-rulers with their male rulers. The Lobun held her court with other female chiefs and passed their views on all issues affecting the welfare of the town to the male ruler (Sofola, 1992). In Ile-Oluji, Ondo state of Nigeria, there used to be Oba Okunrin (Male King) and Oba Obinrin (Female King). These monarchs ruled simultaneously, each with a governing council. This approach had to be merged at a point in history, but with a compromise that at the death of the male king, female regents would reign. This practice is still on (Fagbemi, 2010,). In Ghana, there was Yaa Asantewa, who was regarded as the female king because of her powerful position in Asante. Also in Asanta, there was an office allotted to a female, who occupied the senior of two stools authority in the state (Aidoo, 1977). Such was the situation in some other parts of Africa (Schiller, 1990). In Zimbabwe, Mbuya Nehenda resisted British colonization of her territory so much so that the British could not take over till she was no longer around (Sofola, 1992)

The foregoing brief synopsis is to pinpoint the fact that in traditional African setting before colonization, women were not irrelevant as sometimes portrayed today. There is also the need for more researchers to look up related historical facts to counter effects of western and foreign infiltrations which is far out in composite form as it is now.

The new orientation

Although in traditional society women were powerful, but with the introduction of western education, they seem to have been marginalized. One reason for this is that Africa has not attached as much importance as is necessary to the education of females. Coupled with this, is the desire to protect females from “dangers” such as pregnancy. This accounts for the dwindling nature of female participation in education, from the primary school level, through the secondary to the university. Available statistics also show that girls shy away totally from the vocational and technical schools. Subsequently, their number is insignificant in the schools. Although, there has been no deliberate policy in Nigeria to deny females access to education or career options, it is equally true that different constraints within the social and cultural milieu make women disadvantaged.

The few ones who by virtue of opportunity, find themselves in school, are made to believe that it is “unfortunate” to achieve.

As succinctly put by Poole (1971):

In the past, the ignorance of women has to some extent been prized as a womanly virtue. It was once common for girls to be beaten by their mothers for precocity in school, even when this only meant answering the teacher’s question. The stupidity of women therefore took on the aspect of self-fulfilling prophecy (p. 170).

Through different mechanisms, the female is made to believe that she's weak" and incapable of attaining the highest peak of intellectual development. Invariably she lags behind the male in all spheres of life, particularly in science and technology, since she's told it is "unfeminine: to go into fields that are for "males" she's made to believe at a crucial stage of development that her "brain" cannot cope with the "science", so she too relaxes her efforts at performing well in them. If she is lucky to cross all the barriers on her way and gets a degree ,at best, she is seen as a deviant.

The main purpose of schooling is to teach cognitive skills and give required information to students, but the school does much more than that, especially in its hidden curriculum. Books more often than not, portray females in white collars jobs that are considered appropriate for them and these do not include science and the technology-oriented fields. It is rare to see graphic representations females working in a factory, or read literacy stories of achievement female doctors, or engineers or mathematicians. Illustrations most often confine the female to sewing, cooking and childcare. Few history book include biographies of outstanding women. Science books often have masculine character for illustration and also portray males as being more active, resourceful, adventurous and curious. Teachers also contribute to sex discrimination in subtle ways. Men often teaches mathematics and science while women teach English, social studies and home economics. Consequently, most females are not inspired to have high achievement. Stereotypes about appropriate white collar jobs for males and females, and the definition of achievement through the new orientation invariably restrict the aspiration and opportunities given to females.

Conclusion

Women in Nigeria before colonization could be found in every sphere of life. Today, women lag behind men in science a technology because of the new orientation in Africa, which has inflicted psychological wounds on African women, and turned them away from the sciences. This is needed to promote science and technology among women, and for Nigeria to be to take a place among other technologically advanced nations in the world, Nigerian women need to be aware of their essence, and to be aware of how the new order has not enhanced their status in the society, especially in science and technology.

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