

MORAL ISSUES IN GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN YORUBA CULTURE

Omotayo, O. A.
Department of Philosophy,
Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti
&
Fasoro, J.O.
Department of Philosophy,
Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti

Abstract

Most cultures of the world, especially in Africa, still retain some practices that are inherently inimical to human, social and economic development. Yoruba culture is not an exception. The cultural practices among the Yoruba people that are the focus of this paper relates to gender discrimination which manifests in female genital mutilation, widowhood rites and preference for male children. This requires critical engagement because it borders on the denigration of the humanity of the feminine gender. This paper agrees with Kant that humans, women inclusive, should be treated not as means to an end but as ends-in-themselves. One of the defining characteristics of humans is rationality. As rational beings, women have inalienable rights that the society has a moral obligation to enforce and protect. However the work reveals that the patriarchal nature of the Yoruba culture denies women of their rights and that the treatment of women was grounded in certain narratives that are not rationally well-founded. It is therefore argued that following Kant, there is the need to recognize the humanity in women and preserve their rights and dignity in the society. In other words, the rights of women are sacrosanct and ought to be accorded equal respect as those of their male counterparts. The paper concludes that there is the urgent need for the deconstruction of the narratives surrounding these harmful practices so that women may be accorded proper treatment in the society.

Keywords: Morality, Gender discrimination, Widowhood rites, Female genital mutilation, Preference for male children.

INTRODUCTION

Philosophers, in general, demand that every human belief, proposition or idea be examined critically and carefully in order to ensure that it has its basis in the truth. In fact, the Greek philosopher Socrates said, “the unexamined life is not worth living”. Traditional culture can only become dynamic when those beliefs that are handed down and accepted are examined by subjecting them to analysis and criticism. In the Yoruba society, customs, beliefs and values are passed from the older generation to the younger through social relations. The younger ones are not permitted to question the authority of the elderly ones on any issue. In this situation, members of the society inculcate the positive and negative aspects of the culture without subjecting them to any form of

scrutiny. Consequently, the ideas, values, attitudes, customs and beliefs of the traditional society are adopted by the succeeding generations.

This paper attempts a critical appraisal, evaluation and ethical implications of cultural practices that are discriminatory against the feminine gender in the Yoruba culture. It has been discovered that some traditional customs in the Yoruba culture are injurious and harmful to the wellbeing of women and the society at large. In other words, they have adverse effects on the health of females (Baker, 2009). Such practices include female genital mutilation; widowhood practices and preference for male children. For example, female genital mutilation causes bleeding, infection, urinary incontinence, difficulties with childbirth and even death (Kimani, 2012). It also leads to the formation of keloids and scar tissues around the genitals which may scare or prevent a man from having sexual relationship with his wife. It is believed that family lineage in Yoruba culture is sustained by male children. In view of this, women with female children only are stigmatised. They undergo mental and psychological problems as a result of pressure from their spouses and society for male children. Widows also experience unpleasant experiences which are denigrating and derogatory. Such beliefs have negative implications on the social, economic and political system of the modern society. They promote gender discrimination because women are usually the victims of the practices. They also deprive females of their human rights. This is not to say that Yoruba customs or traditions are not beneficial to the society. In fact, some people have argued that the above cultural practices have some benefits (e.g. it is believed that female genital mutilation prevents a girl from being promiscuous). The work shall examine the reasons adduced for the practices vis-à-vis the dangers inherent in them in order to decide if the customs are to be preserved or eliminated.

HARMFUL TRADITIONAL PRACTICES

All violations against human rights can be described as harmful practices while all forms of violence against human being which are defended on the basis of tradition, culture or superstitions by some community members are usually regarded as 'harmful traditional practices' (Gender and Development Network, Womankind International Planned Parenthood Federation, 2019). In many cases, such practices are performed without the consent of persons involved and thus constitute violation of human rights. Harmful traditional practices are a product of social norms which aim to uphold cultural ideas about gender roles and social relations. Some of the negative cultural beliefs that affect the wellbeing of girls and women among the Yoruba people are: widowhood rites and female genital mutilation (FGM), denial of widow's inheritance of the husband's property and issues relating to preference for male children. The practices are abusive but they are usually seen as acceptable in the community. They are defended based on traditions that are passed down through generations (Oguntola, 2022). These customs constitute an act of discrimination against the feminine gender in the societies (Udomoh, 2021).

FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION (FGM)

Female Genital Mutilation is defined as all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injuries to the female genital organs for

non- medical reasons (Ofor and Ofole, 2015). In other words; it is any procedure that causes injury to the female genitals without medical indication. It is a cultural tradition usually carried out by “traditional circumcisers” without proper knowledge of human anatomy and medicine. It aims to ensure premarital virginity and marital fidelity (WHO, 2022). It is widely recognized as a violation of human rights, which is deeply rooted in cultural beliefs and perceptions over decades. This is different from the male circumcision which has a relatively low-risk procedure and scientifically proven health gains. It has negative long-term effects on a woman's overall health and quality of life (Okeke and Aniaehie, 2015). FGM is also regarded as an aspect of gender- based violence which is an act of discrimination against women and girls. (Ofor and Ofole, 2015).

WIDOWHOOD RITES AMONG THE YORUBA PEOPLE

A widow is a woman whose husband has died and who has not married again (Idialu, 2012) while widowhood may be defined as a state of loss of a marital partner. Widowhood is described as one of the most distressing of all life events. (Utz, Reidy, Carr, Nesse and Wortman, 2004). It involves an enduring period of exclusion, restriction, isolation, trauma, insecurity and pain (Genyi and George-Genyi, 2015). During the period, the bereaved mourns their loss and in many places they are expected to undergo a series of rituals referred to as widowhood rites/rituals. Widowhood rites, as practiced in many traditional African societies, are the customs that accompany the mourning of the loss of one's spouse. The practices are as old as Yoruba society itself as they are observed across different Yoruba communities and categories of people (Akinbi, 2015). Widowhood rites commences the moment the deceased (either young or aged) dies. Widows, regardless of their ages undergo various forms of unpleasant experiences because of the loss of their husbands. A widow is expected to express her sorrow of losing her husband in different ways. For instance, one can easily identify the wife of a deceased person through wearing of black or dull coloured clothes. She is also expected to go into seclusion for several days (Akinbi, 2015). In many cases, she is not permitted to visit places, go to markets or attend ceremonies. In some situations, the widow is accused of being responsible for the death of her husband, especially when the man dies at a young age (Iloka, 2022). Thus, widowhood practices are observed by the woman to prove innocence of the death of her husband. Widows are also subjected to the tradition in order to enable the deceased's family to ascertain if the woman had been pregnant as at the time the husband died so that they can claim responsibility and care for the woman. At the end of the mourning period, the widow is inherited by a male relative of her dead husband (even when the decision is against her wish), just like the rest of the man's property.

It is disheartening that close relations of the deceased, who are expected to encourage and comfort the widows are usually involved in victimizing them. In some cases, widows are dispossessed of their husband's property. One of the ways through which a widow can retain her household property is to allow herself to be inherited and regarded as remarried to one of her husband's male relatives (Olofinlua, 2017). The widowhood rites are not peculiar to the Yoruba people For instance, Akujobi (2019) notes that:

In Edo state, widows are treated as outcast. It is believed that the woman knows something about her husband's

death either through adultery or witchcraft. In view of this, she is humiliated and not allowed to have her bath or wash her hands after eating; she is not to change her clothes or underwear. She sits and sleeps on the floor during her period of confinement. In some cases, the widows go into the forest to recite some incantations for the purpose of cleansing. The widow is not expected to receive condolence visits from sympathizers during the period of mourning. She is also expected to sit on the floor and be naked during the period of the husband's burial rite, weep and wail loudly at intervals. She is to remain in confinement after the death of the husband for a given period dictated by tradition. In most cases, she vacates the matrimonial home for the relatives of the man. (Akujobi, 2009:5)

Also, in Igbo land, widows are exposed to various forms of hardship in order to absolve them of blame. A widow's head is shaved immediately upon the death of her husband. In addition, she is expected to use stick to scratch her body from time to time during the mourning period. She is restricted from washing herself (Adaku and Ndiukwu, 2019) They are kept in dark rooms with little or nothing to eat. They are made to sleep in the same room with the dead husband and the water used for bathing the dead husband is given the woman to drink. Among the Hausa/Fulani community, mourning and purification rites are also observed. A Muslim widow in Kano undergoes a four month mourning period and observes reasonable number of days of seclusion which runs concurrently (Adaku and Ndiukwu, 2019) The widowhood practices subject women to discrimination and deny them of their fundamental human rights such as right to life and dignity of human person (Nwogu, 2015). This compounds the physical and emotional trauma that the death of a loved one already brings.

PREFERENCE FOR MALE CHILDREN AND ITS HARMFUL EFFECTS ON WOMEN'S HEALTH

Another form of discrimination which has broad implications for women is the preference accorded to the boy child over the girl child ((OHCHR, 2019). The practice is common in the Yoruba society. The family lineage is carried on by male children. In other words, the preservation of the family name is guaranteed through the son, a girl takes her husband's family name, dropping that of her own parents. Hence, the fear of losing a name prompts families to wish to have a son. A proverb that expresses females being disadvantaged is *Ai lokunrin nile lobinrin njogun ada-* the absence of male affords a female the opportunity of inheriting a cutlass. Cutlass as a farm implement is traditionally used by men. It symbolizes power and the essence of survival. Therefore, for a woman to assume the mantle of leadership, the head of the household must be irresponsible, lazy or dead. When this is not the case, women are understood to be substitutes (Eziamaka, 2020).

Women in some cases are threatened with divorce by their husbands if they are unable to have male children. Ehirim and Osuji (2022) agree that a woman is not fully accepted by her husband's family until she has a male child. Therefore, in an attempt to satisfy the husband and secure the home, some women give birth to so many children which they are unable to adequately cater for. Fathers sometimes leave the responsibilities of the care and training of the children to the mothers alone. In such cases, women are subjected to physical, emotional and financial stress. The economic cost of having a large number of children may put women at a higher risk for negative health problems as they age (Spence, 2009). Also, improper family planning exposes the woman to various forms of complications during pregnancy and child birth which sometimes result in the death of the mother.

WHAT ARE MORAL PRINCIPLES?

Moral principles are standards of ethical behaviours and norms with which our conduct should conform. They indicate certain things or certain ways of behaviour which should be avoided and other things or ways of behaviour which should be adopted. Omoregbe (1993) stated that moral principles are of two kinds: positive and negative principles. The positive principles tell us what we ought to do, how we ought to behave or the attitude of mind we ought to cultivate and adopt. They promote the cultivation of justice, respect for human life and dignity, truthfulness, generosity, kindness, hospitality, etc. The negative principles prohibit some actions and behaviours that are wrong. Such behaviours are to be avoided because they are destructive to the society (Omoregbe, 1993). Examples of such behaviours include: stealing, rape, bribery, murder, cheating, etc. Moral principles are by their nature universal. In other words, they are valid and applicable at all times and in all societies. The violation of any moral principle means the destruction of a value which ought to be protected. Some basic moral principles that can provide guidance in resolving ethical issues in the society are as follows:

1. Respecting the dignity of human life: The lives of persons are to be respected. We are to ensure that our behaviours are not harmful to others. Humans have an intrinsic worth, i.e. dignity, because they are rational agents that are capable of making their own decisions, seeing their own goals and guiding their conducts by reason. Human beings are not to be regarded as one kind of valuable things amongst others. They are the beings for which mere things have value, and they are the beings whose conscientious value has moral worth. For Kant, their value must be absolute and not comparable to the value of anything else (Rachels, 1993).
2. Respecting autonomy: All human beings are intrinsically valuable and have right to self determination. Hence, we are to act in ways that demonstrate each person's worth. The individual has the right to act as a free agent. In other words, human beings are to decide how they live their lives as long as such decisions do not negatively impact the lives of others. Human beings also have the right to exercise the power of choice.
3. Benefitting others (Beneficence): Our actions should promote the health and wellbeing of others (Ethical Principles, 2018)
4. Justice: The notion of justice is based on three standards; They are: equality,

impartiality and reciprocity. Everyone should be treated as equals. It means not being partial in the treatment of people. An impartial person is not biased and he or she does not show favouritism in the treatment of people. (Dzurgha, 2000). An impartial person makes no distinction in his or her treatment of individual and social groups. Cultural, religious, social, economic, political and gender differences do not play significant roles in his style of thinking, behaviour and working.

5. Being faithful: This involves loyalty, truthfulness, promise keeping and respect. This principle is related to the treatment of autonomous people.

These principles eliminate all forms of discrimination by protecting individual rights and promoting trust, security and fair treatment in the society. Without the endorsement of such principles, some people will be arbitrarily harmed while others will be arbitrarily rewarded.

In the next section, we shall consider the key principles of Kant's categorical imperative and apply them to the issue of gender discrimination in the society.

KANT'S CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

Kant posits that there was only one categorical imperative which he expressed in different ways:

1. Act only by that maxim by which you can, at the same time, will that it may be universal law.
2. So act as to treat humanity whether in your own person, or in that of any other in every case as an end in itself, never as a means only.'

According to Kant, Categorical imperatives should have consistency, show impartiality and fairness. (Kant, 2002) He argues that because people are ends in themselves, we must always treat them as such and never simply as a means. Kant holds that humans have inherent value and should never be treated as instruments. The reason humans have inherent value according to Kant is because unlike animals, humans have ability to rise above the brute instincts and to freely make crucial decisions in shaping their lives and the world around them (Wisco, 2020), He explained that the ability to freely make such decisions is a feature of human reason and it confers on them an inherent dignity that is valuable in and of itself. In other words, when I treat someone as an end, respect the individual's inherent value and when I treat someone as a means, I see such individual as having only instrumental value, however, it may be difficult for any human not to use others in pursuit of their goals. For instance, the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the chairs we sit on, the cars we drive and other equipment we use on daily basis are acquired by way of talents and abilities that have been developed through other people. Yet, we are not to engage in pervasive use of humanity in such a way that we treat it as mere means to our ends and not as an end-in-themselves. One of the ways through which we can treat the producers of the above items as end-in-themselves is by paying for the cost of the commodities. Also, a man needs to have sexual relationship with a woman in order to have children but the woman who has only female children can be treated as mere means to an end if the husband insists that she continues to give birth to children (not minding her

health condition) because of the desire for male children. Hence, to treat someone simply as a means and not also as an end is to treat the person in a way that undermines their power of making a rational choice themselves (Lacewing, 2019). It is important that we allow people to agree or refuse to adopt our own end as their own. Young girls are treated as a mere means to an end when parents give them out in marriage at tender ages to wealthy men. In this situation the female children are regarded by the parents as a means of acquiring riches for the family. In the same vein, some parents “sell out” their daughters by demanding for outrageous bride price from the groom before they are given out in marriage. Widows are not treated as ends in themselves when they are coerced to marry the relatives of their deceased husbands. Apart from this, treating people as ends require that we respect them and avoid harming them. The issue of female genital mutilation poses harm to the feminine gender because it involves the removal of healthy sexual organs for non-medical reasons. Also, various forms of complications are sometimes associated with the mutilation. Female genital mutilation, widowhood practices, preference for male children and all other harmful traditional practices towards women are immoral because they violate the human rights of women and impair their dignity.

ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE HARMFUL TRADITIONAL PRACTICES

The traditional practices discussed in this work are unethical because they harm the victims and discriminate against women in the following areas:

1. Health – FGM is a violation of the right to enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health since women and girls are subjected to it are exposed to short term and long term harm to their physical, psychological, sexual and reproductive health including during childbirth. It further violates the fundamental ethical principle of medicine to “do no harm”. Health professionals that perform FGM are violating the fundamental ethical principle of medicine to “do no harm”.
A woman's health can *also* be impaired as a result of preference for male children. For instance, the woman may experience serious complications as a result of successive pregnancies. Also, seclusion, loneliness, denial of widow's rights to the spouse's inheritance and all form of widowhood practices affect the mental health of the woman negatively.
2. Economy – Preference for male children and FGM may lead to hospitalisation and high cost of health care services. Unplanned pregnancies will lead to financial stress for the mother and the family. Widows also experience financial crisis when they are deprived of the properties of their husbands.
3. Human Rights – Human rights are intrinsic values that give all human beings dignity. The harmful cultural practices deny girls and women of their human rights and dignity. FGM is commonly performed on young girls. Such children cannot adequately protect themselves or make informed decisions about matters that may affect them for the rest of their lives. Widowhood practices and preference for male children trample on the rights of women and subject them to inhuman or degrading treatment.
4. Social life – The harmful cultural practices leads to stigma, depression, anxiety and unstable marriage which may have adverse effects on the social lives of women.

CONCLUSION

It may be deduced from this paper that Yoruba societies are replete with norms, customs or values that have affected the life pattern of women in a way that is different from men. Traditional practices such as female genital mutilation, widowhood rites and preference for male children are still being practised in the contemporary Yoruba society. These customs are obnoxious and unpleasant to women. The practices are also harmful and discriminate against the feminine gender. Females are subjugated and regarded as the property of the man that should be inherited after the demise of her husband. Women are not entitled to the possessions of the deceased husband. Male children are preferred to the female because it is believed that they sustain the family lineage. However, the claim that only the male children ensure the continuity of family name is challengeable. Today, many women in Yoruba society bear compound names after marriage in order to ensure the continuity of their fathers' names. Also, there are several cases of male children who have had reasons to stop bearing the family name by changing their surnames. In such situations, having a male child does not guarantee the continuity of a family name. The harmful traditional beliefs in Yoruba culture promote gender discrimination and are unethical. They also violate the human rights of women and impair their dignity. In addition, they create obstacles for females to move forward in the society. Nevertheless, this is not to say that all aspects of the culture are derogatory to women.

In conclusion, both men and women have important roles to play in the building of the society. Hence, no gender is inferior or superior to the other. In view of this, it is necessary to review and amend the Yoruba culture. Harmful traditional, especially those that are discriminatory against the feminine gender should be discarded while customs and traditional beliefs that are beneficial to women and the society at large are to be preserved.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Parents are to teach the children in the family to show love, compassion and mutual respect for one another. They are to make them understand that both sexes are important. All the children should be involved in house chores and saddled with various responsibilities in the home. This will go a long way in helping the children recognize that no sex is superior or inferior to the other in the society. Education of the female child should be encouraged at all levels. It is important to promote the education of the feminine gender at all levels particularly in the rural areas. It is necessary to also place emphasis on human rights education. Such training liberates the minds of people. It is capable of changing the mind-set and orientation of women. It removes ignorance and makes them aware of their rights. This will prevent the womenfolk from submitting themselves to cultural practices that oppress them. Education can also serve as a means of empowerment. It is an avenue for securing good employment. When this is achieved, women will be able to build up careers and occupy important positions in the society. It gives them the opportunity to be involved in decision making. Also, it helps them in protecting their children and wards against harmful cultural practices. By so doing, they contribute their quota to the progress and development of the society. The media can be used for sensitization. The media refers to communication channels through which news,

music, movies, education, promotional messages and other information are disseminated to the public. People are to be sensitized on the negative implications of gender discrimination and harmful traditional practices through the media. This can be done through bill boards, jingles on television and radio, newspaper, magazines, internet and other forms of media. The State Governments should enforce laws and take legal actions against perpetrators of harmful traditional practices. Cultural beliefs and traditions that are harmful to the wellbeing of people, particularly the feminine gender should be abolished. Traditional rulers and non-governmental organizations are to sensitize the public especially at the villages and grassroots levels on the negative implications of harmful traditional practices.

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