

WOMEN
and the culture of
VIOLENCE
IN TRADITIONAL AFRICA



Edited by
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...every person was embedded in another person, you are regarded as the 'son of...', 'daughter of...'. Thus for women, they had no identity, only as related to some man.¹¹

From Ross' submission, it is evident that a woman without a male sponsor had no identity or importance in ancient Israelite community.

The rape of Tamar by his brother, Amnon, is reported in 2nd Samuel 13:1-22. Phyllis Tribble tags it 'the royal rape of wisdom'.¹² Like the experiences of the woman cited earlier on, Tamar's assailant muffled her voice and ignored her pleading: Do not violate me..." (15:12) The result of the violation was the hatred which Amnon developed towards her. But unlike contemporary women, she took ashes upon her head, tore the long robe that was upon her, and putting her hands upon her head, she went out and wept. (13:19) She did not keep it to herself.

The story of the 'unnamed woman' in Judges 19:1-30 is similarly a story of violence against women. It is a story of betrayal, torture, rape, murder and dismemberment. It depicts the horrors of male brutality and triumphalism. It is an account of female helplessness, abuse and annihilation.¹³ The woman was not only raped: she was also killed while her body was later dismembered. The concubine's revenge

11. Ross Saunders, *Outrageous Women, Outrageous God. Women in the First Two Generations of Christianity*. E. J. Dwyer (Australia) Pty Ltd. Australia, 1996, p. 10.

12. Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of terror: Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1984, p. 37.

13. *Ibid.*, p 65.

was for the destruction done to his property, and not for the violence against the woman.¹⁴

From these references, it is evident that rape is an endemic reality in Biblical and contemporary societies. It is a social problem which calls for concern from all people who cherish dignity of life.

What can account for the helpless state of the female folk both in antiquity and in contemporary society? In what ways were the cultures of these periods instrumental to the subordination of women? A glimpse into the socio-cultural background of contemporary society will help.

Religious and Cultural background of Women in Africa

Africa is a large continent comprising different types of people, tribes and languages.¹⁵ Therefore, it will be a Herculean task to embark upon the background of women in Africa generally. We shall therefore limit our discussion to contemporary Nigerian society, with the Yoruba tribe of the south western part in particular.

In the religious realm, there are some restrictions placed on women in some cultic practices.¹⁶ There are also instances where men usurp the roles.

Corroborating this, Nabofa observes,

Cults which were first started by women and later on admitted men, eventually reverted to cults having men as chief priests.¹⁷

14. Marie M. Fortune, "The Nature of Abuse" in *Pastoral Psychology*, Vol. 41, No. 5, 1993, pp. 275 - 288.

15. J.S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*. Heinemann, London. Ibadan, Nairobi, 1982, p. 3.

16. The Oro Festival, for example, is mainly for men.

It is not an overstatement to submit that women in Nigeria generally are subject to men irrespective of their physique, intelligence and wealth. They are grouped with women who are ministered to and could not be consulted in decision making, their charisma notwithstanding. Women experience prejudice, discrimination, subjugation, relegation and subordination. Culture holds so much sway over women, hampering their involvement in almost every facet of society. Concerning this aptly Maduka notes,

...though there is no legislation barring women from attaining any height in the society, yet there are veritable prejudices and discrimination against them, which will take time to break down.¹⁸

The societal conception of women is portrayed in sayings like.

'Eni bi obinrin ko ri omo bi;

'He who has a female child is as good as barren'.

'Obinrin l'odale, obirin l'eke.

E ma fi nu han f'obinrin'

Women are betrayers, and traitors;

do not divulge secrets to them.

'Obinrin ko se i fi inu han'

Women can not be trusted'.

17. Nabofa, M. Y. "The Concept of Justice in the Indigenous African Religion" in *Coping with Culture*. (ed.) Egbe Ifie. Oputuru Books, Ibadan, Bomadi, Ole, Ukgheili, Nigeria. 1999, pp. 104-117.

18. J.O. Maduka, "The Role of Women in Nigeria's Technology Development" in *F.M.E. Education Today*, Vol. 3, no. 1, Dec. 1969, p. 6.

These sayings portray women as beings that can hold no secrets, and cannot be trusted. It is, however, observed that some men can be so similarly categorized; but in such cases, they are regarded as having 'a large heart'.

Some Akan proverbs attest to the derogatory sayings and beliefs about women:

- What you will not say in public must not be said to your wife at home.
- Do not tell women about critical issues; women kill.
- Women, like chickens, do not forage in one place.¹⁹

Some Gikuyu proverbs similarly corroborate this: 'Women have no upright words, but only cooked ones.'²⁰ Another comes from the Kipsigis: 'Do not let a wife know about a cow that is kept by a friend.'²¹ These proverbs in our opinion are a form of violence against the integrity of women. These opinions are judgements against womanhood and includes all women by the very fact of their being women.²²

19. Oduyoye Mercy. A in *AMKA, A Publication of Concerned African Women Theologians*. 1996, p. 48.

20. G. Barra, *1000 Kikuyu Proverbs*. Nairobi, Kenya, L.H. Bureau, 1961.

21. Elijah P.K. Soi, *Kipsigis Words of Wisdom*. Sotik: Rift Valley Review Associate, 1984, p. 40.

22. Ayanga, Hazel O, "Violence Against Women in African Oral Literature as Portrayed in Proverbs" in *Violence Against Women* (eds.). Grace Wamue & Mary Getui. Acton Pubs. Nairobi, Kenya, 1996, p. 13-20.

It is, however, gratifying to note that all is not negative about women as they play prominent roles in some areas of life, particularly in traditional religious practices. They serve as priestesses, celebrants, cultic personalities, traditional healers,²³ and often experience spirit possession.²⁴ Male herbalists accord them recognition as they seek for their assistance in knotty cases, producing sayings like,

...*O d'owo eyin iya mi/iya agba*, literally,

'I am committing everything to the mothers'.

This attests to the positive roles of some women who are branded as *aje* witches, among the Yoruba.

In all other facets of life, their roles are currently assuming a positive dimension, especially in certain roles which are female exclusive. C. A. Epstein sums it up:

...woman has played many roles in various societies throughout history. She has been a wife, a mother, a farmer, a labourer, business executive, a teacher, a volunteer worker...Most women have combined two or more of these roles. Throughout the centuries, almost every society has

23. Philomena Mwaura, "Women Healing Roles in Traditional Gikuyu Society" in *Groaning In Faith. African Women in the Household of God.* (eds.) Kanyoro, M.R. & Njoroge, N.J. Acton Pubs. Nairobi, Kenya 1996, pp. 253 - 269.

24. Hannah Kinoti, "Women Spirit Possession" in *Groaning in Faith. Ibid.*, pp. 230 - 241.

*developed definite ideas of what activities are proper for women.*²⁵

It is our belief that despite this positive portrayal of women, socio-cultural background is accountable for the denial of the dignity of women and the reason for the silence of rape victims in our community. What are the factors responsible for rape in our community apart from the socio-cultural background of women?

There are various factors which are responsible for rape of women and girls. Poor parental background, peer influence and societal decadence are some of the factors contributing to rape.²⁶ It is the general belief that a child from a broken home may lack the necessary attention and love which may lead to deficiency in moral upbringing with the resultant effect on character. Such a child would therefore develop a non-challant attitude and would want to take it out on the society which has made life unbearable for him. Rape becomes a weapon of vengeance.

We cannot underestimate the influence of the peer group. There is no doubt that there is transference of learning especially among the youth, and out of curiosity, youths learn from their peers. Societal decadence contributes to rape. Dressing almost naked in the name of fashion is another factor. Men accuse the girls and women of 'raping indirectly' with their dresses. Feminists, on the

25. C.F. Epstein, "Woman" in Cynthia Fuchs Epstein. *World Encyclopedia*. World Books Childcraft International Inc. 1981. pp. 316-321.

26. Osunbunmi, Olaitan et al., "Avoiding Rape: Youths, Perspective". In *Reaching Out*. A Publication of Family Health and Population Action Committee (FAHPAC), Vol. 2, No. 5, Sept. 1998, p. 1.

other hand, interpret this as an infringement on the right of dressing for the female.²⁷ In our own opinion, human sexuality is a gift from God and should be channeled for good. Decency should be the watchword in female dressing. A woman who actually has a value for her body will definitely protect and keep it from exposure.

Through commercial advertisements the media, both electronic and print, heighten violent behaviour in form of rape towards women. This is because women are usually presented as sexual and seductive images. These contribute to the public image of women as passive, weak and easy targets for violent sexual abuse. However, most of the girls who engage in commercial advertisements cannot be totally condemned as most of them opt for this type of job because of economic deprivation.

Rape is also committed in times of war or as a political weapon. The rape of women in Choba community in Rivers State and the Odi community in Balyesa State is a fresh case in point. Similar cases occur outside the country. In Bosnia, government soldiers raped Muslim women.²⁸ Some of the soldiers said they raped for sport. Unfortunately, some people regard this as a 'normal' by-product of war. An International Herald Tribune editorial puts it thus: 'all war are like in at least three particulars: death, destruction and rape.'²⁹ In essence, women are spoils of wars whose

27. Ayanga, Hazel, *op. cit.*, p. 13 – 20.

28. George Rodriave, "Serbs Rape Muslims as Weapon of War" in *The Dallas Morning News*. Wednesday, May 5, 1993, p. 26.

29. Aruna Gnanadason. *No Longer a Secret. The Church and Violence Against Women*. WCC Pubs. Geneva, N.D. p. 15

violation serves as weapons of war in a conflict – ridden community.

In like manner, hatred is listed among the factors responsible for rape. The *Kenya Times* reported a case where a father raped his five-year-old daughter because of her mother's offence against him. This he did to punish his wife.³⁰ During armed robbery operations, rape is used as a means of torture. In such cases a woman is raped while her husband is made to watch the act. In some other cases, the hoodlums rape every grown up female member of the household as part of the "fun" of their operation.

Rapes also occur during religious or student's riots and social uprising.³¹ In all these cases, women are vulnerable to acts of violence. It is a growing concern for women as the consequences affect all. However, women have been taught to accept it as normative, thus making it difficult for victims to report the crimes to the law enforcing agents. Moreover, in cases where victims brazen up to report, they are not always believed because of the societal conception of women as 'tempresses'.

What are the consequences of Rape?

Human Rights Watch Report of 1995 records that the injuries that women sustain from rape included both genital and non-genital injuries.³² In Johannesburg, for instance,

30. *Kenya Times*, Nairobi, 12th April, 1991, p. 5

31. E.g. SAP riots of 1989, 1991, 1992, and pro-democracy protests of 1993, 1994. See Theresa Akumadu, *Beast of Burden: A Study of Women's Legal Status and Reproductive Health Rights in Nigeria*. The Publication of Women's Rights Project. C.L.O. 1998, p. 17

32. Human Rights Record, 1995.

almost 40% sustained genital injuries, lacerations and fractures. About 60% of the victims were referred to hospital for further care.³³ Corroborating this, Dr. T.J. Akande confirms that rape results in laceration of the introitus, that is, the vaginal wall. In very rare cases, the cervix may be lacerated,³⁴ thus subjecting the victim to excruciating pain. The fact of contracting sexually transmitted diseases like HIV, Syphilis, Gonorrhoea etc. cannot be ruled out. Rape can lead to unwanted pregnancy and, in the case of an underage victim, it can lead to death either during delivery or while attempting to abort the pregnancy.

Psychologically, the victims suffer some disturbances while some are severely frightened and guilty. In like manner, shock, nausea, insomnia, eating problems, listlessness, crying nervousness, poor concentration, mood swings, memory loss, sexual problems, general depression are associated with rape.³⁵ These symptoms are referred to as Rape Trauma Syndrome (R.T.S.), which is a type of post-traumatic stress disorder. We should also note that some victims may suffer from these symptoms for only a short time, while others may suffer for years. In some cases, symptoms may surface after the actual rape, specifically at the time of establishing a new relationship.

33. Lorna J. Martin, *Rape in Johannesburg*. Publication of the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, Johannesburg, 1993.

34. He is the Medical Director of Tee Jay Hospital, Olorunsogo Area, Ibadan. He was interviewed on January 25, 2000.

35. Sharon Lewis, *Dealing with Rape*. SACHED Books, Johannesburg, 1994

Another effect is that it limits women's right of freedom, as their movements are restricted. It thus makes women dependent on men for protection. Anthony Giddens sums up the effect of rape on the victims:

... it is not just a physical attack, but an assault upon an individual's integrity and dignity. It is an act of aggression in which the victim is denied her self-determination...³⁶

Suggested Solution to the Problem

Browmiller³⁷ highlights some solutions although they appear to be applicable only in Western culture. Yet we believe the application could be apt for women in Africa, since the phenomenon is universal. She purports that the home is to be made as safe as possible with locks, windows and doors in good working conditions. This is apt for single women and in homes where the female child has reasons to be alone while other members of the family are out. Most Nigerian homes currently fall into this category as young school leavers are left at home for months before resumption of academic work in tertiary institutions.

Light should be left on in vacant rooms at night to give the impression that they are occupied. In like manner, girls are to pretend there is a male in the house when there is a knock on the door. Similarly, children are to be trained not to open the door to a stranger. The female child should avoid remaining alone in deserted places like basements and garages. She advises women and girls to carry a

36. Anthony Giddens, *op. cit.*, p. 184

37. *Ibid.*, p. 185.