

## **African Women and Leadership Role**

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**ABSTRACT:** Historically, African women have been outstanding in roles played in the social, political, economic, or educational aspect of the society. Women leadership roles in Africa were portrayed by many prominent women who were pathfinders like Queens of Ethiopia, Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, Yaa Asantewa, Mame Mardior Boye, Winnie Mandela, Margaret Ekpo, Mariam Makeba, Queen Nzinga, Ruth Williams, Ellen Sirleaf Johnson in their chosen field. These had few or no role model yet were an agent of change. They played important roles in the society among many others. The qualities of nurturing and cooperating which is attributed to feminine nature, made them loyal citizens of their various communities. Consequent on this, women in leadership position in different sphere went extra mile to contribute towards the holistic development of their community. They did not only contribute to the development but ensure its sustenance. This paper attempt to uncover the beginning of stigmatization against women in leadership and governance despite their prominent role which resulted into positive impact. This paper tentatively conclude that though there have been a great attempt to making strides in different aspects of the society, yet colonisation, culture, patriarchy, pull down syndrome inter alia had restraint women from governance there by stigmatizing women in leadership position. Eradication of stigmatization and discrimination against women in leadership by other women and male counterpart, financial support from international and national bodies, Creation of women friendly state among many other recommendations are proposed.

**KEY WORDS:** Africa, African Women, Leadership, Governance

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Precolonial African women occupied a position complementary, rather than subordinate, to the men. Historically, women played various important roles in the palace administration. The issue of disparity and accusation of discrimination and marginalisation of women was significant or totally non-existent at this time. Factually, some women were rulers; others were public officials with institutionalised offices and power in their communities and realms. There was nothing like salic law imposed on certain disabilities on women that existed in Africa hence the society was egalitarian. Thus, in the economic and socio-political sectors during the pre-colonial era, African "women were powerful", (Sanni, 2006); Abati, 2011).

Women in African enjoyed positions of prestige and recognition in both social and economic roles. Their work and roles were never bedevilled by stigmatization. The work ethics during the colonial era in the African traditional societies recognised the dignity of labour of all types of occupation which contributed to the development of communities in part and as a whole. However something went wrong along the line. Colonisation and cultural biasness form the basis of why African woman lost her pride and position of authority. This paper with the adoption of qualitative method explore the role of women during the precolonial era and the quagmire that brought about relegation of women's position of authority and made a leadership role of women seem repugnant in the African world.

### **AFRICAN WOMEN'S PRIDE AND HER POSITION OF AUTHORITY**

African women had dominant status that was maternity in nature. The Bantu ethnic group of Zaire, Angola and the great lakes areas as well as the shoma of Zimbabwe, Ashanti of Ghana, the Baddibunka of North Bank of Gambia has accorded power to the matriarchs of their clans to a degree that their children were identified by their Mother's name and owned by their mothers families (Phillott-Almedia, 1994). In some African countries, women did all jobs associated with men. Women like warriors in Dahomey, the Maasai women whom were house builder and also served as guards to defend such buildings. Yoruba women inclusive, were resourceful traders in both short and long distant trades (Falola, 2018).

Odah (2003) documented the political influence of African women in the pre colonial period. Bakira Turunku of Zaira was referred to because of her dexterity in politics and vast agricultural holdings. She became the first Saraunya of Zaria. Also, Queen Amina, who took over the throne by popular consent in 1576. In Yoruba land, females were politically successful. Among these were princess Moremi, who earned herself a political position in Ile – Ife during the second half of the Sixteenth Century. Also, according to history, madam Tinubu ruled Lagos from

1830 -1887 and “was a seasoned political stalwart who used her political weight to support Akintoye the rightful king of Lagos over his feud with Kosoko and helped in returning him to the throne instead of Kosoko. African women have been actively participating in the development of their societies and have excelled politically, economically, socially and their success are have been recognized and rewarded by their societies. (Omoniyi, 2012).

Documented information pointed to the fact that women right from the creation of the world have been resourceful and very impactful being. The Yoruba cosmological myth states that Olodumare (God) sent seventeen primordial divinities to earth at the beginning of time, Osun being the only female among them. The sixteen male divinities ignored Osun and excluded her from all decisions consequently the sixteen male were unable to govern the earth until Osun the only female among them was recognised and respected..(Olajubutu, 2003). This indicated that women were recognised by Olodumare (Almighty God) as an active and powerful being just like their male counterpart and as a partner in progress.

African eye agued further to express how significant and cherished, women role was held in esteem. In history. It was believed that early man did not know any link between sex and birth, thus human being were created by woman, that is the mother of the child. (Chals in African eye,2007) . This procreation role made woman seem like a goddess. Also is was recorded that practice of purposeful cultivation was developed by women as early as 15000BC. This lead to population expansion food surpluses and community settlement. Also active roles played by men did not lead to the subordination of women, rather it enhance the principles of complement evident in creation. It was vital for both sexes to live in harmony to ensure survival and continuity of human race. Women were accord respect and greater consideration were given them when it comes to decision making within their society.’The status and power of women in Africa in antiquity and the pre-colonial period was significantly healthier than it is today.’

**ACTIVE ROLES PLAYED BY AFRICAN WOMEN**

African women were actively involved in spiritual, economical, political roles The Economic role played among many African women were outstanding. Among the Kikuyu of Kenya, women were the major food producers. She had access to land and also had authority over the use of the land and cultivation on it. Thus, the self esteem women had as a result of productive labour in producing and processing food and bride wealth, trade and market system (e,g the egbas in Nigeria) established and maintained their rights in the domestic and other spheres.

The Spirirual aspect role of women was evident in the dominated positions of spiritual and religious power in most African traditional societies. ‘These were responsible for announcing dates and times of ceremonies, rites and rituals. These women were oracles, spirit mediums, knowers, seers and advisors. These women had the power to place and remove curses.’ Brown.(2013)Queen

Among Yorubas, women actively participated in politics. For instance, Moremi stepped into political warfare single handedly and saved her society. Idia, king’s mother was the first to have her own separate court with the same royal paraphernalia as the oba, in Lagos and Abeokuta, and Madam Tinubu showed power of the traditional Yoruba women in political life of her society. In Hausa land, there are record of women who held titles and offices like the Iya Magajiya. As title holders, they held outstanding positions in the society like their male counterparts (Ikejiani, 2001). The table below present some of the African Women leardership Icon and their active roles.

**Table1: AFRICAN ICONIC WOMEN LEADERS (PRE COLONIAL & COLONIA ERA)**

| NAMES               | COUNTRY      | POSITION  |
|---------------------|--------------|---|
| Gisele Rabeshala    | Madagascar   | Municipal councillor and political party Leader |
| Huda Shaarawi       | Egypt        | Feminist Leadre and Nationalist                 |
| Wangari Maathai     | Kenya        | Human Right Activist                            |
| Cesaria Evora       | Cape Verde   | Musician Activist                               |
| Uelete Rufael       | Ethiopia     | Political Active Empress                        |
| Queen of Kano       | Nigeria      | Queen   |
| Ndlorukazi Nandi    | South Africa | Queen mother of Zulu kingdom                    |
| Nana Yaa            | Ghana        | Asantewaa of Edweso, commander in chief         |
| Funmilayo Ransome - | Nigeria      | The Women Activist                              |

|                         |              |   |
|-------------------------|--------------|---|
| Kuti                    |              |   |
| Winnie Mandela          | South Africa | An Activist & Wife of President                             |
| Magret Ekpo             | Nigeria      | Fashionable Feminist and an Activist                        |
| Miriam Makeba           | South Africa | Mama Africa, Empress of African organizations & an Activist |
| Queen Nzinga            | Angola       | Queen, The Reformer   |
| Ruth Williams           | Botswana     | An Activist   |
| Ellen – Johnson Sirleaf | Liberia      | African 1 <sup>st</sup> Women President                     |

Source: Self Adaptation from Guide to Women Leaders. 2018.

Furthermore, Nwaorgu (2004) posit that there was never what we call Nigeria in its present form many years ago, instead collective kingdoms, empires or simply put societies that had clearly identifiable political institutions and functional government in which women either Ibo, Yoruba or Hausa, Fulani played meaningful roles. Among the Yoruba and Hausa societies, women played important role politically making them relevant and they contributed greatly to good governance and in the overall politics. Unfortunately women began to lose their dignity and pride gradually but this was hastened by colonisation. African eye 2001; clayton Brown(2013)

### **COLONISATION: THE BEGINNING OF THE DISCRIMINATION AGAINST AFRICAN WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP ROLE.**

The coming of colonialism brought strange educational, religious, economic and political influences and also redefined the role and the place of women. Women were affected by the alienation of land experience “As women lost access and control of land they become more economically dependent on men. Consequently, this led to an intensified caution of domestic patriarchy, reinforced by colonial social institutions” (*African eye*, 2007). The patriarchal government created by the colonial masters, its gender policies and economic interests reinforced and generalized patriarchal values and perpetuated gender inequality in the country. (Akinboboye, 2004).

Secondly, colonialism negatively impacted women when the introduction of wages labour was made. Women were directly affected by the requirement by law in some cases, to provide wage labour for the European plantation economies. Women were seriously affected by such directives because it may draw them away from their usual economies activities. This produced conflict in women as they were forced to leave their duties to work for Europeans. Forced labour was accompanied by acts of physical and sexual abuse (*African Eye*, 2012). The colonial economy was an export oriented one which seriously undermines the prestige of the traditional occupations of the African women, while it placed women at a great disadvantage. Mensah, 2014

Thirdly, the introduction of wage labour affected women because the colonial economy forced men to seek employment in European economic ventures which took them away from the labour responsibilities they used to have traditionally. Women found out that not only did they have to fulfill their traditional duties as women; the loss of male labour forced them to take on the duties previously carried out by their husbands or men (*African Eye*, 2012). Women began to “experience oppression in its entire ramification. They were formally marginalised in the scheme of things and they seem to have lost power they possessed during the pre-colonial era”. Women were proactive to this situation and they began to organize themselves into pressure groups making the pre colonial form of organized women. Women at this period contributed immensely to the political development Abdureheem, 2007

Fourthly, taxes were introduced by the colonial economy. It was the duty of men to pay taxes but because of male migrant, labour taxes were imposed on women. For instance, among the Egba of Nigeria, the British colonial authority used African males to impose taxes on women. This tax affected women indirectly by affecting their bride wealth exchange. Finally, colonialism led to the complete loss of access to land by women. (*African Eye*, 2007). The colonial master's administration destroyed the traditional system of women's political participation in Nigeria. (Oni and Joshua (2012; Omotola, 2007; Lewu, 2005:65). The colonial administration marked the beginning of masculinity of politics and women's abstention from the mainstream. (Ajayi, 2007).

## **II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Legbeism Approach:**

This is a newly propounded theory by Maria Martins an African American Historian scholar (Martins, 2018). This theory was derived from the Yoruba word ‘Le Gbe’ meaning ‘beside’ which connote support, standing side by side, based on the relationship between Men and Women. The tenets of the theory include synergy (working as a team), opposite but equal ( i.e opposite in gender yet equal when considering social, political, education and economic phenomena) and this is based on relative perception, not biological determinism.

This theory stands on the fact that if African men and women can work together as a team, being a partner in decision making and progress, African women can regain their self-esteem begin from the home front then to the society. colonialism negative impact and wrong cultural practices subjugating women will be curbed or better still, eradicated, hence, the acceleration and achievement of women empowerment to take back their "African women pride". women's self-worth is a nation's self-worth.

### III. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Since it is impossible for colonial masters to come back to Africa and undo what has been done to the deep-seated dignity of an African woman, (that is her possession of leadership power, her position of authority, ownership of land and property, her political role as Queen and Empress among many other) then much is expected of both men and women as a partner in progress to ensure that women are encouraged to participate more in leadership and governance. This starts from the informal and formal education of both girl and boy child.

Women should be giving listening hear in an objective manner and not to be relegated. Affirmative actions are already active in some African countries and making great strides. Those countries yet to affirm the affirmative actions should do so. Empowerment Policies should not be a theoretical matter but a practical one by introducing vocational training in our schools, starting from the primary school to the tertiary level, Eradication of social stigma and discrimination against women in leadership and African women should be proactively emphasised. Pregnant and nursing women should be cherished both at home and in work places. Nursing father should be considered as well.

However, measures should be put in place in order to checkmate both employer and employee, if there are any discrepancy and information related to gender should be rightly disseminated to policy makers and sensitization of all the key officers of various institutions for fair judgment and effective decision making. Men and women should celebrate one another as the creation of God and as a creation to ensure the continuity of human race.

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