

Modern African Women Versus Traditional African Women: A Reply to Simphiwe Sesanti’s “African Philosophy for African Women’s Leadership: An Urgent Project for the African Renaissance”

by

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Abstract

This paper begins with Simphiwe Sesanti’s claim in “African Philosophy for African Women’s Leadership: An Urgent Project for the African Renaissance” (*Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies*. 9:9 (2016): 94-107) that women’s leadership (liberation) is realizable by using historical and cultural ideals with women celebration as informed by traditional African philosophy. Second, an assessment of the strengths and the weaknesses of his arguments is made with a focus on four potential limitations of his claim. Thus, overall, it is argued that the limitations could misinform and misguide possible responses, thereby making his claim not achievable. This critical review also provides some points that could make his key claim more realistic and achievable.

Keywords: Traditional African women, Modern African women, African Renaissance Project, African womanhood, Culture and leadership, Women slavery and exclusion, Women representation, Simphiwe Sesanti.

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Introduction: Simphiwe's Key Claim and Arguments

Simphiwe's key claim is about the restoration of African women's leadership; that women's leadership (liberation), which should be part of the African Renaissance Project (hereinafter ARP), is realizable through historical and cultural ideals concerning women celebration as informed by traditional African philosophy. His paper suggests that the restoration of women's leadership is important for (1) the liberation of modern African women from patriarchal dominance nourished by falsified history, and for (2) the perfect reclamation of African culture. Before going further, I will briefly explore points or arguments raised in his paper.

The paper begins with the difficulty for women to gain leadership role in and through the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa and the biased linkage of the challenge to African tradition and culture, considered as fundamentally patriarchal. Simphiwe rejects claims that African culture is patriarchal and a cause of the women's exclusion in leadership. For Simphiwe (like other Africanists), the patriarchal system in the ANC and Africa generally is an establishment of European colonialism, and it is unconnected to African culture or tradition. He further cites instances of African women celebration/leadership at both social and individual levels before the European invasion. Simphiwe argues, "African history demonstrates that women were free to participate in public life to their full capacity";¹ nevertheless, the doctrines of Christianity and colonialism caused the (political and economic) exclusion of African women.

The third section of the paper shows how Christian doctrines promote the exclusion of African women by making God masculine, especially the creation example that presents woman as originating from man and even guilty for the fall of man (humanity) as reiterated by St. Paul.² The composition of the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ or the tradition of counting only men among beneficiaries of his collective miracles could also buttress the view that Christianity is male-dominant. These would withstand possible retorts to Simphiwe that the creation example is an Old Testament issue and less connected with Christianity, which honors the woman as 'the mother of God'. Nevertheless, Simphiwe's examples remain apt to contrast the European masculine identification of God with the usually *neuter* depiction of God in the traditional African setting.

The fourth and fifth sections of Simphiwe's paper focus on colonialism as a cause of women's political exclusion and economic exclusion respectively. Politically, Simphiwe argues that the European colonial policies disregard women's participation in leadership roles. Since the European political culture is predominantly patriarchal, the culture was replicated in the African colonies and only men had access to develop their political capacity. For Simphiwe, the economic exclusion of African women begins with the disruption in land ownership and repression of land inheritance. Land became a commercial commodity acquirable only by the head of the family (i.e., the man). Women, therefore, cannot possess land either by inheritance or through commercial means.

In consistency with his Afrocentric approach, Simphiwe uses historical instances of the AmaZulus, the Queens, Queen mothers, and Queen sister to present the effaced reality that African culture has much to offer (modern African) women since it is fundamental to African culture that the woman is sacred and deserving celebration. Despite this approach, Simphiwe concludes with a careful avoidance of *ethnocentrism*, as he acknowledges that not everything is perfect about African culture; but the ARP should incorporate the good part, specifically that which celebrates African women.

Critical Review of Simphiwe's Claim and Arguments

Actually, Simphiwe's paper has three major elements: (1) the problem [exclusion of African women], (2) the cause [European Christianity and colonialism], (3) and proposed solution [what African culture has to offer]. These three elements will guide the following critical focus on the potential limitations of his paper. Here are the four potential limitations: (1) loose ties between article body and the title, (2) limited or even biased coverage of the African continent, (3) shallow assessment of African culture and history regarding women celebration and leadership, and misidentification of the major problem.

Article Body and the Title: Loose Ties

Whereas the paper is (broadly) a call to action seeking the application of the proposed solution (i.e., the third element); information provided on the third element is quite thin in contrast to the four pages dedicated to the second element.³ The body of the paper has loose ties with its title because of the lack of in-depth presentation of the core part of the paper as represented in the title. For example, Simphiwe argues that women celebration is part of traditional African culture and history, but the 'philosophy' (which seems to be *ethnophilosophy*) behind such celebration, its modern relevance, and the mechanisms to integrate the philosophy in modern context are unclear. Going by the title: "African Philosophy for African Women's Leadership: An Urgent Project for the African Renaissance", the reader does not only want to know the problem, its cause(s) or that there should be an urgent reaction. The reader reasonably expects an in-depth and clear presentation of the "African philosophical teachings that celebrate African women's leadership", which is the proposed solution by the author. This is not very obvious in the paper, probably because of the much emphasis on the second element (the cause).

The second element (the cause) is however relevant; at least, it helpfully shows the reasons for the exclusion of African women and the nature of the exclusion (i.e., political and economic). It is likely that Simphiwe concentrated on the second element in order to maintain the Afrocentric approach of the paper by defending African culture and history to the detriment of European culture.

The maintenance of the Afrocentric approach is appropriate because it gives the paper a methodological coherence. However, it diverts the focus of the paper from the aptness of African culture to a condemnation of European Christianity and colonialism. It is likely that such diversion would be a distraction that could mislead the reaction(s) of the target audience of the author.

Limited or Even Biased Coverage of Africa

Another thing worthy of mention is that the paper's coverage of the African continent is very limited or even biased. This is evident especially in the third section of the paper: "Christianity and African Women's exclusion".⁴ The argument in this section is that Christianity is responsible for the exclusion of African women. Because Africa has several regions, the expectation is that Simphiwe would give some instances spanning the regions. However, the instances provided (i.e., Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and Zimbabwe) represent specific regions that are almost predominantly Christian. We have not seen how Christianity excludes women in countries like Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria etc. though they were also European colonies. It is thus unconvincing to conclude from few selected instances that African women (continentally) suffer exclusion through Christianity. Although Christianity might have caused exclusions in some African regions, Islam has not done less in other African regions. In fact, Islam had early presence in some African regions prior European Christianity.⁵ "Islamic paternalism and sexism" have caused women's exclusion in some African regions (even till now).⁶ It is possible that the focus on European colonialism must have prevented the author from including Islam, which has little or no link with European colonialism. However, the exclusion of Islam limits the relevance of the paper to Africa generally. To tolerate *argument ad hominem*, one could as well imagine that the author willingly excludes Islam, and his coverage of Africa is thereby biased.

Additionally, the nature of women's exclusion caused by Christianity is not conceptually clear and seems unnecessary for Simphiwe's claim. For example, the exclusion caused by colonialism was "political" and "economic". But what is the nature of the exclusion caused by Christianity? Is it psychological (affecting the mentality of African women)? Or is it religious (erasing the religious relevance of women)? Perhaps, we should consider the exclusion as *religious* because the political and economic exclusions could as well have psychological significances. However, religious exclusion did not receive such focus in the paper.

Shallow Assessment of African Culture and History

Recall the earlier critique that there is excessive focus on the second element (i.e., cause of the problem); I will give a supplement here that the *hyper-concentration* on the cause of the problem has shorten space for the paper to provide a deep assessment of African culture and history regarding women celebration and leadership. African culture and history are of course crucial themes of the paper that need deep assessment. This could have helped the paper to arrive clearly at a more practical solution to the exclusion problems.

I assume that a deep assessment would *inter alia* include a revision of African women's past: the nature of African culture in relation to women's celebration and leadership, and the supportive conditions for women's celebration and leadership in the cultural context. This kind of assessment would be helpful for a proper identification of the true African culture. Simphiwe is correct that the supposed African culture is a distortion of the true African culture. Tamale (2008) describes the distorted 'culture' as "a product of constructions and (re)interpretations by former colonial authorities in collaboration with African male patriarchs".⁷ It means that the original African culture has been repelled and/or replaced. If the original African culture is effaced or only existing in theory, then it is needful to clearly identify the true culture before we could talk about its application.

Furthermore, a deep assessment would be useful to compare traditional African women and modern African women. As such, we would be able to know, on one hand, if there are certain characteristics that enabled the traditional African women to be celebrated and occupy leadership positions along with men; and on the other hand, if modern African women possess those characteristics. Simphiwe rightly identifies that "African women must take it upon themselves to reclaim their relevance, celebration and leadership"⁸ but he has not considered the possible differences between traditional African women and modern African women, and the likelihood that the latter might lack certain characteristics that made the former 'fit' as co-leaders with men in historical times. I will pursue this further to highlight some differences between traditional African women and modern African women, particularly the differences that are useful for our purpose here.

Primarily, the traditional African woman is an integral part of the cultural system. She is an active participant and/or a facilitator of traditional rites: she is customarily the first 'institution' via which younger members of the society gain essential knowledge about their culture and tradition. Through her lullabies, fables and folklore, the traditional African woman preserves the essentials of the culture and skillfully 'initiates' younger ones into the society. Thus, the traditional African woman is always a prestigious member of the African society. This is probably a reason why Badejo (1998) comments that "[i]rrespective of the lineal systems, [traditional] African women remain at the center of the social order."⁹

In contrast to her traditional counterpart, the modern African woman is egocentric, revolutionary and iconoclastic. I will expatiate on this claim. As an egocentric member of the society, the modern African woman is more interested in receiving attention from the society and not otherwise. She wants recognition for her beauty, her culinary dexterity, and sensuality; but these only earn her aesthetic value rather than the socio-political value, which she really needs. The revolutionary trait of the modern African woman is evident in her bid to replace the man through whatever means. She seeks to compete with her male counterpart, rather than complement him. Late Anikulapo Fela (1972) songfully depicts the revolutionary trait thus: “She go say him equal to man, She go say him get power like man, She go say anything man do himself fit do. She go want make him man wash plate for her kitchen.”¹⁰

It is quite sarcastic that the modern African woman desires similar status with the traditional African women while she shies from the cultural responsibilities attached to that status. She dances to the tune of globalization and westernization and becomes very iconoclastic to her background in thoughts, actions, and appearances. Unlike the modern African woman that wishes to “escape traditional burdens of femininity”,¹¹ the traditional African woman deserves her ‘sacred and elevated status’. The Yoruba instances of Osun and Moremi show that the traditional African woman readily embraces her natural responsibilities to replenish and nurture her society. My hunch here is that before the modern African woman could deserve similar status like the traditional African woman, there is a need to train modern legs to walk in traditional shoes. In other words, modern African women must be willing to “work within the specificities of culture to realize their goals.”¹² Some recent examples of modern African women in political power/positions even discouragingly indicate that it is best to let modern African women pay. They should deserve their celebration and respect rather than give it to them on the cheap for the sake of cultural reclamation or women representation.

Misidentification of the Major Problem

The fourth limitation that I will explain here is the misidentification of the major problem that inhibits the relevance of African women. Simphiwe thinks that the major problem (as caused by European colonialism and Christianity) is the economic, political [and religious] exclusion(s) of African women¹³ (hereafter the exclusion problem). I agree that the exclusions are indeed problematic but I am skeptical that it is the major problem. A fundamental reason for rejecting the exclusion problem, as the major problem, is that resolving the exclusion problem would not translate into the restoration of African women’s relevance. Even if it does, the exclusion would also recur because there is a major problem that perpetuates the exclusion. Without addressing this major problem, the restoration of African women relevance would prove difficult for attempts by advocates of ARP. This will be clearer subsequently.

A prima facie solution to the exclusion problem is to restore the relevance of women in the economic, political and religious sectors. Nevertheless, this kind of approach is laden with series of difficulties. The first difficulty is that the restoration of the relevance of women entails that women get leadership responsibilities, and giving women (in general) leadership responsibilities could amount to a sacrifice of efficiency for the sake of female representation, because it is not everyone (even in masculine contexts) that has leadership capabilities. Therefore, there is a need to identify right women for leadership positions. This leads to the second difficulty of identifying the right women. Perhaps advocates of ARP would consider right women as those exhibiting leadership qualities, or those making some social impacts. We may assume the possibility of identifying the right women for leadership responsibilities, but this solution creates a Sisyphean task of ascertaining what number of right women would suffice for a (fair) representation of African womenfolk.

Some African nations, like Nigeria and Kenya, are addressing the exclusion problem. For instance, Kenya increased its women representation to 20 percent in 2012 against the prior 2.5 percent; Nigeria seems to go further by making its representation to be 35 percent. While we may not be certain of the allegiance of the governments to these thresholds, it is clear that the thresholds fall below a fair representation of the womenfolk. In the case of Kenya, it is contentious to consider the 20 percent female representation as fair when the current female population is 50.1 percent.¹⁴ This is almost the case in many African regions. Even if we conceive the possibility of a fair representation of the womenfolk (e.g., 50/50 threshold), for understandable reasons, it is difficult to guarantee the availability of women for such threshold. Thus, the exclusion problem persists. The point here is that Simphiwe has misidentified the major problem. There is a problem that fosters the exclusion problem, and that is the real issue.

The major problem, as we shall see, is not simply an exclusion of some or all African women from leadership position. Rather, it is the repression of African womanhood to the periphery by the forces of slavery, colonialism, and even neo-colonialism. Badejo (1998) explains the situation that “[b]y virtue of colonialism and slavery...the agency of African womanhood was placed in direct conflict with western male sexism.”¹⁵ The conflict majorly initiated the identification of African women as reproductive machines (supplying the slave-markets). Besides, there was a poor appreciation of their skills and labour. Harriet Tubman’s experience is an example of this reality. Harriet [an enslaved girl] produces “as much work as a man and *because she was a woman*, Stewart [Harriet’s Master] didn’t have to pay as much for her labour” [emphasis mine].¹⁶ Furthermore, the physique of African women was entirely undervalued. Tamale (2008) aptly comments, “The body was a focal target of this [European] assault.”¹⁷ African women (as the enslaved) were not only considered “immoral, bestial and lascivious”¹⁸; it was also customary for their Masters to use them for sexual gratification – although it was unacceptable for the Mistresses [white women] to have similar relations with ‘Black men’.¹⁹ “The society’s message is that to be Black and female is to be without sexual control, to be irresponsible about their sexuality.”²⁰ To the white masters (the white woman is sacred but) the Black (African) woman is a strumpet.

These attacks on African womanhood are potent enough to disconnect African women from their authentic nature, to distort their orientation or (traditional) mentality. By virtue of the distortion, African women now identify themselves differently as having a new role. They are more passionate about 'reprisals' on the forces of slavery, colonialism – even in the modern context. (Modern) African women, consciously or unconsciously, aim at disappointing the derogatory claims that present them as reproductive machines or bestial and lascivious. The *modus operandi* to achieve their aim include dissociating from the 'insulted' traditional African womanhood (and even its alleged dignity), meeting the demands of modernization (especially in terms of appearance and behaviour), and/or setting new pace in modern trends (e.g. in fashion and entertainment).

Modern feminine pursuit is, therefore, not about the correction of women exclusion, to acquire the 'sacred and elevated status' just like traditional African women. Contrarily, the pursuit is to take African womanhood to the fore by pursuing the *Black-is-beautiful* agenda to its core. I will reiterate that such pursuit would only secure aesthetic value for African womanhood and not the restoration of the celebration and respect for African women. As it is impossible to shave someone's beards in his [bodily] absence, so is the restoration or the celebration of modern African women without their readiness and personal commitments. However, the readiness and commitments would only ensue from the correction of the distorted mentality of modern African women. This should probably be the appropriate urgent project for the African Renaissance.

Conclusion

Simphiwe's paper advocates that the restoration of women's leadership is important for the liberation of modern African women from patriarchal dominance, and for the perfect reclamation of African culture. As such, he presents it as an urgent project, especially for advocates of the ARP. Though Simphiwe raised important points, his arguments are laden with some limitations that make his claim unachievable. Herein, I have focused on four limitations, which altogether show that Simphiwe's paper could not effectively guide advocates of the ARP into restoring the leadership and the celebration of African women. Thus, I have demonstrated that there is a wide and *wild* gap between modern African women and their traditional counterparts; and a correction of this gap must underpin a successful restoration of African women's celebration, leadership and relevance.

Notes

¹ Simphiwe, Sesanti. 2016. African Philosophy for African Women's Leadership: An Urgent Project for the African Renaissance. *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies* 9:9 97.

² Simphiwe, Sesanti. 2016. African Philosophy for African Women's Leadership: An Urgent Project for the African Renaissance. *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies* 9:9 98-99.

³ Simphiwe, Sesanti. 2016. African Philosophy for African Women's Leadership: An Urgent Project for the African Renaissance. *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies* 9:9 95-104.

⁴ Simphiwe, Sesanti. 2016. African Philosophy for African Women's Leadership: An Urgent Project for the African Renaissance. *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies* 9:9 98-99.

⁵ Nehemia, Levtzion & Randall, L Pouwels. (eds). 2000. *The History of Islam in Africa*. Ohio: Ohio University Press.

⁶ Badejo, Diedre L. 1998. African Feminism: Mythical and Social Power of Women of African Descents. *Research in African Literature* 29:2 95.

⁷ Tamale, Sylvia. 2008. The Right to Culture and the Culture of Rights: A critical perspective on Women's right in Africa. *Female Legal Studies* 16: 51.

⁸ Simphiwe, Sesanti. 2016. African Philosophy for African Women's Leadership: An Urgent Project for the African Renaissance. *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies* 9:9 104.

⁹ Badejo, Diedre L. 1998. African Feminism: Mythical and Social Power of Women of African Descents. *Research in African Literature* 29:2 95.

¹⁰ Anikulapo, Fela Kuti 1972. *Lady Shakara*. Knitting Factory Records, Tape.

¹¹ Meredith, Nash and Ruby, Grant. 2015. Twenty-something Vs Thirty-something Sex and the City Woman. *Feminist Media Studies*. 15:6. 981.

¹² Tamale, Sylvia. 2008. The Right to Culture and the Culture of Rights: A critical perspective on Women's right in Africa. *Female Legal Studies* 16: 54.

¹³ Simphiwe, Sesanti. 2016. African Philosophy for African Women's Leadership: An Urgent Project for the African Renaissance. *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies* 9:9 97.

¹⁴ These statistics were derived through *Africa* at London School of Economics (<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse>) and Kenya Population (<http://countrymeters.info/en/kenya>).

¹⁵ Badejo, Diedre L. 1998. African Feminism: Mythical and Social Power of Women of African Descents. *Research in African Literature* 29:2 101.

¹⁶ Grant, Callie Smith. 2003. *Free Indeed*. Ohio: Barbour Publishing, 89.

¹⁷ Tamale, Sylvia. 2008. The Right to Culture and the Culture of Rights: A critical perspective on Women's right in Africa. *Female Legal Studies* 16: 53.

¹⁸ Tamale, Sylvia. 2008. The Right to Culture and the Culture of Rights: A critical perspective on Women's right in Africa. *Female Legal Studies* 16: 53

¹⁹ Wyatt, Gail Elizabeth. 1998. *Stolen women: reclaiming our sexuality, taking back our lives*. New York: John Wiley, 444.

²⁰ Wyatt, Gail Elizabeth. 1998. *Stolen women: reclaiming our sexuality, taking back our lives*. New York: John Wiley, 28.

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