

African Philosophy for African Women's Leadership: An Urgent Project for the African Renaissance

by

Simphiwe Sesanti

sesanso@unisa.ac.za

Institute for African Renaissance Studies,
University of South Africa

Abstract

This paper argues that for the African Renaissance project to advance, its advocates must emphasise African philosophical teachings that celebrate African women's leadership in the past for future development. Hence, it is argued that African women should be central in the African Renaissance project; therefore they must take it upon themselves to reclaim it in confidence that they cannot be accused of pushing a Western agenda when they work to reclaim their African ancestors' traditional African philosophy. An Afrocentric theoretical approach is advanced to examine African issues from an African historical and cultural context.

Keywords: African Renaissance, African culture, African philosophy, African women's leadership, Afrocentricity

Background and Introduction

The African National Congress (ANC), a South African liberation movement-turned ruling party in 1994, took 31 years after its formation in 1912 to allow women to become full members with the right to vote (Hassim, 2014:91). It took women "considerable work within the ANC in exile to create an understanding of the importance of women having a separate voice, and of naming gender equality and non-sexism as a goal." (Hassim, 2014:95) Even though there were "some notable champions of [...] women [...] such as Oliver Tambo", ANC former president, even "Tambo had a very hard time convincing others" (ibid). Contextualising the marginalisation of women in the ANC, Ginwala (1990:77) notes that the "exclusion of women was neither surprising nor exceptional for the time.

The societies from which the white settlers originated and the indigenous societies they encountered in South Africa were male dominated and patriarchal.” Ginwala is correct in associating patriarchy with Europe, but wrong in suggesting that male domination was an indigenous African practice. Such an assertion is Eurocentric in that it advances negative and biased historical narratives of European scholarship that has consistently sought to denigrate and distort the African image in the universe. Patriarchy was imposed by European colonialism.

Senior ANC leader and former Independent Electoral Commission’s (IEC) chairperson, Brigalia Bam (2015:11; 39) who has “always regarded women’s emancipation as an integral part of the struggle for liberation”, falls into the same trap in noting that “[p]atriarchy in the African context” has “meant the control of women, denying, excluding and relegating them to positions of inferiority”. Bam (2015:11) also notes that “Apartheid was not the only vice to blame” in the oppression of African women, and thus, singles out “[t]raditional practices” as having been “as significant as racial barriers in perpetuating subordination and in attempting to isolate women from active participation in the public domain”. Another ANC leader, Goldberg (2014:193), argues that there are “aspects of African culture, e.g. the role of traditional leaders, that are at times opposing democratic development, especially in relation to rights of elected bodies and peoples and rights of women”. Reflecting on the “notions of leadership” which “profoundly influenced” him, Mandela (1994:18) notes that it was the “tribal meetings that were regularly held at the Great Place [in] Thembuland” in the former Transkei. Mandela “was astonished by the vehemence – and candor – with which people criticized the regent”. He “was not above criticism – in fact, he was often the principal target of it” (Mandela, 1994:19). Mandela (*ibid*) notes that “no matter how flagrant the charge, the regent simply listened, not defending himself, showing no emotion at all”. These proceedings were “democracy in its purest form” (Mandela, 1994:18). His critique, though, was that while “all men were free to voice their opinions [...] (Women, I am afraid, were deemed second-class citizens.)” (*ibid*) On the basis of Mandela’s observation, it could easily be concluded that African democracy did not accommodate women.

To the contrary, Mqhayi (1981:63) argues that amaXhosa so highly regarded women, traditionally, such that women could be rulers, though he gives no specifics. Citing the case of Chief Maqoma, Mqhayi (2009:63) observes that in “Maqoma’s court no opinion was barred” and with specific reference to women, he notes that “women were informed of the situation, and their opinion was sought”. Mandela’s experience and observation took place at a time when amaXhosa had already lost their independence and were subject to European autocracy. It is therefore erroneous to associate with, and trace women’s exclusion in the ANC to African culture as Ginwala does. Attention is given to the ANC in this article for a number of reasons. First, due to its current dominance in South African politics, “the country’s woman president can only come from the ANC” (Mtintso, 2007:27), and second, the African Renaissance project in South Africa was spearheaded by Thabo Mbeki, both as the ANC, and the South Africa’ president.

Thirdly, in 2015, two years before 54th ANC national conference due in 2017, the ANC Women's League (ANC WL) for the first time called for the ANC to be led by a woman president (Shoba, 2015:4). This call follows a move by the ANC to deploy seven men and only one woman to the position of premier in the provinces won by the ANC in the 2014 national and provincial elections, a reversal of the 50/50 gender representation in which in the 2009 elections the ANC had four female premiers and four male premiers (SAPA, 2016). Concerns were expressed as early as 2007, that in its 95 years of existence the "ANC has been led only by male presidents" which remains the case in 2016, after 104 years of the ANC's existence (Mtintso, 2007:27).

Until 2007 "[n]o woman has ever been nominated by any official ANC structure for any responsibility other than deputy secretary general – and only since 1994. Interestingly, since then, only women have been nominated, accepted and elected for this responsibility. Since 1994 (and never before) there has been only one woman official (the deputy secretary general) out of the six ANC officials." (ibid) In 2007, the ANC nominated two women, one for deputy president, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, who was defeated by a male, Kgalema Motlanthe, and another for national chairperson, Baleka Mbete, who was elected. Until 2007 the ANC WL "the voice of the women, and a champion of the broader struggle for women's emancipation and gender equality – has never nominated a woman for any position other [than] that of a deputy secretary general [...]. All that is left is for the ANC Women's League to play its leadership role in this respect and nominate a woman for president [...], the Women's League cannot shirk one of its direct responsibilities [...]. Let us break the chain of patriarchal tradition." (Mtintso, 2007:27)

Mtintso's plea fell on deaf ears. To start with, two camps emerged in the ANC, one supporting Thabo Mbeki, and another supporting Jacob Zuma, for president (Rossouw, 2007:13). Mbeki's camp had a woman, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, for deputy president while Zuma's camp had a man, Kgalema Motlanthe, for deputy president. The ANC WL National Executive Committee had earlier decided to support Mbeki's camp but dynamics changed later, as the votes turned out in favour of Zuma (Rossouw & Mhlana, 2007:10). Mtintso was "shocked that women can sit in their own conference without having any problem and nominate a man. It's really a sad day for us that we are not able to lead the pack." (Rossouw & Mhlana, 2007:10). For Mtintso it was "wrong for the ANC in 2007 not to have a woman in the presidency. Despite the Women's League not winning the debate, we can still have a nomination from the floor. Even at this stage nothing stops the two men from saying we're stepping aside. It will not be a judgment on their character or weakness on their part but them saying we need a fresh outlook." (*Mail & Guardian*, 2007:12) Mtintso's argument did not win the day. The ANC's Polokwane conference elected Zuma as president.

In 2012, five years later, the ANC re-elected Zuma as president, replaced Motlanthe as deputy president with another man, Cyril Ramaphosa. The position of deputy secretary was given yet again to a woman, Jessie Duarte, who replaced another woman, Thandi Modise, with the support of the ANC WL (Mashaba, 2012:4). Justifying this stance, the ANC WL's national spokesperson, Troy Martins pointed out that this did "not mean we do not believe in a woman president [...] in the future we want to see a woman being elected president (ibid)". Clara Ndlovu, then the ANC WL's provincial secretary pointed out that "[w]e want to have a female president in the near future. We are just not prepared for now. We do have capable leaders." Historically giving "deputy" or "vice" positions to women is not uniquely ANC or South African, leading Amadiume (2015:198) to a protest: "Why should Nigerian women accept half-measures or tokenism? Why should women have only 'Vices' and 'Deputies' dangled before their eyes?" Against this background, Amadiume's (2015:191) following question with regards to research on African women, in particular, and African culture in general, needs to be taken seriously by African scholars: "To what extent are the customs of any particular African society indigenous or traditional?"

This question requires a good distribution of material into appropriate historical periods, taking into account alien factors such as colonialism, racism, imperialism and change." Amadiume's question is born out of a recognition that with the passage of time, and the entrenchment of colonialism, through arbitrary Western education, a lot that is European became so much of reference to an extent that African people internalised the European systems and mistook them as originally African. In the men's quest for power and the "reinterpretation of gender relations" Amadiume (2015:155) observes that "some looked to the Bible and Hebrew culture; others distorted facts about traditional culture in defining the proper status of women *vis-à-vis* men". Amadiume (ibid) cites the Biblical story of creation as being used to reduce women to being merely men's helpmates.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Following Amadiume's lead, on the basis of Afrocentric interpretation of African culture and history, I reject as Eurocentric, arguments that African culture expects women to be domesticated. African history demonstrates that women were free to participate in public life to their full capacity. This article argues that if the advocates of African Renaissance claim that the African Renaissance stands for, among other things, the reclamation of African culture and the rebirth of the African continent, then such reclamation must include the African culture that gave women the space to develop. This space was usurped by the doctrines of Christianity and colonialism, as will be demonstrated below. I begin by showing how the doctrine of Christianity disempowered women. I then demonstrate how colonialism disempowered African women both politically and economically. That is followed by a demonstration of how African culture empowered women. In conclusion, I argue that the empowering African culture, informed by traditional African philosophy, should be the basis of an African Renaissance cognisant of the need to give space to African women to grow and lead.

Christianity and African Women's Exclusion

A Christian missionary, Reverend Josiah Tyler, reflecting on the status of amaZulu women in South Africa, notes that “[i]n intellect the women are inferior to the men, but this is doubtless attributable to the drudgery imposed on them” (Weir 2007:3). Regarding “feelings of self-respect and sensitiveness under wrongs, characteristic of their more highly-favoured sisters in Christian lands, they are strangers. As a rule they patiently submit to their lot, unless tortured beyond endurance by despotic husbands; but their life at best is a hard one.” (ibid) Explicitly, the missionary's point was that amaZulu culture, unlike European-Christian culture, oppressed women. To the contrary, Weir (2007:10) points an accusing finger at Christianity for having “shaped the colonial – predominantly male – interpretations of Zulu religion”. This shaping refers to the representation of God as the “male God” and “God the father”. Oyèwùmí (1997:136) observes that the “introduction of Christianity, which is male-dominant, was another factor in the process of establishing male dominance in Yorùbá society”. In the Igbo community known as Nnobi, in Nigeria, where the Goddess Idemili is worshipped, Amadiume (1997:121) notes that when European Christian missionaries arrived, they insisted that “God was a ‘he’ not a ‘she’”.

This representation of God as male, Weir (2007:10) observes, “undermined the importance of women in the ideology of the Zulu state”. The Supreme Being, Weir (Ibid) further argues, was not perceived among the Zulu people, prior to Christianity, in the same way that Christianity came to portray God. A similar pattern is in Nigeria via the Yorùbá when the Yorùbá language was reduced to writing, and the “new Christian elite in Yorùbáland set to work to codifying the customs, traditions, and religion of the people [...] their vision was often seriously colored by Christianity” (Oyèwùmí, 1997:140-141). This was “particularly noticeable regarding sex. There tended to be a male bias in the language and interpretations of Yorùbá traditions” (Oyèwùmí, 1997:141). Before the process of the “masculinization of Yorùbá religion”, there was “Olódùmarè (God-the Supreme Being). Olódùmarè did not have a gender identity, and it is doubtful that s/he was perceived as a human being before the advent of Christianity.” (Oyèwùmí, 1997:140). After the process of the “masculinization of Yorùbá religion” Olódùmarè was presented as “our Father in heaven” and “our ancestors” became “our forefathers” leaving the foremothers outside (Oyèwùmí, 1997:141). The Christian preponderance of portraying God as male moved wa Thiong’o (2013:222) to observe that he had “never really thought of God in terms of gender” but had “always assumed him to be male, although in Gĩkũyũ God is neither man nor woman”. While the Kenyan language, Gĩkũyũ, is neutral about God, as wa Thiong’o points out, in Shona, a Zimbabwean language, reference to God is inclusive of both female and male (Shoko, 2012:57): “God is also referred to as *Mbuya* (grandmother) and *Zendere* (young woman) who originated from *Mwari* and thus, portray God as female. He is also called *Sororezhou* (head of elephant) which means Father.

He is both male and female.” Then came Christianity and its introduction of male superiority over the female. According to Genesis 2: 21-24, after God created the woman out of Adam’s rib, the man, named the new creature “[w]oman [...] because she was taken out of man”. After the woman “sinned” by giving in to the temptations of the snake, Genesis 3:16 spells out the punishment thus: “I will increase your trouble in pregnancy and your pain in giving birth. In spite of this, you will still have desire for your husband, *and yet you will be subject to him*” (my emphasis).

Later St. Paul (Timothy 1 (2):11-14) would invoke the Biblical story of creation to justify the exclusion of women from power: “Women should learn in silence and all humility. I do not allow them to teach or to have authority over men; they must keep quiet. For Adam was created first, and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived and broke God’s law.” Elsewhere St. Paul (Corinthians 1 (11):7-9) would make explicit his subscription to the view that men are superior to women: “But I want you to understand that Christ is supreme over every man, the husband is supreme over his wife, and God is supreme over Christ [...]. A man has no need to cover his head, because he reflects the image and glory of God. But woman reflects the glory of man, for man was not created from woman, but woman from man. Nor was man created for woman’s sake, but woman was created for man’s sake.” In marriage, St Paul (Ephesians, 4:22-24) declares that “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For a husband has authority over his wife just as Christ has authority over the church [...]. And so wives must submit completely to their husbands just as the church submits itself to Christ.” The Christian message of male superiority and exclusion of females was entrenched by colonialism.

Colonialism and African Women’s Political Exclusion

In Yorùbá society, “on the eve of colonization there were female chiefs and officials all over Yorùbáland” (Oyèwùmí, 1997:125). Accustomed to a British political culture where “access to power was gender-based” and “politics [being] largely men’s job” one European tradition of governance and economic organisation that was “exported to Africa during this period was the exclusion of women from the newly created colonial public sphere” (Oyèwùmí, 1997:123). What this meant was that the “British colonial government recognized the male chief’s authority at the local level but did not acknowledge the existence of female chiefs” the consequence being that “women were excluded from all colonial state structures” (Oyèwùmí, 1997:124). Oyèwùmí (1997:124) appropriately refers to this European-imposed new system as “bio-logic” – “biology” being the basis of women’s exclusion from power. While “female chiefs were stripped of power” on one hand, on the other, “male chiefs were invested with more power” and, significantly “more power over the people than was vested in them traditionally” (Oyèwùmí, 1997:125). Remarkably, on their arrival in Africa, the “British created their own brand of ‘traditional chiefs’” (Oyèwùmí (1997:125).

The traditional African concept of “traditional chiefs” which was displaced, is not the same as the European concept of “traditional chiefs” with which they replaced the African’s with. Reflecting on the imposition of “traditional chiefs” by colonialists to do the bidding for the latter, Cabral (1979:26) observes that “[t]he old structure of African political life was totally destroyed by Portuguese colonialism” with the result that the “few remaining chiefdoms [in Guiné, Angola and Mozambique] are controlled by the colonial authorities who use the chiefs as puppets. Most of the chiefs are put in ‘command’ of communities different from those to which they really belong”. Noting that the European colonialists’ “deliberate practice of ignoring [...] the complex and subtle existing leadership structures in favour of selecting leaders and imposing them on the population was the cornerstone of the colonial administration”, Maathai (2009:26-27) echoes Cabral by noting that “some natives, especially those in trouble with local establishment, cooperated with the [colonial] newcomers sharing the community’s secrets and life style. In return for their ‘generosity’, these collaborators (many of them outcasts) were elevated to the positions of chiefs [...] positions that they would never have held in the traditional societies”. Referring to these colonial-appointed chiefs as “local autocrats” who “did everything they could to promote the oppressive, exploitative, and undemocratic authority of the colonial government and ruled their own people with even greater cruelty than the colonizers” Maathai (2009:27) notes that though they were members of the community “such chiefs and their assistants were de facto agents and information gatherers of the imperial powers”.

Remarkably, Maathai (ibid) concludes that the “colonial authorities’ elevation of these individuals, and the imposition of them on an unwilling community, laid the foundation for an oppressive provincial administration that undermined indigenous systems of governance and justice”. The same approach was applied on African peoples’ “customary law” that has been used by African male chiefs to discriminate against and exclude African women from power. Unequivocally, Oyěwùní (1997:147) states that the “ultimate source of the ‘new customary law’ was not [African] custom but the British colonial government”. Having removed African women from power, Europeans effectively used their education system to ensure that women remained on the periphery of society. In the Nigerian Igbo society “[w]hile boys were prepared for government, trade, industry, church and educational services, girls were prepared for domestic services and taught cooking, cleaning, childcare and sewing” (Amadiume, 2015:135). To the British colonialists, “frail-minded” females were incapable of handling “masculine” subjects like science, politics and business. This British approach of undermining women’s advancement was the same in Nigeria’s Yorùbáland. The ability to gain social and economic mobility being “determined by access to Western education” and men being given “a head start, not only in numbers but also in what Western education and values came to represent in African societies”

Oyěwùmí (1997:135) observes that “[p]erhaps the most damaging lasting effect of the association of men with education, gainful employment, and leadership may be its psychological effect on both men and women”. This psychological effect refers to the “notion that females are not as mentally capable as males [...] commonplace among some of the Western-educated in contemporary Nigerian society” (ibid). The colonial legacy of African women’s political exclusion is tightly tied to the colonial legacy of African women’s economic exclusion.

Colonialism’s Economic Exclusion of African Women

One of the landmarks of European penetration in Africa “was the commercialization of land” where it became “a commodity to be bought and sold” (Oyěwùmí, 1997:142). Prior this, “[i]n nineteenth-century Yorùbáland, as in most parts of Africa, land was not a commodity to be individually owned, bought and sold” (ibid). Rather, the “lineage was the landholding unit, and all members of the family, male and female, had rights of usage” (ibid). In Africa “[t]raditionally, land was owned not by an individual but by the family or the community” (Maathai, 2009:227. European colonialists changed this and insisted that “land be controlled by a title deed, and when such deeds were bestowed, the authorities would provide them only to ‘the head of the household,’ which was the man” (ibid). This new colonial imposition, “disenfranchised women, who no longer had a right to land but who, instead, accessed land at the pleasure of the father or the husband, whose name was written on the title deed” (ibid). The colonialists’ approach was a serious contradiction of a “common thread weaving through all Afrikan cultural groups” that being that “the mother is central to the household” (Rukuni, 2007:33).

The centrality of the mother is evidenced by the fact that “[i]n Afrikan traditional systems, a man cannot be allocated land or a home if he has no wife, because it is the mother that is central to the household” (ibid). As in the case where Europeans imposed their concept of “traditional chiefs” and “customary law” which African people later ignorantly appropriated as “African tradition”, the same happened with regards to “land ownership”. Oyěwùmí (1997:146) notes that “[p]erhaps the most serious development resulting from land sale was the ideology explaining the new reality of land sales and abrogation of women’s rights as ‘our custom’ rather than as a ‘tradition’ that developed in the colonial period”. Where until the 19th century and much later in Lagos and Abéòkúta private ownership of land was an alien thing, by the 1930s “there existed an erroneous belief in some Yorùbá localities that the ‘the sale of land has been a tradition among them’”. If colonialism took so much from African women, what did traditional African culture offer to women, and what were the philosophical underpinnings of such?

Power-Sharing Between Women and Men in African Culture and History

Research on amaZulu culture reveals that “far from being victims of male power, many women can be shown to be political agitators, exercising real power. Zulu royal women, for example, demonstrated such leadership before, during and after Shaka’s reign and, in contrast to popularly held views, were not the subordinates of Shaka”(Weir, 2007:4). Weir (ibid) proceeds to point out that in amaZulu society, “[w]omen’s leadership took a variety of forms, sometimes military, but more often economic and religious. Indeed, these roles defined their power.” In fact “[m]ore than fulfilling social functions and providing labour, leadership by women was an intrinsic part of several pre-colonial systems in southern Africa” (Weir, ibid). Weir’s (2007:5) observations are significant considering that amaZulu “are so often presented as fiercely patriarchal and militaristic”. Not only were women leaders among amaZulu, but the “‘Ba-Pedi, or Transvaal Ba-Sutho’ had many”, and “chiefly women were quite common among Sotho and Venda-speaking peoples”(Weir, 2007:8). Reference to the BaSotho as having had “many” women leaders and that “chiefly women were quite common among them” is significant considering that in Lesotho in 2013, the country’s Constitutional Court “reiterated that daughters cannot succeed their fathers to become chiefs” basing its decision on “Lesotho’s customary law”, which, the court argued, “was not discrimination and therefore not unconstitutional” (Jansson, 2013:30). The court’s decision followed a case brought by Senate Masupha, the first-born female child of a chief who was challenging a section of the Kingdom’s Chieftainship Act, encompassing customary law in Lesotho, “which allows only males to succeed their fathers to chieftainship” (ibid).

The court argued that “the applicant cannot be said to be discriminated against on the basis of her sex, but even if it were the case, it does not violate the constitutional provision to the extent that Section 10 of the Chieftainship Act may be declared unconstitutional”. In contrast to the Lesotho Constitutional Court’s decision, the Constitutional Court of South Africa, in 2008, “recognised the right of a 66-year-old woman to become the chief” of her people upholding “an appeal by the woman, Tinyiko Nwamitwa-Shilubana, whose chieftainship of the Valoyi [...] near Tzaneen was taken away from her in 1968 on the basis that she was female” (Maiga, 2014:73). This “landmark decision exemplifies the extent to which courts are interpreting [African] cultural contexts in the light of progressive and international law, and opens the door for indigenous women’s participation in leadership within both customary and state institutions”(Maiga, ibid). Maiga’s observation could be interpreted to mean that alleged male bias in “retrogressive” African culture necessitates the intervention of “progressive and international [read Western] law”, to rescue “culturally oppressed” African women. This is so, considering that African “[w]omen often experience violence in the home and in their communities, which may be justified in the name of culture” where, for instance “domestic culture is often justified by a ‘cultural’ belief that it is acceptable for a man to use violence to control his wife’s behavior” (Maiga 2014:77).

African history reveals distinguishable “rule of queens and queen mothers in the Southern African region, and similar systems of female rule and power sharing with men in West Africa. This was also the case among East African societies.” (Amadiume, 1997:146) There are “accounts of powerful women leaders, queens and empresses in African history” and these “go back into antiquity, covering ancient empires, including Nubia, Ethiopia and Egypt” (ibid.) The “most frequently encountered role of importance played by women was that of ‘Queen Mother’ or ‘Queen Sister’” (Rodney, 2012:227. This post (Queen Mother/Queen Sister) “was filled by a female of royal blood, who might be mother, sister, or aunt of the reigning king in places such as Mali, Asante, and Buganda” (ibid). This was not a token position. The influence of the Queen Mother or Queen Sister “was considerable, and there were occasions when the ‘Queen Mother’ was the real power and the male king a mere puppet” (ibid). A reflection of this position in Southern Africa was that of Barotsi kings governing with one of their female relatives (Weir, 2007:8). In this community, the “Barotsi Mokwae sat in the *lekhothla*, taking part in state affairs and making judgments” (ibid). In the *lekhothla*, Mokwae is “saluted like the king with ‘*Tautona*’ [meaning lion] and ‘*Yo-sho*’, the salutations reserved for royalty alone. People prostrate themselves before her, and nobody has the right to sit in her presence, not even her husband, the Mokwe Tunga (Son-in-law of the Nation), who is only a servant, and can be dismissed at her pleasure” (Coillard cited in Weir, 2007:9).

Among the Asante in Ghana, the Queen Mother “was considered a co-ruler with the king in all state affairs” (Akyeampong & Obeng 2005:29). Noteworthy is that “the very existence of the queen mother at the highest level of state organization signified the perceived complementarity of power as both male and female. Good leadership combined ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ qualities: reason balanced bravery, compassion balanced inflexibility.” (ibid) The Queen Mother’s “main attribute is the moral quality of wisdom, knowledge, emotion, compassion, all that pertains to her as a woman and is not bestowed by male officials” (Gilbert cited in Akyeampong and Obeng, 2007:29). The supremacy of the Queen Mother, Nqumbazi, over her son, King Cetshwayo, finds expression in Massey’s (2007:258) narrative: “When a piece of crewel work bearing the motto, ‘God is my King,’ was presented to Cetewayo (sic) in London, he at first declined to receive it with the remark, ‘There is no one over me but the Queen, my Mother!’” It is significant to learn that the graves of Nqumbazi, the mother of Cetshwayo, the amaZulu king and Mkhabayi’s, the sister of Senzangakhona, Shaka’s father, were “important as a refuge for those sentenced to execution” (Weir, 2007:11). These women’s graves were sacred sites in the sense that anyone sentenced to death by a king and fled to these graves “would not be molested any further” (ibid). Women’s sacredness among amaZulu was not the privilege of only “royal” women.

There was a severe punishment for any man who dared insult a woman by referring to her as a “bitch” (Mutwa, 1996:78). The offender was fined three heads of cattle, two of which were given to the king, the third given to the offended woman as compensation (Mutwa, 1996:78-79). On top of that the offender was “forbidden by the king to have intercourse with any woman for a period not exceeding two years” the reasoning being that “[b]y insulting this woman, he had indirectly insulted all the women in the land, including his own wife” (Mutwa, 1996:79).

But the punishment did not end there. The cow presented to the offended woman would be slaughtered where all the women in the surrounding area would be invited to the feast. While all the meat was eaten, the tail would be kept and preserved for a special purpose: “The man who had insulted the woman would be tied to a tree with his face to the trunk, his loin-skin would be ripped off and the women would take turns to beat his buttocks black and blue with the tail of the slaughtered cow.” (Mutwa, 1996:79) In amaZulu society, if a man insulted a virgin by insinuating that she was no longer one, he would be “banished from the community for about a year, on the understanding that he would be killed without mercy if he so much as showed his face in the land before the period of exile expired” (Mutwa, 1996:79). Commenting on African people in general, who were derogatorily referred to by racist whites in South Africa as “kaffirs”, originally meaning “unbelievers”, Massey (2007:460) observes that what is “more interesting is to learn that in case of homicide among the Kaffirs the scale of compensation allowed by law was seven head of cattle for the male and ten head for the female”.

This uneven meting out of justice is a clear indication of the sacredness and elevated status of the mother in African culture. What emerges from the above narrative is that a woman’s biological fact was not a reason for objectifying her, but that of celebration. In contrast, in Europe, particularly in Greece, “sexual relations – always conceived in terms of the model act of penetration, assuming a polarity that opposed activity and passivity – were seen as being of the same type as the relationship between a superior and a subordinate, an individual who dominates and one who is dominated, one who commands and one who complies, one who vanquishes and one who is vanquished” (Foucault, 1985:215). What this suggests, Foucault (ibid) further observes, is that “in sexual behavior there was one role that was intrinsically honorable and valorized without question: the one that consisted in being active, in dominating, in penetrating, in asserting one’s superiority”.

Conclusion

Africa is no perfect place, nor are the African people. In African culture there are practices and beliefs that have been found by African people as wrong and they have been abandoned. We can count among these the killing of twins in some African societies, and female circumcision. However, equally true is that African people have historically and culturally celebrated women. This celebration of African women should be central in the African Renaissance project. And African women must take it upon themselves to reclaim this aspect, confident in the fact that they cannot be accused of pushing a Western agenda, but instead working to reclaim their African ancestors’ traditional African philosophy.

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