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ABSTRACT

The role of women in many African societies has been formed and contained by age-old traditions that have relegated their place to the home. Where they are compelled to play second fiddle, women rarely discover their authentic identity. This paper presents the roles of women in place making in Africa. It discusses non-formal and formal education of African women and the artistic forms--expressions, symbols, and elements--that African women use to shape the environment. It discusses the evolution of the roles of African women, focusing on the effects of Ali Mazuri's triple heritage, which presents African history as composed of three principal influences: traditional, Islamic, and western. The paper concludes that today, post-colonial African women are struggling to become forces to reckon with as in pre-colonial times, and that African nations need to return to the traditional concepts of empowerment and integration of the female population. Contains a 17-item bibliography. (BT)

**THE DIVERGENT ROLES OF AFRICAN
WOMEN IN PLACE MAKING**

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The Divergent Roles of African Women in Place Making

Introduction

The role of women in many African societies has been preempted by age-old traditions that have relegated their place to the home. Women's roles depend on the status accorded them in any given society. Where they are compelled to play second fiddle, women rarely discover their authentic identity. Their authentic identity only manifests where there is freedom (Asojo, 1999).

This paper presents the roles of women in place making in Africa. The authors discuss non-formal and formal education of African women, artistic forms and expressions, symbols and elements which African women use to shape the environment. The evolution of the roles of African women focusing on the effects of Ali Mazuri's triple heritage, which presents African history as comprised of three principal influences, traditional, Islamic and western is discussed.

Women in Traditional Societies

Informal Education and African Women. When researchers mention the African woman, it is often to lament the dismal state of their formal education. While it is true that African women are

the most likely people on the planet to be formally illiterate, their lack of formal education does not necessarily imply a lack of informal education. The schooling process of women in the traditional societies can be classified into two categories, home training and apprentice training.

Home training stage occurs in three stages. In the first stage, the child learns about society through contact with the environment. The learning process involves crawling around, learning through direct contact, touch, taste, and discovery of barriers and limits. In the second stage, the little girl is initiated into the adult world by pretend cooking and childcare. In this stage, education is richly imparted through visual observation. In addition, this stage is enriched through listening to folklore, fables and rules. The third stage involves the use of direct instruction. The childcare, cleaning, cooking, farming, harvesting, wall decoration, carving, hairstyles, dress making, basketry, pottery all cease to be make-belief. Instead, at this stage, the child is instructed verbally, learning directly how to perform functions that the family and society need.

The Apprentice training stage basically imparts skills in specified areas. In traditional Nigerian societies, after girls have

gone through the home training stage, they are usually sent to live with adult experts in their relevant areas to learn trade skills. The learning process is based on observation, the use of fake tools and finally practice, using real tools. All stages are complimented with verbal instructions and constant supervision. The presence of constant supervision guides the apprentice to maturity in accordance with the motives of the educational process.

African Women and the Society. Pre-colonial African women played active roles in politics, economic and religious lives, they were active participants in many communities, and often leaders. These opportunities varied in different societies, but followed similar trends to those of men. History records the military exploits of many women, such as Orompoto in the Old Oyo Kingdom and Moremi in Ile-Ife, who were said to have fought gallantly, and freed their people from the attack of enemies. In the Benin Kingdom, Emotan was renowned for her effort that led to the dethronement of a tyrannical king. Zaria is named after a powerful woman, Ondo Kingdom was founded by a woman, who later became the first Osemawe (ruler). Queen Amina of Katsina became famous in the first half of the fifteenth century as a result

of her widespread conquest. She built many cities, and consequently received tributes from powerful chiefs.

Early traditions of Ile-Ife document a female Ooni (King, spiritual leader of the Yorubas). Many female Alaafins (King) ruled in Oyo Kingdom. In Benin Kingdom, the important female figure was usually the Iyoba (King's mother). However, in the Igbo societies where the institution of kingship was not prominent, the elders of the village usually appointed some women into position of leadership. Women in the village also had their own spokeswoman, who was usually invited to the village meetings, where matters affecting the communities were discussed. In the different societies, chiefs were able to strengthen their position by arranging diplomatic marriage with women of the royal lineage.

African women were active participants in economic endeavors. In the areas of commerce and agriculture they made significant contributions. Like men, they engaged in both local and distance trade. Lander (1833) observed one hundred wives of the Alafin in Oyo kingdom traveling on a trade business. Writing on Ibadan in the second half of the 19th century, Johnson remarked that "the women of those days were as hardy as the men and they often went in a body of caravans".

Women traders in the different societies competed keenly with men, their economic affluence was often so significant that many of them became strong forces. For instance, in many Yoruba societies, the office of the Iyalode (mother of the town) was the creation of this prowess. A distinguished woman in the society was honored with the title of Iyalode. In addition to settling disputes especially those involving women, Iyalode served as a voice for women. She actively participated in the decision-making for the community. This Iyalode office is still practiced in western Nigeria today. In the Hausa, Benin Kingdom and Igbo societies, there were numerous women traders, those who owned farm plantations, and competed keenly with men. Asojo 1999 notes “In this respect, traditional African women embraced the triple roles of mother, wife and breadwinner.”

Women participated in religious functions such as divination, midwifery and rituals. Often women acted as native doctors with full knowledge of herbs. For example, in many Nigerian societies women are considered powerful metaphysically. Women featured as co-celebrants in the festivals of Egungun (an annual masquerade festival prevalent in all of Yorubaland in honor of ancestral spirits). They added honor and beautified the

ceremony with their thematic functions. There are stories of many women including Yemoja, Oya, Oronsen Iyamapo who were elevated to the level of deities. They are approached even today for protection, health, procreation, wealth, and other vital aspects of human needs.

African Women and decorative arts. Calvin Douglas of the Brooklyn Museum of arts notes “Artistic expression is not the luxury to African peoples that it has become to the west. It is considered a natural and necessary way of giving meaning to phases of a person’s life and enhancing his work...This tradition continues in independent African countries today, where cultural dances and attires are used in political festivals...If the vitality of a culture can be measured in terms of its ability to produce art and enlarge its conception of human life, it is not difficult to understand why so many black people in the US today look to Africa as their cultural source.” Like every other aspect of living, pre-colonial African women were also involved in shaping the built environment. In most societies, men were responsible for heavy construction work, whereas women gathered the materials, and carried out the plastering. Clarke, 1990 notes “the women

planned their spaces according to the principles and customs acquired from her father's house". The wall surfaces were finished in collaboration with co-wives and relatives by applying decorative patterns. Wall art, body decoration, cloth dyeing, basketry and pottery, were performed by women in addition to their duties of child rearing, meal preparation, other household chores and farming. In many West African societies, wall decoration was often a collective effort, initiated by a senior wife or by the owner of the house, whose choice of patterns reflects their identity.

Western and Islamic Influences

The intent of the Judeo-Christian-Western and Arab-Islamic patriarchies were to conquer and civilize the Africans whom they perceived as savage, uncultured, heathen and primitive. Both had economic and religious motives. The economy was initially based on trade in slaves and resources, and later agriculture. The religious motives had root in the Biblical and Koranic decrees of prophecy and conversion for redemption. Formal education was also an instrument for conversion. Women's roles in the society were inauspiciously affected by the adoption of European and Islamic values. These values relegated women to

subservience. In the 19th century, when the colonial masters sought to govern Africa, since there were few men, these colonial masters, notably Great Britain, chose to educate some indigenes to perform administrative functions under British commissioners. This expanded formal education and the spread of European cultural values in colonies in Africa. The colonial system of education, similar to what the colonialist had in their countries had no room for women. They were trained to be good mothers, wives and ornaments of society, in essence black Victorian women. Women education was limited in scope, but those of the men gave them multiple career opportunities. Men could become doctors, lawyers, engineers among others professions.

The earning capacity of women was adversely affected. Women were relegated to an inferior status to their male counterparts. Women who traditionally had dominated political, economic and religious arenas were completely removed from the scene. The new sociopolitical and governing system mirroring those in Europe, afforded little or no opportunities for women. The Judeo-Christian-Western and Arab-Islamic patriarchies eradicated traditional African values. Women who traditionally dominated trade economies were now left out of the formal sector. They were

rapidly relegated to an inferior status to their male counterparts. This trend continued even after the exodus of the colonialist. The authors note it is reasonable, therefore, to argue that women in traditional societies were not subservient to men, rather they were active participants in the society. Their non-formal education gave them the intellectual ability to fit into the society. However, the advent of European and Islamic culture led to significant cultural erosion culminating in the loss of most traditional values.

Conclusion

Today, post-colonial African women are struggling to become forces to reckon with like in pre-colonial times. The 1995 edition of the ARCON decree 10 of 1969 noted 80 women who are registered out of a total of 1,383 registered members of the Nigerian Institute of Architects. South Africa ranks among the top ten countries with the most women in parliament. UNIFEM notes “millions of women in developing countries live in poverty”. Women make up 70 percent of the world’s 1.3 billion poor. Adult female literacy in 1992 was only 45% in sub-Saharan Africa, as compared to a 59% average for all developing countries. African

women account for 80% of food production, yet they derive little benefit from government or international programs.

Like in pre-colonial times where African women played fundamental roles in the society, the authors conclude that African nations need to return to the traditional concepts of empowerment and integration of female population. UNIFEM notes “ Africa will not be able to meet its goals of sustainable development without an empowered, educated, and integrated female population. It is not secret that women play a fundamental role in agriculture, environmental issues, and as capacity builders”.

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