A PHILOSOPHICAL EXPLORATION OF TRADITIONAL AFRICAN WOMEN'S ROLES AS SITES OF KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract

In some parts of Western feminist and gender discourse, women's roles have often been conceptualised in ways that position them as inferior to roles that are typically associated with men. Usually, this depiction not only presents women's roles in contrast to men's but also attaches a sense of superiority to the latter. This has not only contributed to the reinforcement of Euro-colonial patriarchal gender framework but has also invisibilised women in the process, resulting in a lack of positive discourse on African women. This challenge continues to influence much of the resistance and hostility towards feminism in the African context, as many are concerned that feminism undermines the virtues and principles that are contained in female-gendered roles. In an attempt to move away from male-centred theorisation of gender, I explore the roles that women play in traditional African societies, foregrounding, especially motherhood, the roles of aunts and women in spirituality, in order to reposition African women positively. My aim in this paper is twofold: first, to provide alternative perspectives on African women through an empowering lens that shows their agency in traditional settings, and second, to unpack the epistemologies embodied in some of the roles that African women play, especially in traditional settings.

Keywords: African feminism, Colonialism, Gender, Epistemology, Motherhood, Spirituality

Introduction

Historically, women's roles in African societies extended far beyond the confines of domesticity. Their roles were often rooted in tradition and, in many ways, crucial to the functioning of society. Although there is no consensus in the literature on the status of African women in traditional African societies and on whether African societies are inherently oppressive, scholars concerned with issues of gender in Africa do, at the very least, agree on two things: that colonialism affected African people's gender relations and, at the same time, introduced new ones (See NZEGWU 2006; OYĚWÙMÍ 2002; 2016; BERTOLT 2018). These claims about gender and colonialism inform much of the discourse on feminism in Africa and have been central to debates about feminism's role and relevance on the continent. For the purposes of this paper, I will not be engaging in the debate about the relevance of feminism. However, it is important to note, for the sake of clarity, that I am in favour of the claim that colonialism disrupted African people's gender relations and that the patriarchal, racist, misogynist, and capitalist colonial state produced gender in surreptitious ways in Africa (NZEGWU 2020, 42). I am also willing to accept that, in the same vein, coloniality continues to undermine women's roles in post-colonial societies while also reinforcing the idea of masculinity as a yardstick by which to measure humanity.

This paper seeks to illuminate and appreciate some of the critical roles played by women in traditional African social settings with the aim of moving away from a male-centred theorisation of gender, which often presents women as subordinate to men (OYĚWÙMÍ 1997; NZEGWU 2020; EDET 2018). I should note that I am very sympathetic

to the discourse on women's oppression; in fact, I believe it is a necessary discourse insofar as it helps us reflect on the influence of the colonial state on gender and gender relations, especially in post-colonial societies. However, in the same breath, I believe, to focus exclusively on the oppressive conditions of women, whether rooted in culture or history, risks obscuring the broader dimensions of their social and epistemic existence.

In this paper, I explore the philosophical dimensions of African women's traditional roles, positioning them as significant sites of knowledge production and transmission. In response to Nkiru Nzegwu's (2020) appeal to disassemble subordination by radically transforming masculinist societies into female-affirming ones, and Mesembe Edet's (2018) call to include African women's perspectives in our writing of history, I attempt an ethnophilosophical project, drawing from women's roles in African traditional settings in order to highlight how these roles can serve as dynamic sources of knowledge that challenge dominant paradigms. Inspired by my own experiences as a Mosotho[1] woman, I also rely on my personal accounts of the structural organisation of Basotho, foregrounding the roles of mother, aunt, and women's roles and position in spirituality. I do this to reposition and recenter African women positively through an empowering lens that shows not only their agency in traditional settings but also the knowledge embodied in these roles, confirming the claim that knowledge is not only situated but also gendered (See HARAWAY 1988). Additionally, I draw on the literature that provides historical accounts of women's roles in other African cultural contexts, such as Nigeria, to offer a diverse account of traditional African women's roles as sites of knowledge. There are overlaps in many African cultures, and although my intention is not to make a case for any similarities or differences in cultures, I should point out that explorations of this nature tend to highlight salient features in African traditional cultures, which can sometimes become useful in strengthening alternative perspectives or validating some claims about African people. This is to say, I am cognizant of the fact that African people across cultures do not necessarily share the same social and historical experiences, and thus, this study may not apply to all African contexts and should not be read as such.

To begin my exploration, I unpack the claim that colonialism disrupted African people's social structures by imposing gender as a social and epistemological framework. This has resulted in the misunderstanding and misrepresentation of African people's social relations in general and, in particular, of the position of African women in traditional African societies. In response to this, the subsequent sections will attempt to provide alternative and empowering readings of the roles of African women in traditional societies with the aim of inspiring an African-centred epistemology of gender that recognises agency and African women's epistemological contribution to the constitution of African societies.

Colonialism, Gender and the Invention of Women in Africa

According to Oyèrónké Oyéwùmi (1997) and Maria Lugones (2008), gender, as understood in the *modern Western sense*, is a colonially constructed social category. For Nzegwu (2006, 2), "the… problem of gender subordination in Africa… can be traced to European colonial policies and African men's views and constructions of the family." While all three thinkers link gender subordination to colonial influence, Oyěwùmí and Lugones advance a more radical thesis suggesting that, prior to colonialism, gender as a social organising category did not exist. They do not suggest that African societies lacked an awareness of sex difference or social distinction, but that the modern system of gender as a rigid, hierarchical, and oppositional organizing principle of society is a colonial import. Their point is that what was

[1] 'Mosotho' refers to any African – inside or outside Lesotho – who speaks the Sesotho language and who identifies with and practices the culture of 'Basotho' (the plural of 'Mosotho')

introduced through colonialism was not necessarily the recognition of biological difference, but an epistemological framework that interpreted this difference in terms of power, domination, and subordination. In many African societies, social organisation was instead structured through principles such as seniority, lineage, or spiritual role rather than through the binary of male versus female. Thus, when Oyěwùmí and Lugones contend that gender did not exist before colonialism, they mean that the *Western gender system* — as a structure of power that orders social relations through sexual difference — was not part of the indigenous African worldview.

Explicating Oyéwùmi's position, Lugones says the following:

> Oyěwùmí understands gender as introduced by the West as a tool of domination that designates two binarily opposed and hierarchical social categories. Women (the gender term) is not defined through biology… Women are defined in relation to men, the norm. (LUGONES 2008, 8)

From this, it can be inferred that colonialism, among other things, influenced a shift in the understanding of the roles of men and women such that the ways in which African societies have come to understand and organise themselves have now come to be understood along oppositional lines of male versus female. Lugones (2008, 1) refers to this as the "colonial/modern gender system". In her later work, she advances this view through what she calls 'the coloniality of gender', an understanding that gender is and has not only been used to advance colonial interests but also used as a colonising tool. The coloniality of gender is "what lies at the intersection of gender/class/race as central constructs of the capitalist world system of power" (LUGONES 2010, 746). Through this concept, we are able to understand the various impositions of colonialism as always intricately tied to the gendered, economic, and racialising aspects of the colonial system. According to Lugones (2008, 12), understanding the role of gender in both pre-colonial and colonial contexts is important, particularly if we want to understand how colonial Eurocentric capitalism affected changes in the social structures. She maintains that the changes in social structure, among other things, "were introduced through slow, discontinuous, and heterogeneous processes that violently inferiorised colonised women" (LUGONES 2008, 12).

For Oyěwùmí (1997, 82), the problem for Africa begins with the imposition of a Western-constructed notion of gender that sees man and woman as social categories that stand in opposition to each other. She argues that, historically, this notion of gender has been used in Western societies as a fundamentally organising principle wherein male is associated with privilege and female with subordination. In her articulation of Yorùbá world sense[2] and the re-mapping of Yorùbá social order, she rejects this Western-constructed notion of gender by arguing that the social categories "men" and "women" did not exist prior to Yorùbá's colonisation by the West (OYĚWÙMÍ 1997). Instead, she maintains that the principle of social organisation in Yorùbá society was seniority, relative to age. She makes this claim based on her assessment of the Yorùbá language and its oral tradition and eventually presents two Yorùbá categories, obìnrin and ọkùnrin, which, she says, have been erroneously used to denote Western female/woman and male/man categories.

Oyěwùmí maintains that the same distinction did not exist in Yorùbá with the normative implications they are given in the West. Being of Yorùbá descent herself, she claims that:

[2] For Oyěwùmí, world sense refers to the ways in which reality is perceived, organized, and given meaning within a particular culture. She prefers the term world sense over world view to challenge the Western philosophical emphasis on vision (i.e., view) as the primary mode of knowing.

> The word obìnrin does not derive etymologically from ọkùnrin, as "wo-man" does from "man." Rin, the common suffix of ọkùnrin and obìnrin, suggests a common humanity; the prefixes obìn and ọkùn specify which variety of anatomy. There is no conception here of an original human type against which the other variety had to be measured. (OYĚWÙMÍ 1997, 33)

This is simply to say that men and women in pre-colonial Yorùbá were not regarded in extensional terms, and value in this society was placed on humanity rather than on a specific group, based on shared or contrasting anatomy.

Another contrary social category to note in relation to the Western-constructed notion of gender is that of "female-husbands". It was introduced into the literature by Ifi Amadiume (1987) as a category that defies the universalised heterosexual Western conception of marriage, in which a husband is always considered male. A female-husband is a category that exists in same-sex woman-to-woman marriage. This practice of women marrying women is common in some parts of West Africa, Southern Africa, East Africa, and the Sudan (NJAMBI & O'BRIEN 2005, 145). However, the marriage arrangement has not been widely theorised. It is important to note, however, that the institution of the female-husband manifested differently across regions and fulfilled diverse social, economic, and lineage-related functions. These variations underscore the fluidity and contextual flexibility of African social systems, which operated according to relational and functional logics rather than rigid gender binaries. Njambi and O'Brien (2005) argue that woman-to-woman marriages are arranged in the same way that marriage between a man and a woman is arranged. However, because the marriage is not accommodated by the Christian religion, the marriage is customarily officiated, reflecting an indigenous understanding of kinship and social continuity that transcends the heterosexual norm.

The term female-husband has caused controversy in the literature, as some authors have taken issue with the assumption that the woman who initiates the marriage plays the role of a man and should therefore be classified as a man. But Krige (1974, cited in NJAMBI & O'BRIEN 2005) describes the role of the female-husband as having no necessary male characterisation but instead argues that this view imposes a Western assumption that the husband is automatically associated with maleness. There is also the view that while a husband can possibly be male or female, the term female-husband carries with it male connotations, which otherwise make it difficult to separate it from maleness (NJAMBI & O'BRIEN 2005). For someone like Oyěwùmí (1997), this is an implicit imposition of the male category or maleness in the characterization of the female-husband, which sometimes occurs due to translation. This is mainly an error caused by cross-cultural discourse conducted in a Western language, especially because, in societies where these marriage arrangements exist, it has been found that there is no term in the local languages for a female husband.

There are various reasons why women enter these kinds of marriages (a discussion which I will not engage in), such as retaining wealth after one's husband passes away or adopting the children of another woman. However, what I wish to point out here is that woman-to-woman marriages stand in stark contrast to the Western universalised concept of marriage, which is primarily understood as "a personal association between a man and a woman and a biological relationship for mating and reproduction" (WIMALASENA 2016, 166). According to Oyéwùmi (1997), there is an understanding in the Western context that conceives of 'woman' as an essential universal category that is characterised by the social uniformity of its members. As a result, to talk about women, as in the case of female husbands, in a way that does not fit this category, undermines this supposedly Western idea. There are two things to be noted from the exposition of obìnrin and ọkùnrin in the Yorùbá context, as well as the female-husband social category. The first is that in some African

indigenous contexts, sex difference does not form the basis of social categories. The second is that the conception of social categories in oppositional terms is a Western imposition. Oyéwùmi (1997) finds it problematic that, within Western gender discourse, female husbands are presented as gender categories. She argues that this "incorporates them into the Western bio-logic and gendered framework without explication of their own sociocultural histories and constructions" (OYÉWÙMI 1997, 11). This supports the claim that feminist discourse has been shaped and dominated by Western perspectives, erasing the complexities and specificities of women's lives across different contexts and reinforcing stereotypes (see MOHANTY 1987). While it can be argued that Western gender discourse, over the years, has made attempts to escape this gendered framework, Oyěwùmí maintains that what remains an interesting question for [contemporary] feminism is "the degree to which feminism, despite its radical local stance, exhibits the same ethnocentric and imperialistic characteristics of the Western discourses it sought to subvert" (Oyěwùmí 1997, 13). She maintains that this gendered framework has also found its way into African feminist discourse. Unfortunately, many scholars have uncritically adopted this Western-gendered framework in their analysis of African societies. This both reinforces the universalization of gender as an oppositional category and marginalizes alternative frameworks that do not conform to this model.

In order to resist this, Edet (2018) proposes, in his contribution to the collection of essays on *African Philosophy and the Epistemic Marginalization of Women*, that serious attempts should be made for history to be written from the perspectives of women. Following his claim that female perspectives have been excluded from mainstream philosophy, Edet (2018, 157) maintains that this exclusion is not accidental, but rather, "is conscious and deliberate and reflects the fact that Western historiography bears a burden of male bias in the construction of historical knowledge." Locating the problem in historiography, he deploys the term 'her-story, "a pun on the word 'history' as part of a critique of conventional historiography which is traditionally written as history, that is, from the masculine point of view" (EDET 2018, 158). In the following section, I position my exploration of African women's traditional roles as a work of her-story. My aim is to reposition these roles as sites of knowledge that offer us alternative perspectives about the world. From an epistemological point of view, the search for knowledge and truth cannot prevail if our efforts are exclusivist. Therefore, in our endeavors for emancipation, we must be prepared to confront the struggles that shape the African condition, engaging with them not from a distance, but through active and conscious participation. The exploration will also give us insight into the functioning of African traditional societies and the role of women in maintaining social cohesion and harmony.

African Women's Traditional Knowledge Systems

Traditionally, in many African societies, gender was not a fundamental organising principle. As discussed in the above section, colonialism, for the most part, affected how many Africans organised themselves. This occurred especially through the imposition and influence of patriarchy. For Boris Bertolt (2018, 8), this can be seen through "the affirmation of the biological inferiority of women and, in some societies, the destruction of social relations has led to the subordination of women." In many traditional African societies, gender roles were established and allocated based on practical needs and beliefs (ONWUATUEGWU & NWAGU 2023). Gender roles were influenced, among other things, by the division of labour, religion, and the social organisation of communities. Gender relations in African societies were closely tied to people's historical and traditional ties to their respective communities (NGOHENGO 2021).

Contrary to the notion that traditional African societies were patriarchal, Ignatius Onwuatuegwu and Nkemjika Nwagu (2023) argue that gender roles in numerous traditional

communities were commonly established through the distribution of tasks influenced by biological differences and cultural norms. Given that many of the analyses on African gender relations already assume and operate within a binary patriarchal framework, many scholars are inclined to ascribe binary gender relations in all spheres of African social life. In this section, I attempt an alternative exploration of African women's traditional roles, which does not begin from the position that traditional African societies were patriarchal and, relatedly, that women in these societies were or are oppressed. Beginning with the role of mother, or what has now been theorised as the institution of motherhood, followed by the role of aunts, and lastly, women's roles in spirituality, I engage with these roles as sites of knowledge that can empower African women. What I seek to highlight in this exposition is that these roles were not constructed on the basis of gender as a hierarchical or oppositional category, but rather on social function, communal responsibility, and relational interdependence. In many traditional African societies, roles were allocated according to one's capacity to contribute to the well-being of the community, seniority within kinship structures, or spiritual endowment, rather than according to sexed identity. For instance, motherhood represented not merely a biological capacity to bear children, but also a moral and epistemological role centred on nurture, continuity, and communal care. Similarly, the roles of aunts and spiritual women were grounded in wisdom, experience, and relational authority; qualities that signified seniority and competence rather than gendered subordination.

This social logic reflects what Oyěwùmí (1997, 51) calls an "age–seniority principle," and what Nzegwu (2006) later identifies as a relational ordering of social life — systems that organise community through reciprocity and moral responsibility rather than through sexual difference. Within these frameworks, power and value derive from the role's contribution to social harmony rather than from its alignment with masculinity or femininity. As I will demonstrate shortly, the mother, the aunt, and the spiritual mediator each occupy positions of authority and knowledge not because of gendered designation, but because of their relational significance in sustaining the moral, social, and spiritual fabric of the community.

Motherhood

According to Remi Akujobi (2011, 1), "motherhood [is] ...sacred as well as a powerful spiritual component of the woman's life." Setting aside the rites, processes, and valorisation of motherhood, most traditional African societies value motherhood based on its capacity to give birth to new life. The mother figure is considered a representative of humanity (OYĚWÙMÍ 2016); mothers are considered the foundations of humanity. Nzegwu (2020, 43) explicates the value and importance of motherhood through the concept of "omumu — a generative principle of birthing and the power that derives therefrom". In the paper, she investigates how omumu power plays out in the conflict between Ikporo-Onitsha, a community-wide organisation of mothers and officials of the modern state of Onitsha, a city in Anambra State, Nigeria. According to Nzegwu:

> Ikporo-Onitsha operated on the higher principle that they birthed humanity. The moral power and law deriving therefrom meant that they had no reason to fear anyone. Their maxim was… regardless of a person's greatness, he or she emerged from the womb… The juridical implication they drew from this is that relationally, everyone is a child, and every child has a mother; every child is subject to the affection, love, and disciplinary imperatives of mothers' or *omumu* law. Hence, no child can supersede the mother. (NZEGWU 2020, 44)

In instances recounted by Nzegwu, including the dispute, sometime between 1974 and 1976, when Ikporo-Onitsha was in dispute with the East Central State government and the Resident

or City Manager over the control of Onitsha market, this organisation of mothers wielded their omumu power to negotiate the dispute. The state sought to take control of the revenue generated by the Onitsha market, but Ikporo-Onitsha resisted these efforts, arguing that they both infantilised the women and aimed to dispossess them of their rightful asset, since under Igbo law, mothers are the legitimate owners and custodians of the market (NZEGWU 2020). Notably, the state government in question was headed and administered by their sons and daughters; however, under the omumu law, they were duty-bound to take the concerns and counsel of Ikporo-Onitsha seriously. In many African societies, biological relations do not determine social relations. For instance, one would consider every other adult (usually around the same age as their biological parents) their parent and would afford them the same respect as they would their own parents.

On a slightly different note, Oyěwùmí (2016) provides an alternative reading of motherhood that dismisses gender as a defining attribute of the role of a mother. Drawing from her Yorùbá cultural context, she argues that "the category Ìyá (motherhood) is not originally a gender category" (OYĚWÙMÍ 2016, 2). In fact, she finds it problematic that Ìyá is usually glossed as the English word "mother" as this fails to not only capture the core meaning of the term but also reinforces the notion of gender as a binarily opposed category wherein the male is superior and dominant and the female is subordinated and inferior (OYĚWÙMÍ 2016, 58). In the book, [What Gender is Motherhood?][3], Oyěwùmí introduces the concept of "matripotency"— "supremacy of motherhood — as a lens through which to appreciate and understand the discounted Yorùbá epistemology." (OYĚWÙMÍ 2016, 2). "Matripotency describes the powers, spiritual and material, deriving from Ìyá'*s* procreative role." (OYĚWÙMÍ 2016, 58). Here, motherhood is grounded in social function, moral authority, and generative power, not on gendered identity. Although motherhood is often carried out by biological females, its significance in Yorùbá ontology does not stem from biology or a woman's anatomical features but rather from the moral, relational, and spiritual responsibilities that the role embodies. Thus, Ìyá refers to a socially and morally constituted position of authority, wisdom, and care within the community, one that is neither defined by gender identity nor reducible to female biology. The role remains distinct from male social roles by virtue of its generative and relational function

In essence, a mother is not valued because she is female but because she embodies the moral and generative principles[4] that sustain life and community. Both Nzegwu and Oyěwùmí's accounts present motherhood as one of the most important and fundamental institutions in the functioning of African traditional societies. Contrary to the view that mother is an oppositional category to father, their work seeks, on the one hand, to challenge and deconstruct Eurocentric colonial epistemologies imposed on African people, while, at the same time, foregrounding marginalized epistemologies. Motherhood is essentially the cornerstone of humanity, and, in many respects, its epistemological significance extends beyond the capacity to give birth in the literal sense.[5] Motherhood is also often attached to spirituality, a point which I will park for now and return to in the section titled "Women and Spirituality in Traditional African Societies", where I engage with spirituality with respect to women in traditional African societies. In the next section, I unpack the role of aunts. The

[3] She deliberately titles the book as a question to highlight the prevalent misconception in Western discourses that motherhood is a gendered category.

[4] This refers to the life-producing and life-sustaining capacities and values associated with motherhood — not just in a biological sense, but in a broader social, moral, and spiritual sense.

[5] It is perhaps important to note here that while motherhood, in the context of this discussion, is considered valuable, this is not to undermine the fact that in other instances, it has been used to oppress and victimize women.

discussion is anchored in the Basotho worldview, as I understand it through my own cultural experience.

The Role of Aunts

In traditional African societies, the family structure is often extended and deeply interconnected, emphasising the importance of relations beyond the immediate nuclear family. In this web of familial ties, aunts play a significant, multifaceted role that extends beyond that of mere relatives. For example, in Sesotho culture, as in many other African cultures, aunts play very important roles in the overall functioning of families and communities. Maternal aunts are referred to as bomangwane[6] and paternal aunts as borakgadi (THETSO 2020). The prefix "bo-" is used to denote the plural, which, in this case, is aunts. If referred to in the singular, it would be mangwane and rakgadi. Generally, bomangwane may also assume the role of mother, and borakgadi that of father; together they provide support in child-rearing and play a crucial role in children's emotional and social development. Aunts are instrumental in preserving traditions, instilling moral values, and imparting cultural and traditional knowledge to younger generations.

Although the role played by aunts is context-dependent, it is important to note that because familial relationships in African societies extend beyond the nuclear family structure, it is very likely that in traditional African societies, everyone would have had a present aunt regardless of whether they are raised on the paternal or maternal side of their family. Also, because roles in traditional African societies are not fixed (ONWUATUEGWU & NWAGU 2023), a person usually alternates between being a rakgadi and mangwane while, at the same time, being a mother, wife, grandmother, and so forth. Aunts often serve as primary caregivers, meaning that even in the absence of biological children, an aunt has the knowledge of how to care for and raise children. Moreover, because the aunt is not the biological parent and conditions are such that they tend to spend more time with their nieces and nephews, it would not be far-fetched to believe that their availability makes them more relatable, making it easier to offer guidance and support to children in their formative years. This aspect of the role became even more prominent during the colonial era due to rampant capitalism and forced migrant labor systems, which resulted in many parents having to leave their children in their traditional villages to seek employment in the cities.

In most societies, aunts are also custodians of culture. This is where the distinction between bomangwane and borakgadi above becomes relevant. For example, in lobola negotiations[7] of Basotho, the families of both the wife and husband are represented in the negotiations (i.e., both their maternal and paternal sides). However, on the maternal side, they are represented by the uncles (bomalome), while on the paternal side, they are represented by the paternal aunts (borakgadi) (SEMENYA 2014). In this process and the subsequent process of marriage, borakgadi play a crucial role. In the first instance, they are responsible for providing counsel to the bride before she is accompanied to the groom's home. According to David Semenya (2014), they are also responsible for relaying the purpose of the slaughtering ceremony to the members of the community and those who were not part of the lobola negotiations. This ritual is considered important for strengthening bonds between the two families and their ancestors.

Beyond their involvement in marriage processes, aunts also play important roles in conflict resolution, where conflicts may arise among family members, between clans, and often between the couple whom they have facilitated their marriage. While orality does not necessarily account for why aunts take on the role of mediators and peacemakers, it is

6 Sometimes written as bommangwane

7 The process if negotiating the bride price.

common practice, at least in the Basotho culture, for aunts to be called when there is conflict. Aunts are believed to possess the wisdom to resolve disputes and the skills to facilitate dialogue and reconciliation. I suppose, due to their frontline participation in traditional practices, they are believed to have insight into their family's history and, in some instances, family secrets. Therefore, their role as mediators is often strategic, as they may possess information that others lack. This usually occurs when it has been agreed that a man will marry another wife. The aunts often play an instrumental role in either convincing the wife to agree to this arrangement or in searching for a suitable woman for their brother. In other cases, a potentially suitable wife is sought in consultation and collaboration with the wife.

Women and Spirituality in Traditional African Societies

According to John Mbiti (1970, 97), "the spiritual world of African people is very densely populated with spiritual beings, spirits and the living dead." Spirituality is a fundamental aspect of the traditional social life of African people; it is embedded in their social fabric and is intricately connected to their existence. Given the importance of spirituality for African people, in this section, I explore the role and place of women in traditional African societies with regard to spirituality, continuing in my attempt to reposition African women positively through an empowering lens that shows not only their agency in traditional settings but also the knowledge embodied in these roles.

As alluded to above, motherhood is an institution with endogenous powers tied to its capacity to give birth. Recall that for Oyěwùmí (2016, 61), in Yorùbá culture, reproduction is a "fundamentally spiritual process in that Ìyá is the entity who incubates and gives birth to an already existing soul". Reference is also often made with respect to the kneeling position, which is assumed at the moment of birth (AKUJOBI 2011). This position also has spiritual connotations wherein the position is often conflated with "the moment of pre-earthly creation in which individuals choose their destiny (OYĚWÙMÍ 2016, 62). In many African societies, the mother, or Ìyá, in the case of Yorùbá, is perceived to have mystical powers, especially over their offspring (OYĚWÙMÍ 2016, 64). It is believed that mothers have the power to bless their children's lives as they can curse them.

The maternal principle is also crucial in allocating roles in the context of spirituality and indigenous religions in traditional African societies. In many societies, women could act as spiritual leaders, mediums, midwives, and traditional doctors (WANGILA 2009). While it is not clear in the discourse on African spirituality whether there is a distinction in the allocation of roles between men and women, what is clear is that women's birthing power makes them preferable for certain roles. For example, Mary Wangila (2009) maintains that most diviners or mediums were women because they were believed to possess the power of intuition. Furthermore, spiritual tasks that were concerned with fertility were often left to women in virtue of their capacity to bring new life into existence. In other cultures, such as the Embu in Kenya, women are said to be closely connected to the land and the environment (WANE & CHANDLER 2002). This is not because women are perceived to be inferior to men and should, therefore, work the land as established by the patriarchal colonial system. Rather, it is believed that women's birthing power can extend to the environment, thereby influencing crop growth. In the case of Embu, women are said to have vast knowledge of the environment, and in some instances, they also perform rituals in honour of the land and its produce (WANE & CHANDLER 2002). As custodians of the land, women were also tasked with passing down knowledge about how to care for the environment to subsequent generations, knowledge that, in my view, remains relevant in contemporary societies where environmental challenges are pressing. However, by undermining women and undervaluing their roles, we also undermine the knowledge embedded in these roles. This epistemic disregard is symptomatic of a broader colonial and patriarchal logic that separates humanity

from nature and devalues relational forms of knowledge. As Wane and Chandler (2002) observe, indigenous African women's environmental wisdom is grounded in an ethic of interdependence and reciprocity with the earth, an understanding that frames land not merely as a resource, but as a living entity that sustains communal life. Similarly, Wangila (2009) highlights that women's spiritual connection to fertility and the land situates them as mediators between human and ecological well-being. These insights reveal that women's ecological knowledge, rooted in relational and spiritual epistemologies, offers vital resources for more ethical and sustainable responses to contemporary environmental crises.

Beyond the Logic of Superiority and Inferiority

The analyses above demonstrate that the social roles occupied by African women, particularly in motherhood, kinship, and spirituality, cannot be coherently understood through the binary logic of superiority and inferiority. This logic, as Oyěwùmí (2016) and Lugones (2008) observe, emerged with the colonial/modern gender system, which introduced hierarchy as the fundamental ordering principle of social life. Within that system, maleness became associated with universality, rationality, and authority, while femaleness was constructed as its deficient other. Such a schema not only alienated African societies from their indigenous ways of knowing but also redefined gender along colonial lines of domination and subordination.

As the ethnophilosophical and cultural accounts explored in this paper illustrate, traditional African worldviews did not organise social relations through this binary logic. In African ontology, difference does not imply inequality; rather, it reflects complementarity and functional interdependence. This logic of superiority and inferiority can be argued to be both epistemically and ethically flawed. Epistemically, it narrows our understanding of knowledge and agency by associating value with dominance. Ethically, it undermines the communal foundation upon which African societies were built. It measures the value of social roles against a masculinised ideal of authority and, in doing so, renders invisible the moral and intellectual labour of women.

What is required, then, is a theoretical shift from a hierarchy-based ontology to a relational one and from what Nzegwu (2020, 42) calls "the masculinist social order" to a female-affirming and life-affirming order. This is not to invert the hierarchy but to disassemble it altogether. To theorise gender in the African context is to theorise interdependence, not opposition, and complementarity, not competition. As Edet (2018, 157) argues, a genuine reconstruction of African thought demands that we write "her-story" alongside "his-story," thereby restoring the balance and completeness of our historical and philosophical narratives. The African worldview thus provides an intellectual foundation for moving beyond the colonial logic of superiority and inferiority toward a relational understanding of gender grounded in harmony, reciprocity, and mutual flourishing.

Conclusion

This paper explores alternative readings of African women's traditional roles as sites of knowledge. I undertake this against the background of a Euro-colonial gendered epistemological framework, which perceives women as inferior to men. Heeding the call to construct female-affirming societies and to write history from the perspectives of African women, I offer positive readings of the institution of motherhood, the role of aunts, and women's roles in spirituality. The interrogation also highlighted some of the knowledge embedded in these occupations, which could easily be missed if we view these roles from a gendered framework—one that begins its enquiry with the proposition that women are inferior. Historically, African women have occupied powerful roles; they contributed to the well-being and functioning of their societies and have been instrumental in maintaining

harmony and social cohesion. However, as history would have it, the social, structural, and epistemological organisation of African societies was disrupted by colonialism. Efforts to restore African people's traditional knowledge systems should be taken seriously. In doing so, we will not only contribute to an ethical and epistemic restorative project for African societies but also help reaffirm the place of women in society.

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