The Intersection of Traditional African Matriarchy, Neo-Colonialism, and Gender Equality: A Decolonizing Perspective and Collaborative Approach for Societal Transformation

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the enduring influence of colonialism in the form of neo-colonialism, particularly its disproportionate impact on women, constituting a dual tragedy. Focusing on indigenous perspectives, the study emphasizes the decolonization of gender as a prerequisite for achieving true gender equality. Through a re-evaluation of matriarchy in traditional Africa, the roles of both genders are illuminated, drawing attention to enduring values that warrant deliberate integration into contemporary society. The mistreatment of widows, reminiscent of traditional practices, persists in present-day Africa, highlighting the urgent need for collaborative efforts to liberate women from societal oppression. The integration of matriarchal principles with contemporary democratic values is proposed as a solution to cultivate a society that upholds equality for both men and women.

Keywords: Colonialism, Neo-colonialism, Gender Decolonization, Matriarchy, Indigenous Perspectives, Gender Equality, Traditional African Values, Widows' Rights and Societal Oppression.

INTRODUCTION

Scholars have proposed theories about the existence of matriarchal and patriarchal stages in human society, with Henry Maine and Bachofen arguing for the former and the latter. These theories sought to establish a universal pattern of development applicable to all societies, aligning with colonial and capitalist agendas. Feminism emerged as a response to challenge patriarchal norms, aiming to demonstrate that structures and institutions are founded on masculinist assumptions and a patriarchal framework. However, contemporary feminism often overlooks the diverse experiences of women worldwide, particularly in Africa, where they face gender and racial discrimination.

Many scholars now believe that humanity has been divided into two distinct geographical cradles, each favoring the development of either patriarchal or matriarchal systems. These systems encounter, sometimes clash, and coexist in different societies, with instances of superimposition and coexistence. This perspective aligns closely with the understanding of these dynamics in traditional African societies, where patriarchy and matriarchy are not viewed as opposing forces but as complementary elements. This research focuses on elucidating the concept of matriarchy in traditional Africa and its relevance to contemporary feminism by clarifying key concepts used in the research.

In order to establish a solid foundation for this research, it is imperative to provide precise definitions for key concepts. Firstly, patriarchy, as elucidated by Encyclopedia Britannica, denotes a theoretical social structure where absolute authority over the family unit is held by the father or male elder. In a broader context, this authority extends to one or more men, such as a council, exercising control over the entire community. The theories of biological evolution proposed by Charles Darwin served as a basis for 19th-century scholars, notably [1], who developed a theory of unilinear cultural evolution. This theory posited a progression of human social organization from animalistic sexual promiscuity to matriarchy, ultimately culminating in patriarchy, which is portrayed as the zenith of human social organization.

Moreover, as observed by [2], the term "matriarchy" was employed in the nineteenth century to describe a hypothetical society where women held leadership and governance positions. Nevertheless, contemporary anthropologists unanimously reject the claim that any society has ever operated under such a framework. [3] defines matriarchy as a society in which women, rather than men, hold legal authorities pertaining to family affairs, such as control over property, inheritance, marriage, and household matters. Scholars like [3] and [4] argue that despite myths

about matriarchy, authentic matriarchal societies never existed in history. This study aligns with [5] in asserting that the focus should shift from the existence of a genuine matriarchy to understanding the political influence and social status available to women in ancient and pre-colonial African societies.

Lastly, feminism encompasses a spectrum of political and social movements and ideologies rooted in the belief that women should have equal rights, opportunities, and power as men. The Oxford English Dictionary defines feminism as the advocacy of women's rights based on the theory of equality of the sexes. [6] emphasizes that the concept of patriarchy, as a historical phenomenon contingent on time and place, forms the basis for a feminist critique of male supremacy throughout history. [7] defines feminism as a methodology to safeguard women against the entrenched patriarchal system, aiming to challenge and replace gender inequality. Contemporary feminism comprises various movements, such as radical feminism, socialist feminism, Marxist feminism, the Lesbian separatist movement, and womanism feminism, all united in advocating for women's rights based on gender equality.

Matriarchy in Traditional Africa

Debates surrounding matriarchy in traditional Africa necessitate a nuanced understanding of its existence and definition. Traditional African societies saw women playing significant roles, with the contemporary notions of women's liberation and feminism being irrelevant in those contexts. The study of women's roles in traditional Africa often divides into two approaches: one focusing on the roles of royal and aristocratic women, and the other, as adopted here, examining the overall status and political influence granted to women in these societies. [5] underscores the importance of understanding "the political power and range of social statuses available to women in ancient and later pre-colonial African societies."

It is crucial to redefine the concept of "matriarchy" away from the Eurocentric interpretation prevalent in the 18th and 19th centuries, which viewed it as diametrically opposed to patriarchy. In traditional Africa, patriarchy and matriarchy are viewed as interdependent and mutually reinforcing facets of society. This perspective contrasts sharply with the Western viewpoint, which portrays patriarchy and matriarchy as conflicting and diametrically opposed, with patriarchy considered the pinnacle of civilization and matriarchy seen as a symbol of primitiveness. Many scholars, particularly African feminists, argue that in traditional Africa, patriarchy and matriarchy coexist, challenging the prevailing Western narrative.

[8] Asserts that the conceptualization of gender ideology in traditional Africa is rooted in the binary opposition between the mkpuke, a matricentric unit focused on the female mother, and the obi, a male-centered ancestral house. This gendered structure, viewed through a Levi-Straussian lens, reflects a broader contest between the moral kinship ideology of motherhood and the legal force of patriarchy within the social organization and politics of Nnobi. Some African scholars attribute views on patriarchy and matriarchy to Western influence, prompting [5] to advocate for a liberation from Eurocentric biases in studying matriarchy in traditional Africa. Consequently, the relationship between patriarchy and matriarchy aligns with the principle of complementarity, emphasizing their interdependence.

In traditional Africa, gender distinction plays a crucial role in the organizational structure of leadership, delineating areas where women and men exert authority. The roles of men and women are perceived as complementary and essential for societal stability. Contrary to the feminist notion of gender capabilities, leadership roles in traditional Africa are assigned based on inherent gender, and the roles assigned to women are within the context of matriarchal leadership.

The question arises: Does matriarchy in traditional Africa imply gender equality? [9] argue that matriarchal patterns represent gender-egalitarian societies, challenging the patriarchal norm. However, [10] disputes this, asserting that traditional African society is not egalitarian, with women akin to children and subjected to male discipline. While acknowledging flaws in ancestral practices, it is evident that the modern understanding of gender equality doesn't align with traditional African culture and history.

Some argue that traditional African society positions men as superior to women, reflected in the belief in natural hierarchies. This perspective supports the subordination of women, limiting their rights and property ownership. The research aims to delve into traditional African beliefs to understand the perceived superiority of men.

Another aspect of matriarchy in traditional Africa involves a dual-sex political system where a man's achievements are shared with his chief wife or wives. This dual-sex characteristic extends from family to community levels, as seen in Akan political organization and the Western Igbo monarchies. While men are generally overseers in family and community affairs, the research emphasizes the central role of the mkpuke in matriarchy, where women exert influence as wives and mothers. The intricate dynamics, such as women identifying with their fathers' names and naming children, underscore the paramount position of the mother in traditional African philosophy.

Dimensions of Matriarchy in Traditional Africa

Having explored the essence of matriarchy in traditional Africa, it is imperative to delve into its multifaceted dimensions, often not immediately apparent. The economic dimension is paramount, with women holding significant roles in driving the community's economy, starting from the family unit. [8] underscores the matricentric core of matriarchy, the Mkpuke, as the smallest kinship and production unit. This unit exemplifies how matriarchy influences the production, distribution, and consumption of goods, with women primarily responsible for agriculture and market activities.

Furthermore, the social dimension of matriarchy is deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of traditional African societies. Mothers, symbolized by the Igbo concept "Nne ka," hold a supreme status, emphasizing the superior influence of matriarchal heritage. Socialization is anchored in matriarchy, with women exerting significant influence over marriage, cultural festivals, rites of passage, and title ceremonies. Maternity is highly valued, reflected in children often bearing their mother's name or that of their maternal uncle.

In the political dimension, women wielded power in pre-colonial Ankole, contributing through wise women councils and women's courts. Women actively participated in family affairs, holding equal status to their husbands. Daughters of the land (umuada) played a significant role, surpassing the influence of married men's organizations, functioning as the ultimate authority in dispute resolution.

The spiritual dimension introduces the Earth Goddess (Ala), a female entity crucial for maintaining peace and unity within the community. [11] highlight that in matriarchy, divinity is immanent, with the universe regarded as a feminine divine entity. The Earth Goddess safeguards feminine values, and violations of motherhood are considered grave offenses against the deity, leading to sanctions.

Relevance of Traditional Matriarchy to Contemporary Feminism

The enduring presence of traditional African matriarchy in contemporary Africa offers an opportunity to explore its contributions to gender equality. Traditional African dualism allows matriarchy and patriarchy to coexist as complementary principles, presenting a nuanced understanding. Unlike Western patriarchy imposed through colonialism, traditional African matriarchy embraces complementarity rather than strict equivalence in roles.

In contemporary feminism, embracing the principle of complementarity could revolutionize the perception of gender differences. Recognizing the distinct yet interrelated principles of matriarchy and patriarchy would enable feminism to propose its own principles, fostering interaction, dialogue, and cooperation between genders [12]-[16].

The family unit in traditional Africa, governed by matriarchy, serves as the cornerstone. Matriarchy emphasizes equity in roles, acknowledging that men and women may have different strengths and attributes. Women's empowerment can be rooted in the family, where women actively take charge and contribute significantly. Acknowledging and valuing the fundamental role of motherhood is crucial for the family unit and society.

Matriarchy in traditional Africa also serves as a custodian of nature and protector of the environment. The powerful goddess-based religion and moral principles of love and respect contribute to environmental conservation. Embracing the earth as a nurturing entity, as observed in traditional matriarchal societies, can significantly contribute to both feminism and modern society's efforts in environmental conservation.

Evaluation

Despite the official end of colonialism in various parts of the world, especially in Africa, its lingering influence persists in the form of neo-colonialism. This enduring legacy disproportionately affects women, constituting a dual tragedy for them. Indigenous women, in particular, bear the brunt of these lingering effects. Consequently, achieving gender equality necessitates addressing the decolonization of gender, with a foundational emphasis on indigenous perspectives. The re-evaluation of matriarchy in traditional Africa, as undertaken in this research, serves as a crucial step in illuminating the roles of both genders in that historical context. Given that certain traditional African values endure today, deliberate efforts should be made to embody these values, especially those related to matriarchy, in contemporary society.

The mistreatment of widows, echoing practices from traditional societies, continues to persist in present-day Africa. To rectify this issue, collaborative efforts from all stakeholders are imperative to liberate women from societal oppression, abuse, subjugation, and objectification. This requires the integration of matriarchal principles with contemporary democratic values, fostering a societal ethos that champions equality for both men and women.

CONCLUSION

The research underscores the persistent influence of colonialism through neo-colonialism, particularly impacting women as a dual tragedy. The call for gender decolonization, rooted in indigenous perspectives, emphasizes the need for a paradigm shift. By re-evaluating matriarchy in traditional Africa, the study highlights enduring values that can contribute to contemporary gender equality efforts. The mistreatment of widows, an ongoing issue, demands collaborative action to free women from oppression, aligning matriarchal principles with democratic values. Ultimately, the integration of traditional values into modern societal frameworks emerges as a crucial step towards fostering true equality between men and women.

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