

## **On Divinity and Marginalization: Western Christianity and African Spirituality as Impetuses of Gender In/Equality**

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In societies with dominant religions, it is not uncommon to find aspects of religion woven into their politics and social structures. Many African civilizations feature references to divinity and spirituality prominently throughout their politics and sciences, even assigning divine significance to various aspects of life such as war, motherhood, and death.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, many Western societies demonstrate similar religiosity to the extent that renown political theorist and economist, Karl Marx, referred to religion as the “opium of the people.”<sup>2</sup> Since religion plays such an important role in these societies on a personal and political level, it follows that these belief systems would also impact social ordering. Though many forms of African spirituality and Western religion are similarly influential within their respective civilizations, the ways both societies were shaped by their religions reflect the dramatic differences between the belief systems. One of the most striking of these differences is their treatment of gender, as demonstrated in their

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<sup>1</sup> Molefi Kete Asante, *The History of Africa: The Quest for Eternal Harmony* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 1.

treatment of women. While Western Christianity calls for the subordination of women to their husbands and lacks female divinity, women appear prominently in many African spiritual systems. Similarly, while Western women have spent centuries being oppressed, pre-colonial African women were generally respected members of society. The correlation between the positioning of women in national belief systems and the way women exist in those regions suggests that religion is a crucial factor in social ordering in more strongly religious societies. Therefore the presence of powerful women in African spirituality aided in upholding similar respect for women in their societies while the subordination of women in Western Christianity contributed to oppression of women in the West.

In many regions of Africa, spirituality and divinity were foundational to the people’s epistemologies from explaining everyday occurrences such as the movement of celestial bodies and the ebb and flow of the Nile through Ancient Egypt or “Kemet”<sup>3</sup> to grander realities such as the origins of man among the Igbo.<sup>4</sup> In Kemet, for example, arguably one of the most important roles religion played was the legitimation of their political scheme.<sup>5</sup> Believed to be

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<sup>3</sup> Molefi Kete Asante, *The History of Africa: The Quest for Eternal Harmony* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 26.

<sup>4</sup> Toyin Falola, *Africa: African Cultures and Societies Before 1885* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2000), 75.

<sup>5</sup> Molefi Kete Asante, *The History of Africa: The Quest for Eternal Harmony* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 23, 27.

endowed with divinity, each pharaoh or “per-aa” was able to exercise immense influence over the nation with often unquestioned authority. In fact, even the rulers’ names were often changed to reflect their new status as gods upon their coronation. Meanwhile, the African peoples of Jamaica demonstrate their deep connection with spirituality through their grammatical structure. The language commonly known as Jamaican patois lacks a copula verb, which means that subjects and modifiers immediately follow each other. This demonstrates the societal belief in the spiritual connectedness of subjects and the ability of beings to be spoken into existence. To Jamaicans, this means that “being” verbs become redundant.<sup>6</sup> This is evidence of the significance of divinity and spirituality in even the most fundamental aspects of African life.

Across the continent Africans attributed various phenomena and ideas to different divine figures, many believing the universe was split into a masculine and feminine realm.<sup>7</sup> The upper realm was associated with masculinity and included “virility, lightning, fire, heat, fierce animals, birds of prey, sickness, and the color red.”<sup>8</sup> The lower realm was considered feminine and included “fertility, earth, water, cold, domestic animals, healing, and the color

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<sup>6</sup> Tristan Samuels, “A Invokative Pronoun Dis,” YouTube video, 15:59, October 17, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HD5OsUOQ61w>

<sup>7</sup> Toyin Falola, *Africa: African Cultures and Societies Before 1885* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2000), 80-81.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

white.”<sup>9</sup> An example of a goddess from the lower realm is the Yoruba goddess, Osun, who controlled the flow of the Osun River and represented fertility and female sexuality.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Aset, the Kemetic goddess of motherhood, healing, protector of the throne, and guardian of ma’at,<sup>11</sup> was believed to control the flooding of the Nile, filling it with her tears for her slain husband, Asar.<sup>12</sup> Even though the upper and lower realms were associated with gendered characteristics, male gods were known to operate below and vice versa. Likewise, men often worshipped goddesses while women worshipped gods. Furthermore, the public understood these realms as complementary and represented the complementarity of the interconnected parts of the universe. As a result, this binary conception of the universe contributed to the perception of the interdependence of men and women in society.

According to renowned historian, Dr. John Henrik Clarke, while modern Western societies are burdened with issues of gender equality, African societies never questioned the natural equality of the sexes:

“Things that white women are debating about now, Africans never debated about... Nobody was fool

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-81.

<sup>11</sup> Jennifer Williams, “From Aset to Jesus: The History of the Goddess Aset in Ancient Kemet From Circa 3000 BCE Until the Removal of Feminine Salvation Circa 400 CE,” *Journal of Black Studies* 45, 2 (2014): 102-124.

<sup>12</sup> Molefi Kete Asante, *The History of Africa: The Quest for Eternal Harmony* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 26.

enough to debate whether a mother was equal... This is why the Africans had female gods earlier. You make a woman a god then debate whether she's equal?"<sup>13</sup>

The argument here is that not only does the presence of prominent goddesses in African spirituality aid in perpetuating the idea of gender equality, it also suggests that this fact was never in question from the start. For a people to create a spiritual system which features complementary gods and goddesses, the implication is that the people themselves already understood gender as such. Therefore gender and sex complementarity was taken for granted throughout Africa.

Other researchers of African civilization echo Dr. Clarke's assertion of naturally understood complementarity amongst African peoples. For example, Oyèrónké Oyewùmí, a prominent researcher of African civilization, says in her seminal work pertaining to the Igbo people, *The Invention of Women*, that "the woman question is a Western-derived issue... It is an imported problem not indigenous to the Yorúbà."<sup>14</sup> Not only was there an inherent recognition of sex equality in African societies, but sex was irrelevant to the social hierarchy. As a result sex was never given

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<sup>13</sup> Dr. John Henrik Clarke, "Dr. John Henrik Clarke | Africa: Empires of Ghana & Mali," YouTube video, 1:41:08, February 16, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jJ411sgwkvU>.

<sup>14</sup> Oyèrónké Oyewùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), ix.

the formal social category of "man" or "woman," meaning until the arrival of the West, the Yoruba were without gender. Instead, males and females existed and related simply as humans. Some Igbo peoples also recognized gender as separate from sex, meaning people were able to socially operate as men or women irrespective of their sex.<sup>15</sup> In many regions, women were also able to exercise economic independence, possessing jobs and fulfilling a variety of roles such as warriors, farmers,<sup>16</sup> and property-owners.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, even though the majority of African women operated in the home while the men worked and provided for the family, women were still respected as vital members of society.<sup>18</sup> Therefore African women's abilities to fulfill a wide range of social roles without sacrificing their social standing reflects the ability of African goddesses to command respect both in realms designated as feminine and masculine.

There are also numerous instances of African women operating in positions of political power across the continent. The land of Meroe, for example, was led by

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<sup>15</sup> Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1987), 4.

<sup>16</sup> Toyin Falola, *Africa: African Cultures and Societies Before 1885* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2000), 53-54.

<sup>17</sup> Jennifer Williams, "From Aset to Jesus: The History of the Goddess Aset in Ancient Kemet From Circa 3000 BCE Until the Removal of Feminine Salvation Circa 400 CE," *Journal of Black Studies* 45, 2 (2014): 102-124.

<sup>18</sup> Toyin Falola, *Africa: African Cultures and Societies Before 1885* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2000), 52.

female rulers known as Candaces, or “Kandakes,” for over five hundred years.<sup>19</sup> These women led the nation independent of male assistance. Even when they had husbands, their spouses were either equal in power or subordinate, but the Kandakes never deferred to them. Some were even known internationally as fiercely intimidating warriors which, according to Kemetic understandings of gender, women were also recognized as potentially “ferocious.”<sup>20</sup> Another immensely powerful female position was that of the “queen mother” which existed in numerous African societies and often included the power to select the next king or take the throne for herself.<sup>21</sup> The per-aa, Hatshepsut, is an example of one such queen mother who ultimately crowned herself not as a queen, but a female king.<sup>22</sup> However, while the powerful and dynamic presence of goddesses in African spirituality was reflected in their societies where women were respected and held positions of influence, Western Christian civilizations imposed a much more rigid and marginalizing system of sex and gender upon its women.

Just as spirituality undergirded African societies, Christianity was the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Lana Troy, “The Ancient Egyptian Queenship as an Icon of the State,” *Journal of Gender Studies in Antiquity* 3, 1 (2001): 1-24.

<sup>21</sup> Toyin Falola, *Africa: African Cultures and Societies Before 1885* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2000), 52.

<sup>22</sup> Molefi Kete Asante, *The History of Africa: The Quest for Eternal Harmony* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 44.

bedrock of Western civilization for many years. As a result, Christian concepts can be found in many Western ideas, guiding everything from science where many regarded the entire universe as God’s handiwork, to politics where explicit references to “God-given rights” are commonplace.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, before the West largely abandoned its monarchical governmental structure, the “divine right of kings” legitimized most thrones and freed kings of accountability to man-made laws. This positioned many kings as second only to God.<sup>24</sup> Even after switching to a democratic republic, presidents in the United States still swear to uphold the office on a Christian Bible during their inauguration, thus continuing to insert God into the executive office albeit ritualistically. Western education systems, too, have historically included heavy religious overtones. Only recently did the United States, for example, prohibit public schools from engaging in organized religious practices.<sup>25</sup> Religious influence can even be found in Western justifications for war and colonization which frequently occurred under the banner of the cross and included references to divine providence and

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “The Declaration of Independence,” National Archives and Records, accessed May 7, 2019.

<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>

<sup>24</sup> Adam Augustyn et. al., eds. “Divine right of kings: Political Doctrine,” Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed December 13, 2018.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/divine-right-of-kings>

<sup>25</sup> “Engel v. Vitale,” Oyez, accessed December 12, 2018. <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1961/468>.

proselytization up to the late nineteenth century.<sup>26</sup> All of these are examples of the incredible influence religion has had on Western epistemology.

As previously stated, a people's religion not only impacts their beliefs but lends insight into the ideas they possessed before the creation of their religious systems. Even allowing for the divine inspiration or "God-breathed" origins of Christianity, the resulting interpretations and edits of the Word have been filtered through Western cultural understandings and motives, which provides invaluable cultural context. This process becomes especially telling when considering the possibility that the foundation of Christianity itself stems from the Kemetic legend of Asar, Aset, and Heru, whom many believed were the original inspiration for what later became the Christian Trinity. However, while the Kemetic trio features the divine mother, Aset, in a position of prominence, the Western Trinity has no such figure. This suggests that recognition of feminine significance was purposely written out of Christianity, presumably in order to better align the religion with the morals of the people.

The Westernization of Christianity began in 325 CE during the reign of the Roman emperor, Constantine I, who is credited for beginning the process of

creating the modern biblical canon.<sup>27</sup>

Leading up to this time, Christianity was practiced widely across Africa and Europe with people referring to countless religious texts in their worship. Among these texts were some attributed to women such as Mary, the virgin mother of Jesus. However, in 325 CE the Nicene Council led by Constantine I decided to exclude this along with many other passages in his effort to establish a universal Bible.<sup>28</sup> Nearly sixty years later the Council of Constantinople canonized the concept of the Trinity wherein the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist as equal parts of the one true God, officially removing Mary, the Western equivalent of Aset, from the status of prominence or divinity.<sup>29</sup> With each formalization of Christianity by the West, the role of women in the narrative was further reduced to that of nameless wives and mothers, often with little to no importance beyond their utility to their husbands and sons.

It would be unfair to argue that women solely appear in the Bible as nameless or male-centered. For example, Queen Esther, the only woman with a book attributed to her in the Bible, is heralded for her strength and faith. Likewise, Mary, Mother of Jesus; Ruth; and Anna are also recognized as champions of faith, patience, and obedience to God. There are countless

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<sup>26</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The World and Africa: Color and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 318.

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<sup>27</sup> Adam Augustyn et. al., eds. "Council of Nicaea: Christianity [325]," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed December 12, 2018.

<https://www.britannica.com/event/Council-of-Nicaea-Christianity-325>.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

more examples of biblical women who deserve recognition for their feats of miraculous courage and perseverance in the Bible. However, despite these appearances of powerful women, the Bible explicitly situates them beneath men in the social hierarchy. To start, the Bible follows a patrilineal system which erases all but five women from the ancestral line of Jesus.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the book of Genesis condemns women not only to the pain of childbirth but also to subservience to their husbands as punishment for their original sin in the Garden of Eden, meaning that biblically, no matter the context, any married women must submit to the will of her husband.<sup>31</sup> Just as Dr. Clarke argues that a society which makes women gods cannot simultaneously marginalize its women, it follows that a society based on a religion which features a Trinity of divine men and requires the submission of women to men would proceed to marginalize its female members.

Women's autonomy is still a relatively new concept in many parts of the West, including the United States and Britain. In both the US and UK, for example, women were not allowed to own property, earn a salary, or enter into contracts without their husbands' or fathers' permission until the late nineteenth century.

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<sup>30</sup> "Matthew 1," Bible Gateway, accessed December 12, 2018. <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+1&version=NLT>.

<sup>31</sup> "Genesis 3," bible Gateway, accessed December 12, 2018. <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=genesis+3&version=NLT>.

<sup>32</sup> Until the 1960s, women were still largely relegated to the domestic sphere. However, contrary to African women who worked in the homes while enjoying the respect of the men in their lives, Western women continued to be regarded as the weaker, intellectually inferior gender. It was for these reasons that for many years women were either legally or socially barred from obtaining positions of power in government, working in math and science, or possessing physically demanding jobs. This is also why the history of great women in the West is marked not by women excelling in socially endorsed positions of power or influence, but instead succeeding *despite* their gender.

Lists of women defying social expectations dominate the Western conception of what constitutes a "strong woman." Furthermore, when Western women do venture into roles traditionally held by men, the English language reflects this breach in expectation by taking special note of their womanhood in respect to the position; terms such as "woman pilot," "woman president," and "professor emerita" are examples of this phenomenon.

<sup>33</sup> In Western societies, womanhood has historically functioned as a social handicap in many regards. It has taken consistent

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<sup>32</sup> "A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774 - 1875," Law Library of Congress, accessed December 12, 2018. [https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/awhhtml/awlaw3/propertry\\_law.html](https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/awhhtml/awlaw3/propertry_law.html).

<sup>33</sup> Oyèrónké Oyewùní, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), xiii.

social pressure over the course of several decades for women to gain the rights they currently enjoy. This constant struggle is what gave birth to Western waves of feminism.

Because the context of Western gender is one of opposition rather than complementarity, feminism presupposes conflict between men and women as well as the global subordination of women.<sup>34</sup> Though inapplicable to most African societies, this assumed gender conflict is natural in the context of Western Christianity. In Genesis chapter three during the immediate aftermath of Adam and Eve's disobedience of God in the Garden of Eden, God says to Eve, "...you will desire to control your husband, but he will rule over you,"<sup>35</sup> thus setting the stage for a natural, inevitable tension between men and women as a result of the Fall. Therefore, a society founded on these teachings will regard this contention not as an aberration, but rather the predictable unfolding of a divine ordinance. Furthermore, in the context of the overall absence of female authority figures in Scripture, as well as later verses which call for the subordination of women to their husbands, the necessitation of Western feminism is unsurprising.

In theistic societies religion is a crucial factor in social ordering. The

powerful presentation of women in African spiritual systems is not only indicative of African attitudes towards females in the society, but also aided in their perpetuation via the omnipresence of spirituality in daily African life and thought. As Clarke argues, it is impossible for a society which worships goddesses to simultaneously disrespect its own women. Meanwhile, the West built its political and social foundation upon a belief system which both lacked divine women and framed gender conflict and female subordination as inevitable results of The Fall. Therefore, as Christianity was used to guide the creation of new governments and societies, women continued to mirror the positions of their biblical counterparts, forced into the margins of the national narratives. In both of these instances, religion serves not only as evidence of pre-existing attitudes towards the social significance of sex, but also predictors of future social structures. Contrasting African religion and societies with those of the West strongly suggests that depictions of gender roles in dominant religions can not only serve as evidence of pre-existing ideas towards sex in a society, but a predictor of future social attitudes towards sex and gender as well.

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<sup>34</sup> Valethia Watkins, *Beyond Feminism: Some Theoretical Guideposts Toward Examining Women in African Contexts*, 64.

<sup>35</sup> "Genesis 3," Bible Gateway, accessed December 13, 2018.

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