Confounding or Empowering Women through Non-Formal and Informal Education? Religious Leaders in Ibadan and Lokoja, Nigeria, on knowledge that Matters

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Abstract: Since: patriarchal norms prevail in the teachings and practices of new religions in Nigeria; religions carry messages of rewards and punishment; the religions have become cultural systems; and power preserves itself, women who make meaning of life by balancing spirituality rooted in the religions with critical reflections on experiences are usually unable to transform their gender identities and realise their full potential.

Although Nigerians practise a variety of religions, Christianity and Islam predominate. Traditional religions trail these two, and others follow. In many parts of Nigeria, Christianity and Islam have fused with traditional cultures, obliterating traditional religions in such places, with most adherents and custodians of traditional religions being openly Christians and or Muslims. Religion pervades the private and public lives of Nigerians and scholars have drawn attention to the increasing phenomenon of Christian and Islamic fundamentalism (I-IDEA, 2001). Apart from the spiritual benefits that people get from being religious, the practice of religion is one of the processes of socialization, and religions are cultural systems; they are therefore powerful educational agents. Religious beliefs and practices are taught and learned through informal and non-formal education, and whether or not they appear in the curricula of formal educational provisions, they are almost always present as hidden curriculum. In view of the fact that the social position of women is low and patriarchal values are explicit in the religions that predominate in Nigeria, one is concerned about how religion expands or constrains women’s ability to participate fully as Nigerian citizens.

From my experience of participation in the provision of non-formal education for young adults in tertiary institutions, I know that young women display a lot of lethargy around seeking knowledge outside classrooms, such that they are extremely reluctant to attend seminars, workshops and symposia that focus on secular issues. However, prayer meetings, fellowships and large-scale revivalist events attract hundreds of female students. Religions, according to Bowker (1997), “are a constant force for change, despite the fact that they are also, as systems, necessarily conservative” (p.xxi). Given this background, the questions that I tried to answer in this paper are: 1) What do female and male religious leaders in two state capitals in Nigeria (Ibadan in Oyo State, South-Western Nigeria and Lokoja in Kogi State in the Middle Belt) teach women about: their roles in the private and public spheres of life and in civic-political life; their responses to experiences of violence; their identities and how formal education should impact their lives? and 2) to what extent do women in these two locations take the teachings of religious leaders to heart and accept them as knowledge? Persons who wish to: foster learning; transform unequal relations of power and women’s identities; and help women reach their full potential must understand the processes that construct women’s identities and how women internalise the constructions.
The Methodology

This is an empirical research, and my approach is a phenomenological reading of the lived experiences of women in Ibadan and Lokoja. The study proceeds from the liberatory and the gender models of the feminist pedagogy framework (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999), as it takes account of the character of the teaching-learning process in religion and religious practices, and how this affects the formation of consciousness, and the cumulative effect of this on female identity. Interviews were held with 10 female and male religious leaders representing the three main religions in Nigeria – Christianity, Islam and Traditional Religion. They are, from Lokoja: Bishop O. (Christian, male); Mrs E. (Christian, female); Ulamaa (Muslim, male); Amirah A. (Muslim, female). And from Ibadan, Amirah B. (Muslim, female); Mrs T. (Christian, female); Bishop P. (Christian, male); Oni Sango (female priest of the Yoruba Sango deity); Aaare (a male traditional religionist cum ruler); and Professor W., one of the women that the Church of Nigeria, (Anglican Communion) has refused to ordain. Lengthy and open-ended questionnaires were administered to: 42 women and 29 men who work in formal work settings as journalists, teachers, lawyers and civil servants; 46 female and 32 male students in two institutions of higher learning; 56 semi-literate and 39 female apprentices who work and are training in the informal/non-formal economy and education. I explored the Appreciative Inquiry ‘4-D’ cycle in 5 focused group discussions held with all categories of women in Lokoja and female apprentices in Ibadan, and observed the interactions of 3 female religious leaders with adherents. Data was collected in the second half of the year 2004. Except otherwise indicated, I will hence refer to women in formal work and female students as highly literate women; women in the informal sector and female apprentices as semi-literate women and male workers and students as highly literate men.

Religious Leaders On: Roles of Women in the Private Sphere, in Religion and in Civic-Political Affairs; Women’s Identity; Violence Against Women and Women’s Education

All Christian and Muslim leaders indicated that in the private sphere, women should take responsibility for the care of children, husbands and the extended family. Ulamaa indicated that women do not have to do household chores; they can work, but they do not have to contribute to the financial upkeep of the family because a man is the breadwinner, and the woman caregiver. Amirah A. asserted that it is culture that says the man is breadwinner and the wife caregiver. All female leaders and Bishop P. called on women to be submissive to their husbands. Mrs T. said: “the beauty of a woman is actually in submission…female achievers usually forget that the beauty of their achievements is having a cover over their heads and the cover is their husbands. The beauty of a woman is submitting to the authority of a husband even if the authority is a dummy.” Concerning the roles of women in leadership positions in the religions, male Christian leaders said women were not leaders in their Churches because of Nigerian culture. Mrs E. cited herself as an example of a female Christian leader who had had no problems with men in the 19 Churches that she oversaw as district head and the one she led directly. Female and male Muslim leaders said women cannot lead a congregation of men and women because they are unclean during menstruation, and they could attract and distract men with their voices and beauty. Amirah A. said there should be no female Imams and added firmly: “that is the rule and we all understand it”. Oni Sango said there are female priestesses, supporters and worshippers of Sango, and women are actually in the majority.

Bishop O. and Mrs E. insisted that women have to be more involved in politics at decision making levels. Bishop O. blamed culture for the level of women’s participation in politics and urged women to take a cue from Nigerian women who had led and mobilised women in the past. Bishop P. said women should participate in politics if they are led and it will not affect their family. Mrs T.
thought that women ought to take their place in society “without really making noise, like the wife of Pontius Pilate in the Bible.” Ulamaa contended that women can become leaders among the womenfolk; women can vote in elections, but they cannot aspire to occupy overall leadership positions over men and women at any level because Allah has made women feminine in nature, they are weak, fragile and tender-hearted. Amirah A and Amirah B. insisted that women can participate at all levels of decision-making processes, so long as they are not of child-bearing age. Oni Sango said women can participate in politics if they will be honest, because Sango dislikes dishonesty and does not think women are inferior to men. *On women’s identity*, Christian and Muslim leaders acknowledged women as creatures of the Almighty, created to coexist with men as helpers. Bishop P. and Mrs T. said a woman is a man with a womb and Mrs T. argued that, that makes women superior to men. In one of her sermons, Mrs T. said that women who are born again should not keep struggling with the question of identity, and added: “…know who you are … when your maker picks you up, your value increases.” Oni Sango said except for witches, Sango loves women, and Oya, Sango’s last wife, is the goddess of windstorm who precedes him through windstorm when he wants to act.

All religious leaders oppose *violence against women*. Bishop O. saw a need to modernise our culture so men can view women as their mates. Concerning battery, he said when men quarrel with or bash their wives, their prayers will not be answered. Like all other Christian leaders, he said this is because once married, a man becomes one with his wife. He then added that the problem is about man’s inhumanity to man, and men’s greed and lust for power even at home. Mrs E. and Bishop P. advised that rape victims should not go to court, if the assailant owns up, because the Bible says we should forgive 70 times 7 times. In addition, Bishop P. wanted the spirit behind rape to be addressed. Ulamaa submitted that the Prophet says in the Qur’an, Chapter 24 vs 30, lower your gaze and safeguard your chastity, that is discipline yourself. They however added that the Prophet says women should not wear bangles and shoes that will attract attention, and once women attain the age of puberty, they should cover all parts of their body to hide away their beauty. Concerning battery, they indicated that the Qur’an makes provisions for the resolution of differences between a husband and wife and it does not include beating. Amirah A. connected poverty with the rape of children. Amirah B. said the Prophet says: “the best among you men is best to his wife”. In the same breath, she added that the problem arises when women acquire western education; they earn more than their husbands “and then begin to raise the eyebrow to the husband.” Oni Sango asserted that Sango will seize the manhood of a rapist and single him out during a parade of suspects. She advised women to slap, and beat up men who want to sexually assault them thoroughly, and call the attention of passers-by to their misdeeds. On *women’s education*, all Muslim leaders said Islam encourages men and women to seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave. Amirah A. and Amirah B. said Muslims provide Islamic and Western education for women so they can compete favourably with others. Amirah B. asserted that with both Western and Islamic education, a woman is in a better position to weigh and balance issues, but that Qur’anic injunction is more authentic because it is from the Almighty Allah. For Bishop P., “Intellectual knowledge can make a person proud, but spiritual knowledge will make a person humble.” He said he teaches God’s character, and if adherents imbibe God’s character, they will be humble.
A Bible Study Outline

Below is a condensed version of the Bible study outline of the Church of Nigeria for a Sunday in 2005. The topic for the day was: “Submission of Wives to Husbands”, taken from Ephesians 5: 21-24. The aim of the study was given as: “that wives might know that mutual submission to one’s husband is associated with holy living demanded by God. This in turn is an act of submission to God.” (ps 36-37). After the introduction, questions that were raised for discussion were amongst others: how does a godly wife behave towards her husband? Look at how the church should respond to Christ; what are the likely repercussions of a wife’s disobedience and arrogance to the husband? What are the rewards for obedient and virtuous wives? As a Christian, what advice have you for younger women? All the questions had corresponding Bible references.

Discussions

Benefits of religion and learning/non-learning. In responding to the questionnaire, 68% of highly literate women in formal work made references to religion, and half of the percentage referred to religion more than twice. Sixty-Nine point 6 per cent of female students; 91.1% of semi-literate women in the informal economy; and 39.5% of female apprentices made obvious references to religion. Respondents stated that religion has helped them to realise their assets/potential; their belief in the Almighty gives them peace and contentment, and is behind their willingness to lend a helping hand to others. Other benefits are that it: guides their relationship with others; teaches dedication to duty, obedience, respect and faithfulness; teaches how to dress well; shapes character; keeps problems at bay, and is responsible for all achievements.

We checked how much of the teachings of religious leaders had become knowledge for women. In respect of their roles in the private sphere including submission to husbands, most women appeared to take the teachings of their religious leaders to heart. On participation in civic-political affairs, women appeared to be attentive to leaders like Bishop O., Mrs E and Oni Sango, not Ulamaa, the two Amiraahs and Mrs T., for even when they set standards for prospective female leaders, their standards were different from those that the leaders whose positions were ambivalent had laid down. Women had apparently taken their cue from the position of religious leaders on women’s role in the private sphere, and so, in spite of seemingly positive lessons from religious leaders about women’s identities, women’s perception of whom they are reflected their acceptance of the teachings of religious leaders (that they are caregivers, they are subordinate to men) and rejection of other lessons (they assert that they are breadwinners/co-breadwinners; bold, courageous and aggressive). On violence against women, some women appeared to heed the teachings of their religious leaders about dressing, submission, and about addressing the spirit behind misdeeds. In respect of education of women, while religious leaders thought that knowledge from the Almighty is to be favoured, women had their own ideas about the value of knowledge from the Almighty and knowledge from formal education. Although many of the benefits of religion and formal education that women identified converge, many of the religious leaders cannot be comfortable with some of the benefits that women had gained or hope to gain from education. Such benefits include: independence, prestige, being breadwinners and being able to resist domination by men.

The confusing, empowering and disempowering potentials of religious teachings. While many religious leaders are prescribing the ecclesiastical model of meaning-making (Hunt, 2005), many women appear to be balancing spirituality that has its roots in religion with a critical reflection on their lived experiences, in order to understand their world. Although many women have tried this balancing act, only a few have succeeded. Many fail because the lessons from religions are powerful; they are rules, and they have been normalised. They carry rewards and punishment for obedience and
disobedience; they have been with us for sometime, and so they have become part of our culture, our way of life, and so they are “the way things are”, and as Brown (1994, p.191) rightly pointed out, “it is a Herculean task for women to try to define the meaning and worth of their lives in terms different from those that prevail in their community.” In the Bible study outline earlier cited, women were told the rewards and punishment of abiding by or disobeying the injunction that asks that they submit to their husbands. Women who truly wish to connect with someone greater than themselves, and perceive that someone to be the Christian God, would have difficulties resisting this kind of message. Unfortunately, this is how nurturing, socialisation and the construction of identities work. It works through a system of rewards and punishment. Thus, for many Nigerian women, although religion gives them peace and other benefits, the lessons from religious leaders are often confusing and disempowering because some of the messages delivered by a leader are sometimes contradictory; some bare no relationship with the realities of women’s experiences while others are self-serving, and they reinforce the unequal relations of power between men and women. We examine how the messages confuse and disempower women.

First, we observe that an insistence that women be subordinate to men, as prescribed by Christianity and Islam, and the seeming intolerance of the two religions for violence against women, throws up a basic contradiction, given the preservative nature of power. For some women and men, battery is the “natural” consequence of stubbornness and non-submissiveness, and this represents a constraint. Second, the arguments about the nature of women, and the roles that God prescribed for women, and women’s acceptance of their primary role as being in the private sphere, are good grounds for the continuing exclusion of women from key decision-making processes with plenty of determination (Ibrahim and Salihu, 2004). Third, the view that men are breadwinners, and women caregivers is confusing because in this research, female respondents who work in the formal and informal sectors of the economy are caregivers and breadwinners/co-breadwinners. We note that male respondents refused to acknowledge that women are breadwinners/co-breadwinners and this is almost shocking because Nigerian women have always worked (and earned a living), whether in pre-colonial/pre-Christian/pre-Islamic or post colonial Nigeria (Alo, 1984). Fourth, the scape-goating of culture by many of the leaders is both confusing and disempowering. This is because we know that Christianity and Islam have fused with Nigerian cultures whenever they have the same goals. Among religious leaders, there are disagreements about what they label as religious injunctions, and “our culture”. For persons who are familiar with Nigerian cultures, they are taken aback by positions and practices that religious leaders attribute to “our culture”. Professor W., challenged opposition to the ordination of female priests on the basis of “our culture”, because Yoruba traditional religions did not just have goddesses, they had priestesses. She then asked: “which culture are they referring to – the culture of Nigerians or the Jewish culture, which is represented in the Old Testament?” Her response is that Jesus is beyond culture. Finally, the message that asks that women should look more to their religion (and by extension religious leaders) for the acquisition of knowledge is potentially disempowering, given the positions of many religious leaders on issues relating to women’s status. Although humility is a desirable character, the insistence that women who have obtained formal education should be humble appears like an attempt to rein-in educated women.

Conclusions

In postcolonial Nigeria, where the estimated earning power of women and men was 614 and 1,495 (purchasing power parity US Dollars) respectively by 2003 figures (UNDP, 2005, p.301), Nigerians are feeling the stress of the failed promises of religion. This stress is reflected, for example, in a suggestion by Oni Sango that politicians should take their oath of office by Sango
instead of the God of the new religions, given the level of corruption and religiosity among leaders. There is no doubt that some Nigerian religious leaders are committed to using religion to help persons realise their potential and end domination. However, there is a need for them to move their positions further. For instance, there should be a more balanced interpretation and emphasis on the different sections of the sacred texts, and we also need to urge them to favour the potentially transformative aspects of their religions. In addition, feminist adult educators, international adult educators and persons who work with development agencies have to understand the role of new religions in the formation of the consciousness of women, and how this can affect the sustainability of development efforts aimed at improving women’s participation in politics and ending violence against women. Too often, persons who are engaged in development work in the Economic South, assume that the provision of formal western education and skills training to enhance women’s economic power will improve women’s social status. Allied to this point is the fact that religious identity and spirituality matter in the teaching-learning transaction, and so persons who are engaged in the education of women, especially in consciousness-raising efforts, have to take this on board. Finally, the powerful shape discourse, and so persons who are interested in helping women to realise their potential and ending unequal relations of power must intervene decisively in the discourse of religion and women, especially in a country like Nigeria.

NOTES

1. This paper is part of the report of a research entitled: The Dialectics of “Magic Consciousness”, the “Hidden Curriculum” and Formal Education in the Construction of the Identity of Nigerian Women, submitted to the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) in July 2005. Sincere gratitude to CODESRIA for approval of, and support for this research.

2. The Yoruba people inhabit the south-western part of Nigeria, and Ibadan is a Yoruba town. The Okuns, one of the major tribes in Kogi State, are of Yoruba descent. Sango is the Yoruba god of thunder and is usually associated (perhaps fortuitously), with the wrath of Olodumare (God) against all wickedness. See. Idowu, E. B (1962, p.89-95).

References


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