Title

Duplicitous Double Binds: The Search for Womanhood in Zimbabwe.

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/47t3p7qv

Journal

Thinking Gender 2014, March(2014)

Author

Chigonda-Banda, Roselyn

Publication Date

2015-04-14

Copyright Information

Roselyn Chigonda-Banda

Abstract

The preoccupation of the European settlers in the then Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) in the nineteenth century with keeping women in their 'natural' state, and at the same time molding them into mission-educated Christians, has resulted in double binds that have led these women to lose their identity. They neither fit the traditional nor western type of life. This 'third' space has maintained Zimbabwean women in a subordinate position, irrespective of the level of education. The question to be explored is what these women should pass on to their daughters in terms of the identification of a Zimbabwean woman.

Introduction

In her discussion of *Mapping African Fenimisms,* Obioma Nnaemeka notes that the problems plaguing African women's lives reflect duplicitous double binds rooted in the 'internally-induced patriarchal structures and externally-engineered imperialist contexts' (2005, p, 31). The controversy in her discussion lies in the fact that the 'internal and the external are ever evolving, always contaminated and contested, mutually creating and recreating each other' (Cornwall, 2005: 31). While these double binds affect the lives of women throughout the African continent, I aim to take a closer look at the position and struggles of contemporary Zimbabwean women. Specifically I look at how religion has been used to authenticate the position of women who grapple with emancipation from the traditional-cultural restrictions based on pre-colonial gender hierarchies and the imperialist gender dynamics introduced through colonialism and globalization.

My analysis seeks to elaborate on how religion, which came with colonialism, has been institutionalized, making the emancipation of women seem to focus on incremental gains within the existing framework of gender relations. In other words the talk-shop of women's emancipation in the country is only a way to ease burdens within existing frames of gender relations rather than truly challenging the sexual division of labor on which this framework rests (Seidman, 1984, Bourdillon, 1972). Take for instance the education and income generating programs which are important for improving women's economic positions. The approaches may alter the lives of women, but neither approach has changed the existing inequalities. Within the auspices of Christianity polygamy still exists, and cases of widows left penniless by their husbands' families who under customary law inherit all property are still very rampant.

In this paper I elaborate on three legacies that have affected the lives of Zimbabwean women. As I look at how religion works to naturalize Zimbabwe 'customs' in women at a United Methodist Center in Murewa District, Zimbabwe, I discuss how the pre-colonial society still has a strong impact on 'culture' and 'custom', particularly on the family structure and personal relationships. I also discuss how the colonial society imposed by the white settlers in the late nineteenth century brought its own gender ideology, together with new economic relationships. The guerrilla warfare, as well as the independent Zimbabwe also severely altered the practical conditions under which many Zimbabwean women live, and this has suggested new kinds of relationships between men and women (Seidman, 1984).

Before proceeding, I think it is important to note that I write not simply from the perspective of an interested scholar, but a Zimbabwean woman who, for sixteen years, participated in and observed fully the operations of the church and the changing role of women. Therefore, I use 'we' in reference to Zimbabwean women instead of the pronouns 'they' and 'their.' I have also been part of the academic elite that has been exposed to Western education and am conscious of how the lives of African women are described as oppressed. Following in Collins' (1991) footsteps, distancing myself from the script may credit my observations as scholarly and impartial, but may also lack authentication through my lived experiences. Hence I will include myself in my discussion of this paper as part and parcel of my standpoint.

The United Methodist Church in Murewa

Murewa is a district in Zimbabwe, 75km (46.6 miles) northeast of the capital, Harare. According to the 2002 census the district has a population of 162 167 inhabitants, of which 78 037 are men and 84 130 are women (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, 2008). It is dominated by Shona speaking people, and culture and religion play a significant role in the daily lives of this predominantly rural community. The working population in this district is mostly not Murewa natives. Most of them are employees are civil servants, and a sizeable number are teachers.

United Methodist Center, was established in 1909 by European settlers. It houses four departments, a primary school, a secondary school, the church and an orphan trust. The church, one of many in the district, commands a large gathering, because it has a well established school system. The schools are boarding schools, and there is also a special education department which caters for visually handicapped and mentally challenged students. However my main focus will be on the church and how it socializes working and non-working women in the district.

The congregation is divided into organizations, where married men and women have separate ones, whereas the youths and children meet as boys and girls. Men meet to pray and teach each other about men issues, whereas boys and girls, besides learning biblical teachings, are encouraged to socialize and form lasting relationships of a heterosexual nature. However, it is the women's organization that I am focusing on. The organization is called Ruwadzano Rwe Wadzimai (RRW) and it is governed by a small booklet known as 'Rumano' authored by senior women of RRW. The 'Rumano' teaches women the genealogy of prayerful women warriors who formed the basis of RRW. The booklet also focuses strongly on how women should maintain a certain type of demeanor to be acceptable as Christian women. It teaches them how to always know their roles as managers of the home, making sure that the husband's clothes are well kept and that the children are bathed and dressed. The teachings of Rumano take so much from the colonial purpose of education for women as stated by Schmidt (1992) that women were taught domestic science, which included taking care of the home and children. If, according to Gaidzanwa (1990) education for women was meant to domestic them, then the teachings of Rumano are meant to capture even the educated women and domesticate them for purposes of maintaining patriarchal authority in the society.

Non married women are not readily acceptable in the RRW organization. They are only acceptable very late in their lives, as the elderly women need ample time to assess 'their movements' and satisfy themselves that they live a "clean" life. The narrative is that if a woman has a child out of wedlock, then she is of loose morals. Only married women presented the sanctity of marriage, and therefore perfection in the eyes of God. Hence the symbol of such holiness was presented at a ceremony where the women were sworn in into the organization adorned in the crispy blue and red uniform that only the pastor's wife can saw. Non married women only had the prerogative to wear the uniform, if ever they did, very late in life. Schmidt (1992) noted that "the Victorian ideal of a virtuous wife, selfless mother, and tidy industrious housekeeper was the goal for which all African women should be taught to strive". In this sense women in Murewa worked hard to be members of RRW. Irrespective of one's status in terms of education, we all wanted to belong to this organization and get the label of a woman, wife and mother as expected by society. And of course, all these teachings were authenticated by the bible, which we all had to 'believe' in.

The 'Third Space'

The talk of improving the position of women in Zimbabwe started as far back as during the 1979 war of liberation (Seidman, 1984). The emancipation of women anticipated was not only in terms of freedom from racial and economic oppression, but also in terms of freedom from oppressive gender roles. Women's positions had shifted after they were mobilized for the war and had assumed a new role, a vision of a possible involvement in the public sphere. After independence women were almost forgotten, and were expected to take positions of their 'proper place' which led one woman to comment during a survey in the early 1980s:

> It's horrible to be a woman. I don't know if it's because we are created being useless or we make ourselves useless and pretend to like it that way (Speakout, 1981)

The 'proper place' for women has been difficult to find and define in contemporary Zimbabwe. The position of women has been affected by the changing paradigms of rule, from pre-colonial to post-colonial. As Angela Cheater (1986) noted there is very scanty information on pre-colonial Zimbabwe, most of it produced by men of different cultural origin, such as David Beach in *The Shona and Zimbabwe* , 1980. She stated that the pre-colonial situation is 'indirect, extrapolated from what is currently classified as *tradition* or *custom*.' What Cheater is highlighting is the assumption that pre-colonial tradition or custom is not guaranteed to be the same as that which is talked about in this day of post-independent Zimbabwe. The changing contexts from pre-colonial to colonial eras show a regard or disregard of the so-called tradition or custom to suit the agendas of the time. The pre-colonial Shona women had a substantial amount of informal power in the home over their daughters, as mothers-in-law or as aunts to their brothers' wives (Schimdt, 1992). However, they did not own any means of production, and were excluded from the allocation of land. Their position as producers and reproducers was authenticated by the payment of lobola, a dowry that was paid to the parents of the woman as a token of appreciation (Schimdt,

1992, Beach, 1980, Cheater, 1986). Cheater (1986) noted that lobola was paid to compensate the woman's clan for the loss of productive labor which also served as enough reason to exclude women from direct control of the means of production.

Women were used as objects of exchange, an exchange which hardly implies equality. It gave husbands legal control over wives and children and their labor (Seidman, 1984). Women would bow their heads and bend their knees or kneel when speaking to adult men, an exercise which is still very prevalent in today's Zimbabwe. The introduction of colonialism in the late 19th century changed the state of women. Many factors external to traditional society, such as education, urbanization, migration to urban towns, and of course, religion influenced indigenous women during the colonial period (Gaidzanwa, 1990, Schmidt, 1992, Cheater, 1986). The Shona customary laws were rigidified through structural enactment of laws. For instance a Native Land Husbandry Act of 1951 was introduced as a law governing the allocation of native land. Religion introduced Christian marriages, additives that cannot count as 'customary', but in today's Zimbabwe they are part and parcel of expected 'customs' or 'traditions' of the Shona people (Cheater, 1986, Seidman, 1984, Schmidt, 1992). The payment of lobola continued through the colonial period, and is ironically still practiced today in independent Zimbabwe, despite the fact that the Convention of the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was ratified in the mid-1990s. The issue of lobola as a token of appreciation is insignificant as this has now been commercialized. Women whose parents have received lobola are expected and obliged to play the 'traditional' roles expected of wives.

These days the issue of the token has turned to *I bought you* concept due the amount of money paid (Cheater, 1986). The commercialization of lobola means that the more educated the bride is, the more the groom has to pay. Hence in this instance, the woman is expected to be obedient and super 'wifely' in what is termed 'traditional' sense because of how much has been paid for. And because the production aspect of women has been 'naturally' eliminated in post-colonial Zimbabwe due to improved status of women who no-longer have to work the fields, they have to be gainfully employed and at the end of each month surrender their pay to the husband as the head of the household.

The terms 'custom' and 'tradition' have been manipulated by the male dominated nation to try and fit a global definition, yet still trying to confine itself within the imagined context of pre-colonial tradition. The definitions of what can still be termed 'traditional' or 'custom' still lie in the patriarchal structure that defines what is considered good or bad practice. Speaking on juridical systems of power, Foucault (1980) points out that juridical notions of power appear to regurgitate political life in purely negative terms; through the limitation, prohibition, regulation, control and even 'protection' of individuals related to that political structure through the contingent and retractable operation of choice, yet the subjects regulated by such structures are, by virtue of being subjected to them, formed, defined and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of those structures.

As women's groups work to redefine gender roles and advocate for the liberation of women from the draconian dictates of traditional society they are caught in a web of defining who they are and who they want to be, without the interference of the male dominated society. As we learned in RRW, we had to always value our place as women in the home, meaning that it was the male head's responsibility to make decisions and map the way for the home. The church, as a social institution, combined both traditional traits in the form of *unhu/ubunthu* (Samkange, 1980) and imperialist concepts of subordinating women.

The concept of *unhu/ubunthu* is a classical one whose origins are in the Bantu languages of southern Africa. In his text *Hunhuism*, Samkange (1980) postulates that to be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and establishing respectful human relations with them. Thus *unhu/ubunthu* acknowledges the presence of shared values, assumptions and beliefs that keep a people together. Those who do not adhere are chastised for lack of *unhu*, not for the single individual, but the whole group in which only a handful might have deviated. For instance, in the example given by Samkange, a daughter-in-law is expected to kneel down when greeting or serving food to her parents-in-law as a sign of respect. She is also obliged to maintain highest standards of behavior, a state which will extend or reflect her family and all the women raised in her family. She plays an ambassadorial role of where she came from, and also for the women of her age group and background. Hence *unhu/ubunthu* is described in Shona (main Zimbabwean language) as 'munhu munhu nekuda kwevanhu'. Literally translated to English it means 'a person is a person with other people'. The argument is that one cannot exist as a human being in isolation. There is an interconnectedness that joins us as a family, clan, village and nation. What one does affects the whole and when one does well it spreads out through the whole humanity.

I place Zimbabwean women in what I call a 'third' space, although I do not claim to be original in the use of the term. The women have been positioned as such because they cannot claim to be purely traditional nor to have adopted Western cultures exclusively, but dither in between. Having lived in a state that has been colonized for more than a hundred years and also having been in an independent state for over thirty years, I question why women have not been able to stand up as a collective group to challenge the patriarchal structure. African feminism(s) theory claim that as women of Africa we need to be assessed as the unique group that we are (Cornwall, 2005, Phillips, 2006), as our uniqueness emanate from our 'cultural and philosophical specificity of our provenance' (Cornwall, 2006; p, 33). As it is differentiated from Western feminism, African scholars label African feminism(s) as proactive, and that is has a life of its own that is rooted in the African environment (Phillips, 2006, Nnaemeka, 1998, Cornwall, 2005). What the definition of African feminism(s) fail to elaborate on, in my opinion, is the fact that the legacies that we as African women have gone through have made it difficult for us to correctly identify what is 'African' and what is not. Some aspects foreign to us as a people have been intertwined with what is referred to as 'custom', making it difficult for us to break free from the bondages of subordination. What do we mean when we say we do not want to be separated from our men, yet

that relationship is laden with power imbalances? How do we subvert the relationship (where African men have a 'cemented' belief of the role of women) to escape patriarchal domination? If African women refuse to be separated from their men, what does this mean in terms of the social structure of the concept of family? Could there be need to redefine the relationship between marriage partnership that is different from the pre-colonial or colonial concept? The changes do not materialize because the social institutions that reinforce gender inequality are maintained and the effort to change women's position is made without challenging the existing gender hierarchy.

Conclusions

In a student based research at the University of Zimbabwe, Julia Wells (2003) observed that women stressed the importance of maintaining respectability and showed a strong dedication to preserving the broad outlines of the 'traditional' values system, even while working for reforms within it. The issue of reforming these values has also been complicated by the aspect of the Western Educated elitists (Cornwall, 2005) who often strongly believe that Zimbabwean women are without a doubt in an oppressive position. Moreover, grassroots women (Aina, 1998) are also affected by the teachings of the elitist because they see themselves as still 'pure' in the Zimbabwean 'tradition.' The grassroots woman claims to have no outside influence, and does not believe that she is oppressed. She views the elitist as someone who has lost the 'culture' and therefore the concept of *unhu.* The educated women are mostly found in urban areas, and during pre-colonial and colonial eras women in urban areas were labeled prostitutes, a stigma that perpetuates to date, unless women prove otherwise (Cheater, 1986, Seidman, 1984). The problem in such a scenario is who has what it takes to help emancipate Zimbabwean women from the hold of patriarchal oppression, the literate few or the traditional illiterate majority? My distinction of the illiterate traditional and literate elite stem from the fact that the women's movements are mostly comprised of the educated women who stay in urban areas. The working women in Murewa subscribe to such organizations, yet the traditional, especially older women in rural Murewa, believe that they are the preservatives of the cultural values of a virtuous woman.

My argument therefore centers on the whole system which has operated as a closed system. Even with us, educated elites, being conscious of the need to evolve from that of a kneeling submissive woman to a standing woman, a veiled perception of tradition makes us succumb to the same system that we feel we need to change. We have no concrete knowledge of what traditionalism entails, even those who claim to be purely aware and still practicing customary values should admit that the journey through colonialism has not left them unscathed. What is required is to wake up and not sleepwalk down a deterministic path. The tradition or custom has 'transmorphed' as it is now a syncretization of pre-colonial, colonial and post or neo-colonial times. We cannot advance as long as we are holding on to something that no longer works. The result of building a new structure from a fallen one means a system that is better organized internally and more responsive to its environment externally.

As Zimbabwean women, we cannot run away from identifying ourselves as Christians. If Christianity entails preserving *unhu/ubunthu* according to the new social order of post-independent Zimbabwe, then transformation should mean coming together and re-defining who we have become. This should be an undertaking that we must embark on in our own special way and time. As much as we have refused to be influenced by Western perspectives, we still need to acknowledge the effects of globalization, and we cannot underplay the salience of a re-definition of what we want to do and where we want to go as a people. The elites should have the prerogative to accommodate the grassroots women because the academe teaches us to be open and receptive to Freire's concept of unfinishedness, and be able to get to a conferencing level, democratically coming together for the purposes of re-imagining who we want to be.

Thus as I look at all these duplicitous double binds, I seek answers to who we are as Zimbabwean women? What cultural aspects am I passing on to my daughters? What kinds of conversations must I hold when I converse as an educated elite with grassroots women?

Reference

Aidoo, A. A. (1998). The African Woman Today. In Obioma Nnaemeka, *Sisterhood, Feminism and Power.* Asmara, Eritrea: African World Press.

Aina, Olabisi. (1998). African women at the grassroots: The silent partners of the women's movement. In Obioma Nnaemeka (ed), *Sisterhood, Feminism, and Power: From Africa to the Diaspora* (pp. 333-350). Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

Beach, David, N. (1980). *The Shona and Zimbabwe.* Gweru, Mambo Press.

Bourdillon, Michael, F. C. (1975). *Is 'customary' law customary?* NADA IX, pp 140-149.

Cheater, Angela P. (1986). The role and position of women in pre-colonial and colonial Zimbabwe. *Zambezia,XII(ii, 65-79.*

Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings.* New York: Pantheon.

Gaidzanwa R. (1994). Canon Formation: Women, Men and Literary Art in Africa.

Nnaemeka, Obioma. (2005). Mapping African Feminisms, In Andrea Cornwall (ed) *Readings in Gender in Africa.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Phillips, Layli. (2006). *The Womanist Reader.* New York, Routledge Taylor and Francis Group.

Samkange, S. & Samkange, T.M. (1980). *Hunhuism or Ubuntuism: A Zimbabwe indigenous political philosophy.* Harare, Graham Publishing.

Schmidt, Elizabeth. (1992). *Peasants, Traders, and Wives: Shona Women in the History of Zimbabwe 1870-1939.* Harare: Baobab Press.

Seidman, Gay. (1984). Women in Zimbabwe: Postindependence Struggles. *Feminist Studies,10(3),* 419-440.

Summers, Carol. (1996). "If you can Educate the Native woman…": Debates over the Schooling and Education of Girls and Women in Southern Rhodesia, 1900-1934. *History of Education Quarterly, 36/4,*

Wells, Julia C. (2003). The sabotage of patriarchy in colonial Rhodesia, rural African women's living legacy to their daughters. *Feminist Review 75,*101-117.

Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, 2008.

Zimbabwe Women Bureau,(1981). *We carry a heavy load: Rural women in Zimbabwe Speak Out.* Harare, Zimbabwe Women Bureau.