

## Governance, Politics and Antecedents of Gender Behavioural Flexibility in Africa

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**Abstract.** The coming of western and eastern cultures changed the “face” of Africa and brought in a new dispensation which eroded what was in operation hitherto in Africa. Women became relegated to the background in the scheme of influence. The situation was worsened because written records were not available before the coming of foreign cultures. Necessary efforts for proper documentation by the new elites in Africa for hitherto ‘erased’ history in Africa have also been poor. This paper is intended as gap-filling in this regard. It delves into ‘gender blindness’ governance and politics before foreign infiltrations.

### 1. Introduction

The woman had important roles to play in the scheme of thing within the Africa world order before foreign infiltration. The most significant being the dual-gender system of social-political line that was in operation. Sofola (1991) espoused on how womanhood was perceived in the following realities:

A reality as a woman and the divine equal of man in essence

- A reality as a daughter
- A reality as a mother
- A reality as a wife

These realities were conceptualized and established within a system of co-ruler ship structure politically. And, the world view of the African is rooted in the philosophy of holistic harmony and communalism rather than in the

individualistic isolationism of Europe (Sofola, 1991). This is more so, because of the communal system in operation in most parts of African societies.

In most habitats, people were related in varied ways. If not by blood line, then by marriage ties. This “relatedness” brought about not just peace and communal feelings but a deterrence to maltreatment of the female not just because of “relatedness” but the fear of negative tags on families that may deter future probable in – laws from agreeing to unions with notorious bad in – laws (Mowaiye Fagbemi 2008).

### 2. Gender Structures, Politics and Governance

Sofola (1991) articulated that in pre-colonial period, the individual belonged primarily to a family and within it he/she moves and has his/her being. It is this philosophy that informed African social order and the dual-gender system of social-political organization which Okonjo in Sofola (1991) articulated further as follows:

*The African woman has not been inactive, irrelevant and silent. Rather, African tradition has seen the wisdom of a healthy social organization where all its citizens are seen to be vital channels for a healthy and harmonious society. Hence the establishment of a dual-sex power structure which is lacking in European and Arab cultures (Okonjo, 1986).*

The principle of relatedness makes it possible for the African society to evolve a social-political order that gives every member a proper context to live in with a check and balance mechanism that helped to maintain equilibrium. This mechanism evolved within the micro-unit of the home to the extended political, economic and larger dominated political governing council in societies where there will not be a female voice to represent the voice of other females in the varied communities. At least, there will be a female priestess or female political head or head of market women in council who can be called in at critical moments to articulate the opinions and wishes of others. In Yoruba land of western Nigeria, these were known as Iyalode and Iyaloja among other titles. The co-ruler-ship concept of governance falls into the following categories (Sofola,1991):

- Monarchy that evolved on gender line
- Monarchy and co-ruler-ship that evolved on the principle of daughterhood
- Monarchy based on the principle of queen-motherhood,
- Priestess/spirit medium principle
- Warrior-queen system based on daughterhood representative of the throne in the supreme military council of the kingdom.
- Monarchical co-ruler-ship based on the principle of woman of the house role of the first wife of the king, Anasi-Obi (Igbo); Olori (Yoruba).
- Co-ruler-ship based on constituted roles of heads of female professionals; Iyalode (Yoruba).
- Co-ruler-ship based on the principle of institution of wives.

The principle of dual-gender political line of power evolved initially from the principles of father and mother of the family units, and gained a stronger reinforcement through the principles of man/woman of the house system of governance. But the composition of the governing council of each arm, male and female, demonstrates more clearly the reality and significance of the dual gender power structure. In Igbo land, The Obi was the head of the male arm while the Omu was the head of the female arm.

The Eze-Omu, the head of the female line of power, may not be the wife of the king nor necessarily be related. Unlike in European and Arab cultures where “Queenship” refers only to the wife of a king, she is a duly elected head of that political line of power, and with her governing council; Ndi Olinzele-Omu, she caters for the interest of the female citizens, controls certain areas of the power in the combined central council of the kingdom and the commercial life of the state. She is a priestess and spirit medium, and has a primarily role to maintain a sustained spiritual health of the kingdom both at peace and war time, (Sofola. 1991).

Governance of the state/kingdom begins from the head of the family unit, who sees to the welfare of the family members, control and seeks for the peaceful co-existence of all in the family, and extends to the larger extended family unit: oldest family member heads the unit and is regarded as the elder, who resolves conflicts and gives correction.

Among the peoples of Ijebu land, Owo and Ondo in Yoruba land, the same system of political power line existed, but with a slight difference. For example among the Ondos in general, and Ile-Oluji in particular, there existed a strong dichotomized power structure based on gender line - each with a political head as ruling monarchs; Oba – Okunrin (male) and Oba-Obinrin (female).

There was also the Iyalode in Yoruba land, who is the head or voice for the females. That the council of high chiefs integrates both genders reflects the structure that existed among the Yorubas and the western peoples of Nigeria where each line of governance had its say akin to what was operational in the eastern of Nigeria. Hence the saying that no matter how powerful a king may be he cannot be an Omu or Iyalode. (Sofola,1991; Mowaiye, 2002)

The people of Ijebu land in the present Ogun State of Nigeria had the Erelu (women) in the council of governors. There was a female line of power which combined with the male line of power in a joint council of high chiefs which served as the supreme executive council of the kingdom. Then directly below this council is a ‘lower’ house where the Iyalode system also

existed. The same structure also existed in Ile-Ife in present Osun State, Nigeria. This was also the governing structure for most states in Yoruba land. European/Arab encroachment destabilized this system.

Powerful women emerged in their own rights as astute politicians to become Obas. In the kingdom of Ile-Ife, there is a record of Ooni Luwo, Oba Obinrin or female king, whose reign over the kingdom of Ile-Ife experienced great development. Among her physical developments and her artistic nature made her totile the palace ground in Ile-Ife in a typical intricate style of African civilization. She was the first and the last monarch in Ile-Ife as Sofola (1991) extensively articulated.

It must be noted that today, notwithstanding colonial pollutions-positions such as Iyalode, Erelu, still exist in some parts of Yoruba kingdom, though these positions are not as powerful as before colonial period but some of the title holders are no push overs. An example is Olufnmilayo Ransome Kuti, who rallied women against colonial powers in present day Abeokuta.

Among the Edos; of the eleven dynasties of Ogiso era and before the advent of Oranmiyan era with its Yoruba influences, there was also a high chief level where women also had their power line. It was from that structure that the female Ogisos; female kings, emerged as the ruling monarchs in their own rights as astute and powerful politicians. For example, Lady Emose. The Europeans and the Arabs arrival on the scene and introduction of their philosophy of inferior position of women in the scheme of things, enthroned the superiority of men; and monopolistic intolerance of male psyche. The dislodgement of political structures has led to chaos and women were dislodged and made irrelevant, a fact that is now full-blown in today's European-Arab system of government of contemporary Africa. (Sofola 1991).

As noted, in some areas, there were two lines of power ruling kingdoms on gender line. Each having his own governing council and ruling over its own gender, though periodically a joint

council would hold to discuss matters of common interest.

In some kingdoms at the death of the king, a female regent would reign until a new king is enthroned. This is still in practice in Ile-Oluji, Ondo State, Nigeria and some other parts of Nigeria. As articulated by Mowaiye (2002), women heroines abound. For example, Emotan of Benin who risked her life as a spy to save the kingdom of Benin at a very dangerous point in Benin history when the throne of Benin was viciously threatened. Till date, in many parts of Nigeria, the women folks still have their ways of making unpopular kings to abdicate the throne. For example, among the Ijumu people of Kogi state in Nigeria, in the past, a tyrant king who refuses to do the people's biddings or take to correction would be overthrown in days from when the women go half naked for him.

The Queen warrior, Queen Amina of Zaria who as the daughter representative of her father's throne in the supreme military council of Zauzzau, seized power at a diminishing point of the kingdom, and expanded it far and wide through her military leadership and tactical mobilization of her warlords and soldiers. The ancient city of Zaria, built under her leadership, is a testimony of her greatness (Sofola, 1991). Till date, she remains a heroine in Zaria, Nigeria.

In Angola, there was Queen Warrior Nzingha who spat fire on the Portuguese. It was her acceptance of European culture through Christianity that mellowed her down, yet the sheer force of her presence prevented the Portuguese from taking over Angola until after her death. There was Yaa Asantewa of Ghana, 1863, 1923, the monarch, (female king) who fought to the last against the British and finally gave her life in a bid to serve her people.

The Europeans, not having a system of power line which is not attached to "wife-hood" could only understand such powerful female characters as either wives of the king, Queen, or mother of the king, Queen mother. Consequently, they would refer to women of such high monarchical status only as Queen-Mothers.

There was the Priestess/Spirit-medium Mbuya Nehenda of Zimbabwe, who mobilized her

people and fought the British when her people were invaded. She was executed by hanging by the British for her resistance against imperial authority.

There were powerful Queen mothers such as Queen Idia of Benin Empire and also the Queen-Mother of Mai Idris Alooma of Borno empire. It was Queen Idia of Benin Empire whose series of successful war exploits in defence of the throne won the favour of Oba Esigie of Benin such that an hitherto ritual as put to an end and an end was put to the ritual killing of Queen-Mothers during the coronation ceremonies of their sons, the heir apparent.

Among the Edos of Nigeria, before Orunmiyan, there were powerful women politicians like Emose and Orhorho who were rulers of their people. In old Borno Empire in Nigeria, the (Queen mother) or (queen sister) or the Gumsu (the king's senior wife) were influential in the state, especially the Queen mother. They were regarded as special advisers to the king and those seeking favours from the king had to go through them. (Mowiaiye 2008).

It was Iyalode Tinubu of Lagos, strongly supported by Efunsetan Aniwura, the Iyalode of Ibadan, which resisted the signing of a treaty that was to sign off Lagos into a colony. She was finally betrayed by the Oba of Lagos and the treaty was signed. She then chose to die in exile in rejection of the damage the men had done to selling their birth rights for a mess of pottage.

And of recent history was the Aba women's war, popularly known as Aba riots of 1929, where the women resisted taxation by violent protest and succeeded in suspending for a long time, the colonial government's decision to introduce taxation in the eastern part of Nigeria.

Mrs Olufunmilayo Ransome Kuti successfully mobilized the market women of Abeokuta of Nigeria in 1940s to drive a point home and successfully got the king of Egba land to go on exile for some years until things cooled down.

Recently also, there was Omu-Ako of Issle-Oligbo of Aniocha who during the Nigerian civil war of 1967 – as the head of Omu women's council, took over the traditional government, combined both male and female lines of power, and confronted both warring camps of the

Federal Nigeria and Biafra in defence of her citizens. Madam Okwuanyi Okwumabua (paternal aunt to Prof. Sofola) was a member of that governing council.

In various part of Africa, women did not see themselves as irrelevant in the scheme of things. They had their way of not only making their points but also getting their way at critical periods of their kingdom's history, especially if a king was getting despotic. Till date, women in some areas of Nigeria such as Ijumu kingdom in Kogi State (Central Nigeria) as noted ,still protest half naked when they think their views are being pushed aside or they want to insist on a king taking particular steps, to the point of asking a king to commit suicide if found wanting in governance.

### 3. Conclusion

With the type of African womanhood reflected in the foregoing array of African heroines, one would not have expected any less from women in the diaspora (after the slave trade) who themselves were undoubtedly descendants of warrior Queens, Monarchs, women intelligence/spies, economic magnets and powerful daughters of the African land.

This was reflected by various women who found themselves in diaspora and actions they took which led to the breakage of colour bar in the 1950s in the United State of America.

And as succinctly put by Sofola (1991) it was the Africa women's healthy psyche and heritage that they carried over to the new world. It was not brought about by a mere circumstance of being left in the home during slavery nor accidental.

It is apparent that African's governance and politics was different from the western and eastern dispensation as regards genes and political structure. The strength of African womanhood and her essence lies in the past. When this essence is brought to the fore and males and females potentials are maximized for the good of the society, African development will be hastened.

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