

Gugu Mkhulisi-

History 395

Final Essay

Abstract:

- This paper primarily focuses on identifying the reason why and how many African countries are patriarchal. It also investigates the ways in which the system of patriarchy has impacted the growing up of African students who are at St. Olaf College. It also investigates what exactly caused them to change their perspectives as they now identify as feminists. From interviews that I conducted, I discovered that education and the media play a huge role in creating these differences. I then explored how education and the media changed their perspectives and to what extent. The paper therefore, explores how education and the media are slowly influencing African women to resist their culturally defined roles as well as become more aware of their rights.

Women have always played a fundamental role in African families and societies. It was in recognition of this that Dr. James Emmanuel Kwegyir-Aggrey of Ghana said, "if you educate a woman, you educate a family (nation)." However, Africa is predominantly patriarchal and is also one of the fastest developing continents. One of the criteria used to measure development is the promotion of gender equality and women empowerment yet many African nations are failing to meet these goals due to cultural practices that seek to marginalize women. Secular education and the media are slowly influencing African women to resist their culturally defined roles as well as become more aware of their rights.

The first thing that I should mention is that gender defined roles are not indigenous African ideas. Many African countries became patriarchal as a result of colonisation. When colonists came into the continent, they used physical strength to differentiate between people and therefore men ended up doing the manual labour while women ended up doing domestic chores. This became the way in which children were raised and this became the cycle that we are a result of. However, prior to this, certain tribes already acknowledged women as powerful individuals who had the capabilities to run tribes and villages. Many pre-colonial African societies such as the akan, had structures for female political involvement through institutions such as queens and queen mothers. Colonisation broke these structures, therefore Africa wasn't entirely patriarchal before

colonisation although now she suffers judgement by colonisers for being patriarchal.

The two countries that I focus on; Nigeria and Zimbabwe, like many African nations are patriarchal, meaning that men possess more power and they dominate in the areas of political leadership and social privilege. The idea of patriarchal lineage is mostly pertinent in families because after marriage, women take their husband's surnames and their home last names become insignificant. According to Morountodun Adebisi of Nigeria, " I always wondered why I had to take my dad's name and not my mom's." Children born in wedlock also tend to take their fathers' surnames and follow the cultures of their fathers rather than their mothers' regardless of the fact that mothers are the ones who raise children. She also went on to describe how although her parents come from different tribes, she had to learn her father's language, Yoruba and cannot speak Itsekiri which is her mother's language. She also mentions that, "But I don't know why but I definitely identify with my father's side of the family more and I am just a Yoruba girl. I never, I almost never talk about the other side of me, which is Itsekiri." This reinforces the fact that children, furthermore, learn the cultures and adopt the lifestyles and even identify with their fathers' identities and their mothers' identities are lost. In the case of Morountodun, whose parents come from different tribes, her mother had to learn her husband's culture in order for her to pass it down to their children. This is a norm in many African countries thus, Africa is predominantly patriarchal which is important when analysing the changing structure in the power structures of many

African countries.

Another ideology that is dominant in African countries is that which defines their domestic roles at home. In many families, women still have the role of taking care of children and cooking in many families. Female children are expected to learn how to cook at an early age which two female students of St Olaf College attested to. “ And like, learning how to cook, like I have been cooking since I was, I don’t know. I have been cooking since I was 7 and everytime my parents would cook, they would always say, “stand with me in the kitchen.” Morountodun has been cooking from a tender age but that could be attributed to the fact that she is the first born child in her family and the first daughter but from the age of seven she had to learn to cook as well as take care of her younger siblings which is common, and also acts as training for womanhood. Tariro Mwendamberi from Zimbabwe, “I had to learn how to cook from a young age and I actually don’t know how long I’ve been cooking for because it seems like forever but I have never liked cooking. I just had to cook though because not cooking has ever been an option, although my mother cooks most of the time. My dad never touches the pots.” This also reinforces the fact that most men who have partners or females around them rarely take on the duties of the women, which consist of the domestic work. Yet female children are taught to be “wife material” from a young age. This practice is dominant and is spread to other African countries. Tariro seemed to see this as a normal practice before she left Zimbabwe but she mentioned that, “after leaving Zimbabwe and coming

here [to America], and seeing the shared roles in many households, I now see the culture that I grew up in as the wrong thing.” To quote Chimamanda Adichie Ngozi, “Because I am female, I am expected to aspire to marriage. I am expected to make my life choices always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important.” These words are, sadly, the reality that surrounds many young girls because every action and decision that they make for themselves is always going to be connected to marriage and therefore, instead of aspiring to great positions in society, many girls are working towards being wife material. However, it is worth noting that there is a shift in these traditional roles that were set out for women or men, because with more women who are educated in the continent, the amount of respect and authority that they have in the home is steadily increasing.

Interviews that I conducted brought up a point that the authority of women is rising in African families because my informants raised the point that in the households that they grew up in, both parents were involved in decision making in the families which is progress, on its own. This is a cultural shift and what caused an uproar when Nigerian President, Muhammadu Buhari said that his wife belongs in the kitchen.¹ This was after she criticised his government and the way in which his party is running the country in an interview. Although he later retracted his statement with the excuse that it was a joke, it is difficult to believe this because this is the normal attitude that a majority of Africans

¹ Alonge, Sede. "My wife belongs in the kitchen'? President Buhari isn't helping Nigeria | Sede Alonge." The Guardian. October 17, 2016. Accessed May 04, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/oct/17/wife-job-look-after-me-buhari-nigerian-girls>.

still have. This is the same attitude that resulted in an uproar when a Swazi Pastor, Bakhe Dlamini posted a picture of himself carrying his daughter on his back on Facebook². In his caption, he mentions that his wife had come home from work, tired so he sent her to bed and cooked when his daughter asked him to carry her on his back. He was criticised by the public, mostly men who said he did this because he was bewitched by his wife. One Facebook user said, "Asewume nje kusonisa please. Ungahlulwa lutsandvo. Lentfo yema populist Lena yekufuna fame nangemanga. Uyabonakala nje kutsi awukajwayeli nalokumema lomtfwana sibona kusho sona lesithombe. Awume nje mnetfu kusonisa. Awati nekutsi utsini. Asewusimelele simadvodza." ³ This loosely translates to, stop misleading us. Don't let love blinden you. You are using this as a publicity stunt to gain fame. We can tell, from the picture that you don't normally do this so stop misleading us my brother. Represent us well as men. This merely shows that different parts of Africa still see men who stand up to domestic work as less of men and this extends to those who delegate decisions as well because ideally, men should not allow women to make decisions or rest when there are certain chores, yet to be done.

However, the phenomenon of women's rights is widely spreading on the continent through education. One of the ways in which countries hope to achieve the third

² Dlamini, Bakhe B. "Bakhe B Dlamini." *Oops, Daughter Just Asked Me to Carry...* N.p., 10 Apr. 2017. Web. 04 May 2017.

³ This is a direct comment from the Facebook post by Bakhe B. Dlamini and the man who commented might have used siSwati because that is his first language of communication as well as for the reason that when one is annoyed by something, they tend to use their first language to express their frustration.

Gugu Mkhulisi-

History 395

Final Essay

Millennium Development Goal is through educating the girl child which is a long term investment into the women of the countries. For example, education of women was particularly difficult because they are expected to be married off at a young age for their parents to acquire wealth in the form of dowry. In the Swazi culture, dowry is paid in the form of cows and the earlier one got married, the more glory their family got for raising their child well and this also leads to arranged marriages for daughters so that the family accumulates wealth. Professor Amina Mama, who is one of Africa's leading contemporary feminist activist scholars from Nigeria, in an interview with Elaine Salo of the *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* publication, talked about her peers leaving secondary school to get married which she did not do because her family encouraged her to stay in school. What her family did was a rare thing in the time that she grew up in and this, of course, was talked about in her community. This was an uncommon thing in her times because marriage was more important than education. This is the same reason why Morountodun Adebisi repeatedly talked about Chimamanda's grandmother leaving the man she had been arranged to marry to marry the man that she wanted to marry, instead, because this was a taboo and the first signs against the culture of patriarchy. Therefore, for the same reasons that Dr. James Emmanuel Kwegyir-Aggrey said that women should be educated, more female children are being educated. The number of children enrolled in primary schools in sub-Saharan Africa rose by 75% to 144 million between 1999 and 2012 with an equal enrollment of

Gugu Mkhulisi-

History 395

Final Essay

boys and girls.

From the interviews that I conducted around the subject of changing culture of patriarchy, I realised that the media also plays a vital role in inspiring women to be sceptical about their given roles. Chimamanda Adichie Ngozi's speech which featured in Beyonce's song, *Flawless*, played a role in this. It was a turning point in my life because as much as I did not know who Chimamanda was when I first heard her speech, I fell in love with what she stood for and I went and did research on her. From there onwards, I followed her publications and I got involved in a Women's Empowerment Community Service project. I am not the only one who reacted like this to Chimamanda's work, Morountodun Adebisi mentioned that, "The concept of feminism really kicked in when I watched Chimamanda's talk, uhm, "We should all be feminists" and that is when I understood what it means to be a feminist and how it is applicable in Nigeria." This shows that this particular video has inspired a new generation of women who are also more woke ⁴ and are willing to make changes in their communities.

With an increasing number of African students who are studying in Western countries, particularly the U.S, there is an internal change that happens with their perspectives about the issue around the place of women in Africa. There is a sense of liberation which makes them become more aware of the oppression that they face back at home. I spoke to Rudorwamwari Nyakanda, she mentioned that she would never want to

⁴ Woke - Being Woke means being aware.. Knowing what's going on in the community

return home, in Zimbabwe because “back in Zim, I could not dress up like I do here so returning only to cover myself up is not something I am trying to do.” After the African students that I interviewed came to the US, their attitudes towards home have changed drastically. However, this is more common with the female students because they felt the oppression by the system more. When I talked to a male student, who preferred to stay anonymous, he said that, “every action I make is based on the next person, I think about how my actions affect the next person so I knew that certain things were not right but now I actually think about how my actions affect women.” This was his response when I asked whether or not coming to America changed the way in which he sees women. This shows that female students tend to want to remove themselves from their families after coming to the US whereas for a male student, he just aspires to be better in terms of the way in which he treats them. This oppressive system towards women could also be one of the reasons that Africa is experiencing brain drain, because once female Africans get a sense of liberation from the patriarchy that they experience at home, they do not want to return.

The biggest question is that, yes, a lot more girls are being educated and are willing to step out of their defined roles in their families but how realistic is it to try and make impactful changes? The truth of this lies, I would say, is dependent on where you are because different families have different habits and cultures and that determines how easy or difficult making changes is. My family believes in everyone doing the same

chores which means that chores are not gender defined. My brother does the same things that I do therefore there are not many differences between us. However, other families have gender defined chores which would make it more difficult to make changes. It is also difficult to make these changes because it is generally easier to identify the problem than to present the solutions to them. It is therefore more realistic to say that the most that we can do now is to teach the younger generations the fundamentals of gender equality and hope that they can practice it better than we can because we cannot suddenly stop doing what is expected of us but we can teach both boys and girls that gender cannot be the main determinant of their roles and chores.

Africa inherited the structure of patriarchy from colonists who came into the continent and broke down the matrilineal structures which existed. They then divided the roles among people based on gender which resulted in a seemingly patriarchal culture on the continent. However, education of the girl child both in Africa and outside has resulted in a rise in subtle uprisings towards patriarchy. Education, together with the media, both play a vital role in also making the upcoming generation, male and female of the problems that arise from patriarchy and therefore as much as it is quite difficult to make drastic changes to the society now, we can only hope for the coming generations to be raised better than to spread the culture of patriarchy.

Gugu Mkhulisi-

History 395

Final Essay

Bibliography:

- Elaine Sab, and Amina Mama. "Talking About Feminism in Africa." *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, no. 50 (2001): 51-63
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4066405>
- Nyamidie, John Kwami Esseboe. "Sep 1999: *If you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman, you educate a family (nation)*. - Fanti (Ghana) Proverb"
<http://www.afriprov.org/index.php/african-proverb-of-the-month/25-1999proverbs/146-sep1999.html>
- Thiam, A. (1986). "Speak out, black sisters: Feminism and oppression in Black Africa." London; Dover N.H: Pluto.
- "United Nations Millennium Development Goals." United Nations.
<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>.
- Drew, Allison. "Female Consciousness and Feminism in Africa." *Theory and Society* 24, no. 1 (1995): 1-33. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/657918>.
- Sulaiman, Tosin. "More children are going to school in African countries, but there are still 30 million who are not." *Quartz*. April 09, 2015. Accessed May 7, 2017.
<https://qz.com/379709/more-children-are-going-to-school-in-african-countries-but-there-are-still-30-million-who-never-will/>.

Gugu Mkhulisi-

History 395

Final Essay