

Exposition of Culture and the Space of Women: An African View for Policy Consideration

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This conceptual article, framed around Marxism, highlighted the fact that, over time, African women have persistently questioned the ways in which understandings of culture have both valued and devalued them. Relying on the experience of women in some randomly selected African countries – South Africa, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Ghana, this research shows clearly that the space of women as members of the household and at a macro level is shaped by an existing culture to which they must confine their lives. Also, culture, as shown in this research, is deeply contextualised and highly contested. As such, their transformability, through questioning, is fundamental to policy formulation and implementation.

Keywords: culture; women; African experience; policy; Marxism

This article sets the tone for a deeper understanding of culture and its implications on women. In other words, I examine the experiences of women in some randomly selected African countries – South Africa, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Ghana – focusing on the practice of “bride price”. The writings of Baker (1988) and Jackson (2003) substantiate the random choice with respect to the countries selected for this research. Baker and Jackson both note that a researcher can randomly select or utilise any individual case where each individual case in the population theoretically has an equal chance of been selected for the sample. Furthermore, I chose “bride price” as a symbol that epitomises a powerful cultural practice in which women’s experiences of “bride price” do not necessarily resonate with its avowed purpose. In focussing on “bride price” I draw a distinction between the rhetoric of culture and the experiences of women with respect to culture. In this research the terms “bride price” and “lobola” are interchangeably used. Both terms refer to the same concept. Scholars from Southern Africa prefer the use of “lobola” while scholars from West Africa prefer “bride price”.

Bride price and culture

Ratele (2007, p. 65) argues that “culture is a non-generic, changeable and permanently incomplete system of lessons and acts we get to learn over time and use to navigate our worlds”. The concept culture is not limited to a specific field of study; it extends to sociology, philosophy, management and education, among others. Schein (1985, p. 9) conceptualise culture as “a set of basic assumptions – shared solutions to universal problems of external adaptation (how to survive) and internal integration (how to stay together) – which have evolved over time and are handed down from one generation to another”. The definition by Schein and Ratele (2007) will form the basis of discussion in this research as the core meaning of culture. In many studies, for example Wilson-Tagoe (2003) and Badoe (2005) African women have highlighted the fact that culture plays a dominant role in their lives and thus shapes their lives. Importantly, women express much concern about culture with regard to marriage (Reddy, 2011). Many young women understand “marriage as an unquestionable expectation that is embedded in culture and tradition” (Reddy, 2011, p. 39). For this reason, large cohort of women often discuss and analyse culture from a marriage entry point of view, in

particular the practice of “bride price”. “Lobola”, referring to ‘bride price’, is an enduring custom that offers insight into past and present gender and power relations” (Shope, 2006, p.65). Mandela (1991) conceptualise bride price as “lobola” in European love, where the bride is converted into a sort of feudal slave purchased from her father by the husband's family.

As a means of understanding the impact and influence of culture on women with respect to “bride price”, I examine recent studies of Jude Clark, Janet Hinson Shope, Lydia Magwaza and Konjit Kifetew, among others. Clark (2006) explores how the concept “culture” is mobilised to produce and represent women in relation to different temporalities (“then” and “now”) within the national project, and the particular constructions of “transition” that emerge in and through such processes. Clark (2006) and Shope (2006) argue that culture, as a conceptual and practical phenomenon, has conflicting meanings for women.

In Clark's (2006) study, *“that sought perceptions on culture from both urban and rural women in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa”*, she explores that contradictions displayed in women's views are to be expected, since “culture is a changing site of contestation that is open to multiple interpretations” (ibid, 11). Clark's study reveals that most women are aware of the restrictions placed upon them by culture. Despite this, they uphold culture as a given past that shapes their identities. One of the respondents in Clark's study noted that the dominant understanding and categorisation of “culture” as specific acts, events and objects, conceals its role as a system of meaning – one that simultaneously produces and regulates what women do and how they understand themselves. These specific acts and objects are important, but are only part of the many ways in which they (women) draw on cultural resources to understand and perform what it means to be a woman (ibid, 9). The narratives of participants indicate that in the lives of women, culture gains specific meaning when considered at different times (“then” and “now”), given the apartheid and post-apartheid era in South

Africa. According to Clark (2006), when we consider the combined excerpts of narratives by women from rural and urban contexts, we see how they raise certain ambivalences in articulating the link between the notion of time and the construction of identity.

Shope's (2006) study *“Lobola is here to stay: rural black women and the contradictory meanings of ‘lobola’ in post-apartheid South Africa”* focuses on the contradictory meanings of “lobola” – “bride price” – and the internal power struggles that emerge over its interpretation and practice. In her studies she interviewed six hundred black women in rural and urban communities in South Africa to draw findings and conclusions. Her findings reveal an increasing commodification of “lobola”, which has a tremendous influence on its meaning and process. She argues that in South Africa's rural communities, black women seek to maintain the relational facets of the tradition, but object to the ways some men appropriate the custom to maximise their own interests. Shope (2006) discusses contradictory meanings of “lobola”, noting that the practice has invited numerous doubts, with some dubbing it as a practice that is discriminatory towards women. In her study, she argues that in the past, “lobola” forged a relational bond among families, and as the older women in the research site recall, it celebrated the addition of the woman into the husband's family. The study depicts that women value ‘lobola’; it is a symbol of respect for them. Some of the participants argued that “lobola” acts as a woman's charter of liberty, upholding the worthiness of women. Through the negotiation of “lobola”, families are brought together and united; thus the transfer of “lobola” creates a web of affiliations (Ansell, 2000).

Women in Nigeria, Ghana and South Africa cling to “lobola”/ “bride price” for the respect and dignity it confers, and for the relational interdependence it cultivates among families (see Shope, 2006; Salm & Falola, 2002). Their defence of the practice draws on the same logic invoked in the support of human rights as entrenched in the constitutions of their respective

countries, that is, to uphold one's dignity as a right (Shope, 2006). In short, "while women simultaneously reaffirm the relational value of culture and its practices, their potential to be full participants in post-apartheid and post-colonial African societies rests on their ability to redefine tradition in ways that expand women's opportunities and reflect their interest" (ibid, 71). One major exposition of the views of women concerning "lobola"/"bride price" as reported by Shope, Salm and Falola is its centrality to marriage. It is indeed, in many African societies, the entrance point for men and women into marriage.

In an attempt to summarise the work of Shope (2006), Magwaza (2006) argues that the acclaimed value of "bride price" is viewed differently by men and women – while men employ it to enforce their power, women appreciate its role in bringing families together, as well as its contribution as a base for "appropriate" gender relations. Referring to and relying on Lydia Mugambe's (2006) study, "*Rethinking culture in the face of HIV/AIDS*", a similar but different study in East Africa, Magwaza (2006) reveals that "lobola" is a traditional cultural practice that contributes significantly to placing women in vulnerable positions – exposing them to all forms of risk, including diseases. She asserts that "lobola" permits polygamy in all East African cultures, that is, it allows a man to have more than one wife or partner, provided the man pays the "bride price" to the parents or elders of the woman's family. As reported (Mugambe, 2006), the women participants usually fear the threat of being returned to their parents' homes and the "bride price" being returned. According to the writings of Reddy (2011), they (women participants) remain in the marriage and become vulnerable to HIV and AIDS. Speaking on this situation, Hey (2003, p. 326) uses the metaphor of leaving home: the "outsiders" within the new family risk "*revealing a self that is thought stupid in the host culture and pretentious in your original culture*". In effect, this perception paralyses women into remaining within the confines of the family into which they have married.

In Ethiopia, Kifetew (2006) writes about and describes women's downgraded status,

particularly within the domestic sphere. In her view, the role of culture in downplaying women as "objects", being good for only reproductive purposes, is worrisome. Hartsock (1981) considers the role of reproduction and suggests that the concept of "production" is insufficient as a description of a woman's role as mother, domestic worker and wage earner (see Harding, 2004). Thus, for Hartsock, women's experiences in childbirth and childrearing contribute to a distinctly female way of experiencing culture and the world at large. On this note, I suggest that culture in this regard be questioned. Questioning culture is a means of allowing women's voices to be heard and a path that leads to women locating themselves in any societal or environmental site.

The rhetoric of culture and the experience of culture

My purpose in distinguishing between the rhetoric of culture and the experience of culture is a means toward adopting a questioning rather than an accepting/acquiescent approach to culture. Put simply, my assertion is that women's experience of culture and its practices often does not resonate with the articulation of the value of such practices. While agencies of power, for example, chiefs, elders and governments, may argue that cultural practices are good for the community, women's experience of such practices is not necessarily so. However, as I seek a deeper understanding of the rhetoric of culture and the experience of culture, I acknowledge the multiplicity of realities and experience(s) as underpinned by the standpoints of various theorists (Harding, 2004; Arnot, 2006; Hartsock, 1981).

Culture affects women differently at different points in their lives. For instance, the cultural expectations and responsibilities of women change if they are married, single mothers, aged or divorced. This suggests that African women re-imagine themselves "*as members of different groups, in several places, and being citizens of the world, all at the same time*" (Ratele, 2007, p. 66). Krijay Govender's (2001) work, "*Subverting identity after 1994: the South African Indian woman as*

playwright”, illuminates culture as portraying the identity of people. In her work, she argues that South African Indians’ constructed notions of identity are located in history and place. This indicates that the identities of people change on account of their history and place of habitation. With respect to Indian South African women, their culture, as well as their identities, is constantly shifting according to the political, social and economic environment (ibid, 34). This arguably applies to women across the world, given, the global migration patterns and the increasing numbers of women who head different homes. In the words of Govender, “the so-called Indian South African woman’s identity has experienced shifts in both the apartheid and post-apartheid eras” (ibid, 34).

In West African countries (e.g. Nigeria and Ghana) where the military ruled from the 1980s to the late 1990s, the culture and identities of both men and women shifted between the pre-colonial period, the military regime, and the infant democracy era in the 2000s. During these periods, women who used to be housewives could no longer stay at home to perform domestic work, but looked for work or engaged in petty trade following the austerity measures brought about as a result of harsh economic policies favoured by military rulers (see Ezeilo, 1999; 2000). These circumstances, together with other aspects of lifestyle adjustment, such as friendly co-existence among women and men of all ethnicities and tribe, suggest that culture is learnt, and is fluid. To this end, it can be said that the success or failure of an individual or institution depends, to a reasonable extent, on the acceptance of the notion of a changing culture.

The writing of Mabokela (2004), and the narratives of participant(s) in her research, highlight the use of culture by societies as a political tool. A “society’s cultural symbols, performance traditions and expressive art can be used as tools through which subjugated groups exert political agency, especially when other forms of activism and movement participation are blocked” (Kuumba, 2006). These expressions of cultural politics, according to Alvarez,

Dagnino and Escobar (1998), can be defined as the process enacted when sets of social actors, shaped by and embodying different cultural meanings and practices, come into conflict with each other. Women’s lifestyles and achievements in Africa have been characterised and influenced by evolution in terms of changes from the pre-colonial, colonial, military and democracy periods in different countries. To be able to evaluate or assess the rhetoric of culture and cultural experiences of women, it is ideal that we “question culture”. According to Ratele (2007), cultivating a questioning attitude to culture is an estimable goal of critical inquiry and practice. Questioning culture is also needed when subverting the closed discourse about culture that rules the worlds of women and men and is thought to be a critical gender issue. While I understand that questioning culture will prompt a better understanding of its impact on men and women, Bodoie’s (2005) and (2012) work in Gambaga, Ghana, indicates that women who question culture and seek freedom for themselves are sometimes viewed as witches. Similarly, in South Africa, Shope (2006) notes that when women challenge patriarchal definitions of tradition and introduce gender equity, they are accused of “ruining” culture. This suggests that many African cultures consider it “culturally improper” for women to question culture.

Through “culture questioning”, African women are able to understand themselves, and thereafter are able to re-define and re-construct themselves beyond the “clutches of state-invoked culture – as more than just women” (Wilson-Tagoe, 2003; Acker & Webber 2006).

Questioning African culture, for example, “lobola” is tantamount to “African resistance”. This suggests that “African culture” defines Africa as a continent. The detailed analysis of this resistance spells out the difference between “national culture” and “African culture”. Franz Fanon – an important founder of the growing body of theory on African resistance and a Westernised West Indian and French citizen, who worked as a psychiatrist for the French army in Algeria – argues for “national cultures” rather than “African

cultures". This imperative according to Tomaselli (1987) emerged from the nation-building attempts which underpinned the continent's independence movements of the 1960s. Different yet similar, Dr Kwame Nkrumah, first prime minister and president of Ghana (1957 – 1966), advocated for African culture – “Africanisation” – when he said that “the independence of Ghana is meaningless unless when linked up with the total liberation of the entire African continent” on 6 March 1957. For him, it was not about “national culture” that is, culture within the borders of Ghana but beyond and across Africa as a continent – “African culture”. Fanon (1965) argues that culture takes concrete shape around the struggle of the people, not around signs, poems or folklore. In his view, culture is not a pre-determined model offered by the past. It is not a state of being, but a state of becoming. Fanon (1965) argues further that black petty bourgeois politicians often call on the idea of nationalism and “culture” to disguise their own opportunistic political agenda. Therefore, culture as a discursive romantic mobilising agent is common to both nationalist and popular struggles in Africa (Tomaselli 1987).

The act of questioning culture identifies the limitations and imperfections of culture and its influence on people; thus cultures that fail to acknowledge their own imperfections and limits are harmful to their members (Ratele, 2007). Concomitantly, “questioning culture” as is evident in the writings of gender and feminist scholars, necessitated the need for shaping and re-shaping their thinking (for example, Pereira, 2002; Oyewumi, 2002; Amadiume, 1987; Odejide, 2003; hooks, 2000). This partly explains why radical feminist writers today consistently affirm new ways of thinking and speaking, and pursue what is “visionary” and “imaginative” – these new ways of thinking and speaking challenge gender and feminist scholars to transcend neo-imperial and patriarchal boundaries (Lewis, 2005). Such feminists, according to Lewis (2005), suggest that “it may be in imaginative expression that we can find the most abundant sources to resist the coercive

powers of our present discursive context” (ibid, 76). It is therefore vital that women speak for themselves, and question for themselves.

Navigating through Marxism

This article is primarily aimed at setting the tone for a deeper understanding of culture and its implications on women, therefore, issues around culture and policy in relation to the experiences of women in societies is central and as such must point to the entry and exit points of the navigating route: my lens. In the light of this, Marxist standpoint theory was embraced. In this context, Marxism offers the classic model of a standpoint theory, claiming an epistemic privilege over fundamental questions of economics, sociology and history on behalf of the standpoint of the proletariat (Marx, 1964; Lukács, 1971).

Integrated in this theory is the articulation of the experiences of people, particularly women, as Sarah Harding, a Marxist standpoint theorist, noted. Using the Marxist theory is an attempt to gain meaningful insights to this research phenomenon, especially in the light of policy consideration that foreground rich and far over-reaching discussions and conclusions that would add to the knowledge of readers and intellectuals generally. This theory, according to the popular quote of Karl Marx on *change, understanding, and world* (1818 – 1883), is aimed at “not just understanding the world, but at changing it”. This for me aligns with the act of culture “questioning” by women herein – reviewed literature. Noting that Marxist theory is strongly influenced by a materialist approach which is drawn from various sources hence applicable to all fields of study, saves me the fears or worries of not applying it correctly.

In this article, rather than dealing with the many branching paths of Marxist scholarship and polemic as Noble (2001) advises, I concentrate on the political philosophy cum history and cultural domains (elements of the Marxist standpoint theory). Both domains help to discern what is distinctive about the realities (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology) of the Marxist theory and

how it represents the views of different people either as individuals or as a group. Marx believes that the history of society like culture could best be understood as a dialectical process, but a material dialectic – not the opposition and negation of abstract principle (Noble, 2001). Dialectical materialism consists of the confrontation of conflicting class interests (ibid). In this dialectic of class against class, and the negation of their negation, is the emergence of a new social order (Noble, 2001) which includes capitalism.

In his work titled, *“Culture in connection: re-contextualizing ideational processes in the analysis of policy development”*, Padamsee (2009) reveals that we cannot understand policy formulation without its cultural determinants. This according to Padamsee is new scholarship that has laid a solid foundation for approaching culture, ideas and discourses as constitutive elements of policy development and process. In Padamsee’s work, the four points of connection that help to re-position these processes within the larger endeavour of understanding policy formation are as follows: (a) interaction between ideational and other causal dynamics, (b) the interdependence of these processes and its implications for notions of causality in policy analysis, (c) the ways contemporaneous meanings are connected with one another, which reflects the multiplicity of cultures, ideas, and discourses, and (d) the connections between these meanings and discourses across time, which are critical to instances of significant policy change.

The points above, when combined is more observable and evident in a political economy of knowledge not refrained from questioning, but where human rights are cherished (see for example, Desai, 2013; Rivera, 2010; Cowen & Smith, 2009; Marx, 1857). The lesson learnt here does not only underscore the empirical and theoretical scholarship that typifies these connections, but simply highlights the relationship between culture and policy and by extension, pointing to proposed policy objectives.

Discussion

As a means of consolidating the writings and views of the writers mentioned above, I note in alignment with the view of Ratele (2005) that we need to constantly distinguish a positive cultural feeling from an exclusionary “us only” tendency. Hence, the questioning of culture will always be an attempt to show that the cultural world is made up of many stories in which gendered power figures feature prominently alongside state, economic, ethnical and racial forces (Ratele, 2007; Harding, 2004; 1993). The work of Lewis (2005), among other African scholars, indicates that questioning and analysing culture unveil “the complexities introduced into our cultural understandings of our identities by history, ethnicity and social stratifications...” (ibid, 143). Understanding these “complexities” is essential for a “just” policy consideration by all who are assigned the responsibility of formulating and implementing policies in all spheres of life.

Accordingly, such an approach shows that society does not begin and end with one’s own culture, however hegemonic, and that any single individual’s consciousness is only one minor part of culture. This suggests that the problem is one of transcending the binary: inviolable “culture”, on the one hand, and pure instrumentality, on the other hand (Loots, 2001). In her work, *“Re-situating culture in the body politic”*, Liane Loots argues that culture is a political issue that both challenges and defines nationhood, belonging, subjectivity and democracy (ibid, 12). She underlines that “culture being a political issue warrants binary”. For her, it is time to put the tired binary to sleep! In line with the understanding, “lobola”, a “pure instrument”, is the Marxist insight that culture, while pervasive, is not homogeneous with rifts within, yet correspond broadly to divisions within society especially class divisions. Against this background, culture should indeed be questioned particularly by those who experience the rifts given Marxist standpoint theorists’ exposition which supports the understanding of human experience particularly from personal narratives. Harding in her famous writing,

“The feminist standpoint theory reader: intellectual and political controversies”, emphasises that standpoint is an attempt to construct knowledge from the perspective of women’s lives. This according to Collins (1986) is based on the concept of women as being more able to bring objectivity to research as a result of their societal roles, described as the “outsider within”. With this ideology, the chances of culture been questioned from outside in an arbitrary and idealist manner is minimised.

The ability and desire to question expressed views, including those of one’s avowed culture, is one of the greatest gifts a culture and society can nourish in its members (Ratele, 2007); likewise in its policy consideration. And, in a world that demands of us to love our culture, to teach a child to approach what they get from the world with a questioning attitude, sets that child up for an open, interested and productive life (ibid, 75). Furthermore, it relaxes restrictions around culture, and establishes conditions to allow it to flourish and perhaps promote objectively existing social and class positions other than dominant ones. Questioning culture as the experiences of women in the reviewed literature depicts, is aimed at understanding and providing answers to relational cultural practices such as “lobola” that informs their fears or reservations. Their “questioning” compartment, overtly attempts to identify detailed imaginative and rethinking need for knowledge (Loots, 2001). Foucault documented how knowledge of issues concerning a large spectrum of livelihoods in the 18th and 19th centuries became the basis of new practices on which institutions and societies were built. These institutional practices and cultures, which shaped perceptions, categories, values and behaviour (Wright, 1998), are nest in structural individualism (Noble, 2001).

In an attempt to shed light on structural individualism and traditional societies, Weber (1949) argued that ideas and values are crucial in shaping human actions and can therefore bring about self-reflective change. Adam Smith believes that people are primarily driven by private, human considerations: hunger, thirst, the passion

which unites the two sexes, the love of pleasure and the dread of pain (Smith, 1759). These pleasures and pains, according to Noble (2001), include the pleasure of being thought well of, or deserving to be thought well of, by our fellow men and women and the same or earning embarrassment, which usually invokes or provokes the questioning of existing norms and practices, simply culture, be they cultural, social, economic or politically inclined.

Substantially, the experience of these women (in reviewed literature), which necessitated their questioning attitude, tilts towards understanding neutrality and equality barriers of both sexes, as Marxist standpoint theorists advanced. Meredith Tax, a Marxist literary critic, asks that if culture is not neutral, whom does it serve? (Tax, 1973, p. 45). Basically, as Tax responded, it is to promote and attract political benefits to patriarchy and capitalism (see Loots, 2001). This is an explanation for describing culture as “coercive power” which industrialists, capitalists and politicians – who are usually men – hold on to for directing, if not manipulating the lives of women. Further to this, Gramsci links the “coercive power” of capitalists and owners of resources to hegemony and class division, a dominant feature of culture as (Wright, 1998; Desai, 2013; Cowen & Smith, 2009) identified. Of course, hegemony is how the ruling class persuades the masses to consent to be ruled in a certain way (Gramsci, 1976; Desai, 2013).

Conclusion

The term culture is used in many contexts to mean different things as illustrated in the definitions of different scholars. Nevertheless, this article reveals that where people are involved, especially as it concerns communities, societies and nations, culture is present. From pre-colonial to post-colonial, military and democracy eras in African societies, different policies have been formulated by different governments, yet culture – a major determinant and reflection of the way of people’s life – appears not to have meaningfully changed. As shown in this

article, culture explains things such as bride price (lobola) and dowry; but ideas, beliefs and thoughts around things like “lobola” and dowry for example, are held onto to explain culture itself.

This article illuminates the fact that, over time, African women have persistently questioned the ways in which understandings of culture have both valued and devalued them. It is equally clear that the major implication of culture (lobola) on women and their space in all spheres of life is centered on their external adaptation i.e. how to survive and internal integration, that is, how to stay together with their husbands and families. “Lobola” or “bride price” as a form of culture is not in any way different in selected countries given the experiences of women. In fact, “lobola” is a significant cultural element that African women cling to because of the respect and dignity it confers on them. However, it hinders women questioning approach to culture meaningless, that is, renders their voices insignificant given the fact that men cling to it because it gives them the power to silent the questioning approach of women to culture. In addition, this article shows clearly that the space of women as members of the household and at macro level is shaped by existing culture which they must confine their lives. “Lobola” as a form of culture illuminates codification of women’s experience in their everyday life; of which it’s questioning replaces consciousness that equally conforms to their experience.

While questioning the culture of “lobola” may have mentally change the ideologies of women, it has not change their world as Marxist theorists agitate, but certainly leads to critique the illusion of homogenous practices and uniform thinking among Africa women. I opine that, culture is both a state of “being” and a state of “becoming”; an opinion that contrast Fanon’s view. This implies that it determine women’s lives as well as that of men in present times and the future to come. If culture is applicable to the present only that is, state of being; then women or the dominant or exploited class would worry less hence there might be no need to “question culture”. More so, questioning culture is not just being

inquisitive or rebellious: it is a kind of critical awareness about our beliefs, ideas and thoughts’ limitations in the realm of globalised and democratic societies that translate into pursuit of human rights and gender equality amongst others.

In sum, culture, as shown in this research, are deeply contextualised and highly contested. As such, their transformability, through questioning, is fundamental to policy formulation and implementation if a better life for women, and indeed, for men is what African societies seek.

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