



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

Religious Myths and the Internalization of Non-Leadership Identities in Nigerian Women: A Symbolic Interactionist Analysis

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Abstract:

Despite concerted efforts to promote gender equity in the global space, women remain underrepresented in leadership. This trend is most observed in Nigeria, where of the 49.99 percent of women in the population, only 6.7 percent are in elective and appointive political positions. Research suggests that men are usually seen as more capable leaders, even when women have higher qualifications. This paper attempts to investigate the etymology of this notion within the postcolonial framework and feminist research while drawing on a social psychology theory. Using the symbolic interactionist theory, I examine why/how the gender in which divinity is conceptualized sets the stage for stereotypes that inform a people's perception and conception of reality, thereby influencing how the attributes associated with the feminine and masculine are perceived in society. My argument is that the functionality of the symbolization process in religious myths is connected to the conscious and unconscious processes of human thought, perception, imagination, and intuition; therefore, it relates to epistemology as a means of knowledge. This makes it function dialectically and interpretively with the social processes, enabling outcomes such as the masculinization of the social reality and the internalization of non-leadership identities in women.

Keywords: *Feminine, identity, leadership, masculinization, religious myths, symbols, symbolic interaction*

1. Introduction

Myths are traditional stories transmitted through generations, and societies use them to explain their history and belief systems (Murfin & Ray, 2003). In ancient cultures, myths were used to create moral codes, explain natural phenomena, inspire art, and establish religious beliefs. Most myths use symbols to tell their story. By symbols, I mean the visible something that is used to represent an invisible reality, either by interpretation, association, or conversion. The ethology of symbols is as old as the human experience. Several forms and expressions of the processes through which humans make sense of, and experience reality are connected to the concept of symbols. Literature from social anthropology research hypothesizes a direct relationship between the gender in which the mystic creator is symbolized and sex roles in society (Sanday, 1981). Expanding on this hypothesis, I attempt a psychological analysis of this premise using the Symbolic Interactionism (SI) theory of self and identity. SI is a social interaction framework popularized by George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) and Max Weber (1864–1920), where society is conceptualized as the product of shared symbols. Also, the social world is constructed by the meanings the individuals attach to these symbols in their social interactions, all of which are then transmitted intergenerationally through language (Serpe & Stryker, 2011). Therefore, I contrast the masculine conception of divinity in Judeo-Christianity and the feminine conception in Indigenous Ijo/Ijaw (African) culture, with the purpose of showing how their myths influence the social process. Guiding this paper is the question: In what way might the masculine conception of divinity impact society differently from the feminine or dual conception, especially with regard to how social identities are constructed? I draw from the psychological meaning of identity, which is the amalgamation of the memories, experiences, values, and relationships a person utilizes in creating their sense of self.

2. Myths and Perception of Reality

From time immemorial, myths have played a significant role in human societies, especially when it comes to providing the basis for religious beliefs and practices. Hence, their ability to provide humans with a framework for understanding the world. The ideas in myths are usually represented with symbols, thus the symbiotic relationship between them. In the history of humanity, myths and symbols with a religious undertone have been shown to have the most influence on the way people construct reality because of their association with the divine or sacred. Cross-cultural comparisons of myths show similarities in their themes, structures, images, and features (Myth, p. 284). This is true in

creation myths, where the creator is either conceptualized as feminine, masculine or dual (a combination of feminine and masculine). For instance, in the creation myth of the Abrahamic religions, the Creator is male.

According to feminine historian Merlin Stone (1976), some of the more ancient creation stories had a feminine creator. In her revolutionary book based on a decade of research, Stone (1976) traces the worship of the Divine Mother or Goddess to the Paleolithic and Neolithic ages, maintaining that feminine creator stories were suppressed by patriarchal accounts as their cultures gained dominance. A few, such as the Ijo accounts (in Southern Nigeria), were preserved orally through myth until they were able to be written down. In Ijo cosmology, the universe was created and sustained by a feminine creator known as *Woyingi* (or *Woyengi*). *Woyingi*, which means 'She Who Creates' in circumstantial interpretation, is said to have arrived on the earth with a lightning and thunderbolt, and while sitting on a stone, beneath a sacred tree, with her feet on the 'Creation stone' moulded humans out of the mud of the earth, on a sacred surface. After which, she hugs and breathes into them, and they become living beings.

In her article, "Pre-patriarchal Creation Stories", American theologian and feminist Leslie Miller-Mangile (1993, p. 29) examines the difference between patriarchal and matriarchal creation accounts. What she observed are as follows:

"In most patriarchal creation stories,...The male God commands; it is his words that create. In the majority of Goddess creation stories, She creates from Her own body, giving birth not only to the heavens and earth but often to other Gods and Goddesses and, in some cases, humankind itself. There are other myths in which the earth already exists, and the Goddess creates humans from things She finds around Her....The closest a Goddess comes to commanding into being is in a legend in which She is said to have used singing to create."

According to Miller-Mangile (1993), the central theme in feminine creation stories is that 'the Divine Mother' is an intricate part of everything she creates. One who creates out of already existing matter and is conceptualized as the Divine Ancestress, who births all of creation or from whom creation emanates. Unlike the masculine creator who commands and his words create, portraying a dissociation from his creation. These notions are inferred and reflected in the socially constructed leadership styles associated with the feminine and masculine. Observably, the symbolization of the male creator as one who 'commands' creation into existence was used to construct a 'God' who is not to be questioned nor subject to logical interrogation, making 'him' most suitable for promoting a narrative of domination.

Most feminist philosophers (e.g., Sanday, 1981) argue that the adoption of a sole male divinity by the Abrahamic religions was intentional. The purpose was to derive a creation myth distinct from the neighbouring Asiatic and Northern African cultures, whose myths represented creation as a product of the mystical collaboration of the feminine and masculine deities (Isherwood & McEwan, 1993, p. 52). Through the male conception of God, the Judeo-Christian sources were able to symbolize God as "...the mirror image of a patriarchal society in which the leaders of the tribe are men who rule and judge" (Isherwood & McEwan, 1993, p. 5).

Creation mythology, though allegorical, contains themes that represent strong symbolic meanings. Precisely, the interaction with the help of symbols is a central feature of human societies, as symbols and their interpretations form a basis through which society generates meaning. Psychologically, symbolization is an unconscious mental process in which an idea or object represents another through some aspect or quality they both have in common. That is why a symbol can invoke the same emotional response as the initial idea or object it is associated with. Symbols can function this way because they have an analogous cognitional and existential relationship to what they represent or signify. Thus, in any social reality, social cognitive categories such as feminine, masculine, or child are often constrained to stereotypical definitions that are often derived from their symbolization in the religious myths of society. One consequence in the context of myths of the Abrahamic religion is the superiority of the masculine against the feminine.

3. Symbols and Social Relations

Besides the notion of male superiority attached to the masculine construct of divinity, other aspects of the Abrahamic creation myth symbolize the feminine as inferior. One is the idea that the man was created first, symbolizing masculinity as the first principle. Also, the woman was not only made out of the man but is the co-conspirator or harbinger of evil who was first deceived and misled the man to sin. This myth has been used as a defence to discourage female leadership and further masculinize social and political leadership, as the feminine is associated with gullibility, emotionalism, and illogicality. None of these attributes are considered relevant in a leadership space. Further, every expression of maleness is associated with leadership, whether he be a father, husband, or son. As popular American feminist Mary Daly (1973 1993) cynically said, "If God is male, the male is God." In reality, the Christian Bible has more than one creation account. The first account recorded in Genesis chapter 1, verses 26-27, implies the equality of the masculine and feminine, unlike the second account in Genesis chapter 2, verses 21-23, where the woman is made out of the man. Interestingly, this, and several other scriptural contexts where God is represented as feminine, is hardly mentioned because it does not fit into the male monotheistic agenda.

Literature from social anthropological research hypothesises that women have greater access to social, economic, and political power in cultures with a feminine creator in their creation myths (Boomer, 2016; Sanday, 1981, p. 15-16). Confirmation of this hypothesis can be found in the Ijo culture in Southern Nigeria, whose societies are historically matrifocal. In Ijo ethos, feminine-related themes and roles like motherhood are highly valued, as the feminine is perceived as the confluence between the spiritual and material worlds. Additionally, the 'Mother' is regarded as the source of all being, subsequently, their family structures are based on a matrilineal system. Here, lineage is traced from the mother, and offspring belong to the maternal family. Similarly, among the Kalabari-Ijo, a sub-group of the Ijo, where divinity is conceptualized as the feminine (*Tamuno*), who creates, and the masculine (*So*), who governs the universe, offsprings belong to both the maternal and paternal families. Historically, in both Ijo and Kalabari-Ijo cultures, women had high status in the socio-political, economic, and spiritual spheres in precolonial society, functioning in several leadership roles,

from sovereign leaders, high priestesses and merchants (Alagoa, 2003; Wariboko, 1995), unlike in patriarchal societies, where roles associated with femininity are stereotyped with weakness and emotionalism, therefore unrelated to leadership.

It is important to note that the matrilineal system practised in Ijo cultures does not infer the relegation of the men in society, as conceptualized in cultures influenced by Abrahamic religion. Where attributes associated with the feminine are tinted by the notion of Eve's 'sin', from whence arose the negative connotations attributed to feminine concepts such as matriarchy. Contrarily, the matrilineal system practised in precolonial Africa presupposes the centrality of the feminine as a first principle and motherhood as the foundation and glue of the family and society (Nzegwu, 2020). Here, the feminine is seen as the point of origin in the existential reality and scheme of all the spheres of society – social, political, economic, family, and community. Inherently, the myth of a feminine creator justified the tracing of lineage through the mother because its symbolism validates the belief that every person came through the virginal canal, making the maternal the basis of human linkages. This notion is strongly endorsed in the Ijo worldview, where the cosmic virginal canal of *Woyingi* – 'She Who Creates' symbolizes the collective origins of reality.

One important aspect of the symbolization process that is emphasized in psychology is the direct relationship between the context of the symbol and its interpretation. Intrinsically, as the social context changes, new forms of meaning arise. This was the case when the colonial agencies (i.e., the Church and school) were used to enforce the cultural assimilation agenda of the colonialists, resulting in the deliberate obliteration of the Ijo indigenous worldview and the imposition of the myths of the colonizers as the ideal. With this came the redefinition of the social reality and the recasting of social identities into one that best reflected the Christian notion. This resulted in the creation of a society where individuals were indoctrinated to internalize a notion of the submissive - second-class feminine identity. This scenario buttresses the power of myths as sources of knowledge that inform the identity formation process.

4. Symbolic Interaction and the Construction of Non-Leadership Identities

The main argument of the SI framework is that a person's personality is formed within society and shaped through interaction with others. This buttresses how our unconscious processes influence identity formation. It also confirms a central stance of the SI hypothesis, which is the importance of social processes through which identity emerges and functions. According to the SI perspective of self and identity construction, identities are internalized self-designations associated with positions individuals occupy within various social contexts, therefore, are a crucial link between the individual and their location in the social structure, as well as the roles they take on by reason of this location (Serpe, & Stryker, 2011). Further, in the SI framework, identity is conceptualized as different from role. Identity is the meaning an individual ascribes to themselves within the context of a given role and, therefore, is perceived as the most visible aspect of the self that is interpreted during the interaction with others (Serpe & Stryker, 2011). Roles, on the other hand, are conceptualized as being 'performative' and situational; thus, they are continuously improvised as individuals attempt to actualize their goals (Carter & Fuller, 2016).

By implication, identities are those role expectations that have been internalized by the self and others. This internalization process is attributed to the legitimatizing ability of the societal myths and their related symbols. Such a hegemonic environment induces psychosocial pressures on the unconscious of individuals. According to SI, individuals assign higher importance to symbols associated with shared identities and meanings connected to the position/role they occupy within the social structures (Serpe & Stryker, 2011). Similarly, identities that are related to the values, norms, and other symbols within the individuals' social structure occupy higher positions in their consciousness. This highlights the part environmental perception and conceptual categorization play in how humans construct and transform their notions of self and identity. It also elucidates the reason a woman in a patriarchal society would feel pressured into conforming to what society perceives as the appropriate expressions of femininity. This illuminates why people in contemporary Nigerian societies feel uncomfortable with the idea of perceiving a woman as a leader and the women themselves struggling to self-identify as leaders. It also explains why individuals who appear not to fit into the expected mould are gaslighted as 'abnormal' or dissident.

Ultimately, a person in such an environment learns to conform to these 'norms' and interact in ways the society considers appropriate. Hence, my contention is that the present trend of low representation of Nigerian women in political leadership is due to the epistemic sensitization of the notion of the inferiority of the feminine in the social reality, resulting in the internalization of the non-leadership identity in women. This could explain why deliberate efforts at balancing the proportion of women in leadership roles through measures such as the insistence on quotas of candidates for leadership positions produce little result. In most instances, most women in leadership appear to be uncomfortable with their roles. Consequences of this are seen in their apologetic stance, especially when having to lead men, as well as the reluctance to encourage other women to aspire to leadership. In reality, becoming a leader goes beyond acquiring leadership skills or attaining a leadership position or role. It requires a fundamental shift in the internalized identity of the self and others.

5. Conclusion

The study of creation myths is a captivating subject, considering there are several avenues to explore. Not only do they contain materials from which we can draw inferences about how humans conceptualized divinity and reality in times past. They also provide us with symbols and shared themes that show how interconnected and related the human race is. One feature that is evident in creation myths is the elimination of female creators by male creator accounts as their cultures gained global dominance. Through conquest and colonization, the lens through which these cultures perceived and interpreted the world gained prominence. One consequence of their dominance is the masculinization of the social reality. A legacy that is still impacting human relations in postcolonial societies. Therefore, to effectively promote gender

equity in the Nigerian leadership space, an approach that recognizes the etymology of the problem needs to be adopted. One that will enable us to deconstruct the 'non-leadership' identity associated with the feminine and enable women to internalize a leadership identity and perform leadership functions with a strengthened sense of purpose.

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