

Groaning in Faith

African Women in the
Household of God

Edited by

Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro
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Women's Well-being in Culture and Religion

Sonnet make their changes by hearing the shoutings of urban. Older women say and through this age they make new beginnings for their lives. They privilege to hear some of the stories of many of these women as to accompany them as they go through their transformations, at times spaces for others to grow and sing, and others, as we must, ministry. I can be grateful that the Lord I believe in thinks that this is a good thing to do even though women's stories are not often a priority for Church leaders. I claim my experience and the presence of the Holy Spirit for the reality of my ministry.

Maria

I should like to acknowledge with thanks the many women and men I met in my own time and work who continually affect my thinking and develop my own participation in doing theology. I have been influenced by many books written on ministry, but I want specifically to acknowledge two of them:

- Blindness, 1862-1947: Germany's Atonement Vision of Ministry* New York: Westminster Press
- Blind, L. M. (1973) Church in the World: Atonement Interpretation of the Church's Mission* The Westminster John Knox

14 Olivia Nassaka

Women and Taboo

A Case Study on Buganda in Uganda

Introduction

Women, as persons belonging to the Kingdom of God, are located throughout the world. In their different locations, they experience diverse cultures, customs and beliefs which influence and affect their well-being at different levels. This paper explores how taboos influence and affect the well-being of women, with a case study on Buganda in Uganda.

What is a taboo?

Taboo can simply be defined as 'something which religion or custom regards as forbidden' (Hornby n.d.) or 'something traditionally forbidden' (Adegbola 1983). In Buganda, taboos are referred to as 'emizizo', meaning 'things which are forbidden'. Every belief, custom and tradition in Buganda has taboos which accompany it. Taboos act as regulators of behaviour in society. They prevent the breaking of customs and conventions, since the breaking of a taboo is an abomination in society and is met with bad luck, rejection or even death. Taboos, therefore, inculcate fear and prevent or lessen the commission of sin, for, in Buganda, persons sin if they violate set norms, conventions, customs or beliefs.

Taboos were and are intended to regulate the behaviour of the individual, group and community at large. Society is concerned with the life, behaviour and well-being of every one of its members, and a person's actions affect the whole of society.

Taboos in Buganda

Taboos in Buganda and elsewhere in Africa surround all areas of life: from an individual's birth, throughout their childhood, their marriage and up to their death. In Buganda, taboos permeate the existence of human beings and all human practices. Women and men live within the limits of societal control, and everyone has to live and do everything carefully in order not to break any taboo. From the time a girl is born, she begins to live within the limits set by different taboos and sees others doing the same. As she matures, she learns to avoid breaking taboos.

Bugandan taboos to be avoided by all women and girls include:

- 1 Girls should not sit in their father's chair in the home. If they did, the father would die.
- 2 Girls who have started their menstrual cycles should not stay in their parents' house, for fear of the parents suffering from 'obuko' (an unclean disease which can result in madness).
- 3 A woman or girl should not get pregnant when she is still in her parents' home. If it happened, that home would become unclean and the girl would be sent to some other place.
- 4 A pregnant woman should not move about or sleep with other men. If a woman broke this taboo her child would die or she would turn mad after giving birth.
- 5 A woman who is still of childbearing age should not eat eggs and chicken. If a woman broke this taboo she would be regarded as a thief and an indecent woman.
- 6 Women should not eat their 'tortems' – clan symbols like plants and animals – nor the tortems of their children. If a woman broke this taboo she would be disowned by her family and clan members. This would also happen to her children.
- 7 A woman should not touch her in-laws, for fear of 'oduko' – suffering from an unclean disease.
- 8 A woman should not climb a wall or climb to the roof of a house. If a woman broke this taboo, no relative would enter that house until it was cleansed. If a person, including her own child or husband, entered that house they would die.
- 9 A woman should not open up a new building or sleep in it in the absence of a man or boy. If this taboo were violated someone in that home would fall sick or die.
- 10 A woman should not get married to her relatives or clansmen.

Breaking a taboo makes a person unclean and impure. That person, their family or community have to perform cleansing rituals and ceremonies to clear away the abomination or sin. Elders, diviners and medicine men or women carry out the cleansing rituals. For example, if a girl became pregnant when she was still in her parents' compound, a kid or a goat would be led through the front door of the house and pulled out through the back door. The kid would be sacrificed/slaughtered, food would be prepared and served with the kid's meat. Then a small hut would be built for the girl to sleep in, or she would be sent away to stay with some other people, or married off to the man who impregnated her.

Taboos and Bugandan women

These sorts of taboos and many others like them continue to affect the well-being of women in Buganda, socially, economically and politically. Their effect can be either positive or negative. I shall discuss first those taboos which have a positive effect.

Taboos which forbid women from eating their tortems and that of their children are helpful and have healthy effects, both on individual women and society as a whole, because women are created to live with others in society and to be in harmony with them. A woman belongs to a family, clan and community and cannot live in isolation. Therefore, taboos which create in a woman a sense of belonging, which help her to live a respectable life in harmony with others (especially her relatives), contribute to her well-being. The case of a woman not eating her children's tortem, for example, is one way of helping a mother bring up her children in an acceptable way and to rear and help them grow into respectable persons in society.

The two taboos which bar women from touching their in-laws and marrying their relatives or clansmen are also important and healthy taboos in Buganda. They encourage women to respect their relatives and clansmen, and to live as respectable people. In addition, it is known that it is not good for people of the same genetic composition to marry one another, for they risk passing on to their children genetic abnormalities and inherited diseases.

The taboo which forbids pregnant women to move about or sleep with other men is also healthy and is aimed at the well-being of the mother and her child. It helps to minimize the danger of contracting sexually transmitted diseases, which can affect the health of both of them. This taboo has become even more helpful in the era of AIDS. It also helps to keep strong and faithful marriages.

On the other hand, some taboos hinder the well-being of women and can prevent them from enjoying life in all its fullness in the Kingdom of

God. Taboos relating to menstruation make a girl grow up with feelings of shame and dislike about her womanhood, which separate her from her parents at a time when she most needs them. A menstruating girl's enforced removal from her parents' home exposes her to the world at too early an age, which is why she may indulge prematurely in sex. Such a taboo becomes a source of misery.

Furthermore, taboos in Buganda which stop women of childbearing age from eating highly nutritional foods like eggs and chicken undermine their well-being. Today, the taboo has been overcome to such an extent that many women now eat these foods, although some, especially in the rural areas, still abide by the taboo.

Taboos which stop women in Buganda from building houses have badly affected their social and economic well-being. Such taboos have killed creativity and initiative among women and bred laziness, despite the fact that today in Uganda and elsewhere in the world women shoulder the greatest burden, caring for the children and themselves. Such taboos have retarded development and made women overly dependent on men. Consequently, some women forget God, their father and creator, and look to their husbands as the source of their survival. When it comes to politics, women do not take leadership roles because they feel unworthy and fear rejection. This is a great setback to women's well-being as they strive to participate in the Kingdom of God.

Taboos which forbid girls from becoming pregnant while they are still in their parents' homes help them to avoid premarital sex. However, the punishment given to girls who break this taboo is very cruel and unhealthy. Chasing them away, or marrying them off to men who do not love them, is an inhuman punishment which makes some girls seek an abortion or attempt suicide, while others just disappear from home. Some become prostitutes in order to exist in this cruel world.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it has been observed that some taboos can enhance the well-being of women in the Kingdom of God, while others are just a hindrance. Taboos bring about social order, control behaviour and regulate misconduct in society. On the other hand, they can also enslave people by creating fear, especially among women. This retards reasoning, blocks creativity, hinders personal initiative and finally slows down development again, especially among women. All this reduces women to levels which God did not intend for them, levels which deny women the abundant life that God did intend. It is then that Christianity and other religions should

intervene in order to develop and even rescue the humanity of women: the Kingdom of God is at hand, wherein Jesus 'proclaims the good news to the poor... release to the captives... and sets at liberty those who are oppressed' (Luke 4.18).

In the light of Jesus' words, there is an urgent need to set free African women from some oppressive taboos. Taboos which dehumanize and hinder the well-being of women should be discouraged, while those that lead to the well-being of women should be encouraged and developed to suit the times. People need to be educated about taboos and their values. This will help them to know why they should not do certain things or behave in certain ways. Let people be educated in the importance of good health conditions and how to lead respectable lives, openly, without blurring any information in ritual prohibitions. This will help people, especially women, to become more responsible and to live in harmony with others. God's Kingdom can exist and operate within human cultures, but it cannot be controlled by human regulations, prohibitions and taboos.

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