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The cultural distortion of the African world view and the subordination of women in 'postcolonial' African societies

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The purpose of this article is to bring to light a critical question which borders around the decolonial feminism discourse, and in so doing I unveil some salient insights which add valuable contributions to the discourse about the place of feminism in the African context. The motivating problem is the question of subordination of women in Africa. There are many reasons and questions, each deserving thorough examination that have been brought forward for the causes and possible explanations of the phenomenon. The argument I seek to highlight is that cultural distortion through colonisation has led to the valorisation of narratives that perpetuate the subordination of women in Africa. One such narrative is that women are second-class citizens and that they occupy an inferior position in the social, economic and political hierarchies of our society. What will come from this article is that these narratives persist in what we would consider a postcolonial "modern" Africa where women seem to be gaining rights and tapping into spaces that foster equality owing to feminism. However, the subordination of women is still prevalent, even for the "liberated" women. The article will show why the persistence of this problem is proving difficult for the comprehension and acceptance of feminism in African contexts.

Introduction

To think of the subordination of women is to mull over one of the issues that has been redundantly discussed, and often there are solutions proposed to address those issues but they remain largely unimplemented. Meanwhile, the problem of the subordination of women is a global one; the root of the subordination is different in each continent. Some of the reasons may overlap, but some are certainly unique to a single continent. In the case of Africa, the oppression of women has multiple roots, but this article will only focus on the colonial factor. Thus, this article seeks to express that the subordination of women in Africa is tied to colonialism. The birth of this article is due to such concerns, and precisely the question: why is the subordination of women prevalent in a modern and "postcolonial" Africa? With awareness that this problem affects women on the entire continent, the article will focus on women in selected cultures such as the Yoruba in the western part of Africa and the Bantu cultures in the southern part of Africa. This is to allow for a more focused approach and to avoid misrepresentation. The article will propose that the cultural distortion of the traditional African world view has led to the subordination of women in a modern and "postcolonial" Africa. To support this claim, I will outline a particular narrative which legitimised the subjugation of women in Africa through cultural distortion. The narrative referred to here is colonialism.

The colonial ideology held a particular view about the African world view based on direct encounters with the continent. The perceptions held by the proponents of this ideology have subsequently been passed on to the African people through the use of force and "false liberation", and this has put the African woman in a continuous position of subordination. Hence, to investigate how the culture and the African world view has been distorted is one possible way of highlighting the root and also the persistency of the problem and thus pointing towards a distinct way in which

the problem could be solved. The article acknowledges the cultural diversity of the continent and the multiple world views which are based on the different cultures. While there are different cultural world views, the common idea that the article will interact with is the case of how women were understood in some world views. As I will demonstrate in the article, women were viewed as having a higher status in African society in precolonial societies.

The article is divided into two parts: the first part provides an in-depth explanation of the idea of cultural distortion and how that is linked to the subordination of women in our context. The second part of the article will discuss how colonialism is one such narrative which has become a tool for the distortion of the traditional African world view and how that has led to the legitimisation of women's subordination in this context. Potential objections will be considered, one of which is that African cultures considered women as subordinates, or second-class citizens before the advent of colonialism. In response to this objection, the article will demonstrate that this too is a source of cultural distortion. Another objection against the main claim is that of the evolution of cultures and the results of the changes both desired and unfavourable of the evolution, thus justifying the idea that cultures change over time despite the results of the change. A rebuttal to this is that the way in which a culture evolves should not lead to the adoption of views imposed through force and deception which in turn lead to the violation of other beings' existence.

Cultural distortion and the subordination of women

The major difficulty implicit in this discussion is attempting to think about the continuous subjugation of women in Africa, whether it is prevalent across the precolonialism, colonialism and postcolonialism timelines. Another element is to understand the link between this subjugation and changes in a particular culture. The justification for the use of this timeline is because according to Mbembe (2001, 1), "the African human experience constantly appears in the discourse of our times as an experience that can only be understood through a negative interpretation". What this means is that the majority of Africans in our times have viewed their past (precolonial and colonial) in a negative manner and that largely informs the lens through which they view the present. This specifically applies to the case of the subordination of women. While the historical narrative on the colonial part is quite clear, it is grim. The precolonial time is barely accessible in academic works except through the eyes of the missionaries, traders and European invaders. Most of the academic work gave a biased account of the reality of the lives of African women, which was often viewed in contrast with stereotype of Western women during those times (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1997). Coquery-Vidrovitch (1997, 14) explains that the narratives given by missionaries often indicated that "[w]omen were thus officially excluded from power, and in fact their presence was forbidden in the men's debating courtyard". Contrary to the tales of the missionaries, Mutwa (1998) gives an account of some the laws of the Bantu which were upheld in the precolonial era. At the core of these laws is the idea that women are to be honoured and held in the highest regard because of their roles as life givers. Thus women were the matriarchs of the family, consulted in decision-making and not excluded as the previous example suggests. This shows that much of the traditional African world view and culture may have been distorted through the manner in which it was conveyed in some of the academic work. Therefore, there is a need to uncover how the cultural distortion occurred, which in turn will reveal how it is linked to the subordination of women. This will be done by analysing how women were defined across the given timelines and across the Bantu and the Yoruba cultures in Africa.

Cultural distortion and traditional African world views

It is necessary to define the main concepts briefly before proceeding so that there is an understanding of what is meant by cultural distortion and the subordination of women. Cultural distortion has been defined as the way in which the literature by the colonising culture distorts the experience and realities of the colonised people and inscribes their inferiority (Rice 2016). However, this definition requires further elaboration for it to capture the ideas relevant for the argument made in this article. For those reasons, I consider that the definition supplies the method employed by a colonising culture when explaining the phenomenon of cultural distortion. In the case of the literature, one

has to be aware that it involves more than written works of fiction and reality, poetry, music and all works of art, and that it encompasses those aspects that transmit a culture. For the "modern" educated African, that is to say Africans of the 21st century, their exposure to written literary works through the education system which has largely been colonial is laden with information which both directly and subtly paints the African world view as irrational. Furthermore, the academic canon, as it has been inherited by modern Africans, still has features that dehumanise the African world view; for example, science, which is largely Western, has barely opened up its doors to accommodating aspects of the African world view that could contribute immensely to the discipline. With that being said, what would cultural distortion mean? Does it mean a particular culture imposes itself on another culture, if yes, how is this process facilitated? Are the resulting changes always undesirable? To answer these questions and those that could potentially arise, I propose to analyse the phenomenon of cultural distortion by deconstructing the words and looking at them separately.

Culture is defined as the enduring behaviours, ideas, attitudes and traditions shared by a large group of people and transmitted from one generation to the next (Meyers 2013). Meanwhile, Patten (2014, 52) posits that "cultures are defined by their members' shared experience of social formation". Based on these definitions, we can conclude that culture is not just a definition of a way of life for a group of people, but a phenomenon that speaks to their shared paradigms, patterns of thought and the lenses through which they will view and interpret the world. All these elements are enduring as highlighted in the definition, meaning that they can remain in existence for long periods of time, for example, the practice of *lobola* in African cultures, particularly the Bantu cultures. These paradigms, beliefs and perspectives are shared among the community. These then inform the values that the community upholds and transmits to future generations. The transmission of culture is not abrupt; it is a process that withstands the test of time. Therefore, one has to question the changes in most African cultures to ensure that in as much as a culture does evolve (meaning modification), it does not necessarily mean a complete shift in the culture, but that a part of it – for example, an attitude – becomes enhanced and better serves that culture. Whether or not that is desirable is a question of cultural relativism and will be posed in most cases by those who are outside of that culture.

The use of the word distortion bears a negative connotation. It means changing something to make it unclear, to make it strange, untrue and or inaccurate (Hornby 2010, 425). Distortion could mean the change of the lens through which one uses to view the world, or a change of the context that is being viewed. One has to think of the intent of the distortion, because to bring about the distortion, the motive driving the distortion should be brought to light. Analysing the motive of the distortion helps to understand the extent of the distortion and the lasting implications it has on a particular group of people. Often, the motive for the distortion is the assumption that culture is static (Matthes 2018). Once one particular group sees the other group's culture as unprogressive, this is used as a reason to want to save the other culture. The imposing culture then succeeds in placing itself as superior and representing all that is ideal and desirable in terms of the standard of the way of life. The culture that is deemed inferior will begin to view its own perspective of the world as flawed and irrational (Kohn and Reddy 2023). This is undoubtedly the case in Africa. As mentioned above, education was used as a way of distorting the African world view, and it still is. Colonialism is one major tool of cultural distortion and its effects have lingered into the postcolonial era which is also facing a new kind of colonialism. In the next section, I outline what it means to be a woman in the African world view and if it is any different across the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial timelines. By doing so this will provide room for clarification on how exactly cultural distortion has changed the perception of being a woman.

Being a woman and/or female in the African world view

To qualify the idea of the "postcolonial" woman, what is significant about her and her context (time and space) is essential because it not only shows how different she is from her predecessors who lived in different contexts, but it also highlights the similarities they share. According to Mbembe (2001, 102), "the notion 'postcolony' identifies specifically a given historical trajectory: that of societies recently emerging from the experience of colonisation and the violence which the colonial

relationship involves". This situates the African women in a context where her identity is under scrutiny by herself and those who perceive her. She is on a quest to self-determine and there are many narratives, for example, a misguided feminism that can easily shape how she identifies herself. The danger here is the source of those narratives.

Let us now consider the perception of women in the precolonial era, while acknowledging that the data in this particular focus of the article may be limited in some sense, since casting our gaze on the seemingly forgotten and unreachable past is problematic because of the inaccessibility of that past. The article will not hesitate to use the information available as it gives room for more questions and insight into the nuances of the perspectives of the African cultures on women. Amadiume (2005) explains that, coming from the works of Diop, the social structure in precolonial Africa was essentially matriarchal. So, in this case it could be that women were seen in a different light from what we perceive them to have been in that time. What we know about women in precolonial Africa through sources of knowledge such as proverbs reflects them as masochistic, women who were expected to enjoy and endure pain and who were groomed for pain (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1997, 14–15). I will cite some proverbs from the Batswana and the Basotho of southern Africa to show the depth of this belief. The first proverb is the common Batswana proverb which reads *Mosadi o tshwara thipa ka bogaleng* "a woman holds the knife with/by its cutting edge [the sharp end]" (Masenya 2018). This proverb can be interpreted in two ways; however, an in-depth meaning reflects that both interpretations point to the same idea. The first interpretation is that no matter the intensity of the pain, a woman will always endure. A woman faces danger head on, taking risks along the way and emerging from the situation victorious and stronger than before. This interpretation celebrates the pain-bearing abilities of women in any given circumstance. The second interpretation is given as an expectation, that is, a woman must and has no alternative but to suffer and come out of the situation unscathed. From these two interpretations, we learn that women have come to be viewed as objects of pain. Their lives are measured about how much pain they can bear. This idea is quite common in the current African experiences of women as is evident in the rates of gender-based violence which some women suffer silently. Another Batswana proverb which could provide some insight into the status of women reads *Mosadi mooka onya lemiriga*. The proverb is translated as "a wife will do her best to look after her family even in the most adverse times" (Campbell 1972, 126). Based on this proverb, we learn in that the Tswana culture there is an expectation a woman bears to fend for the family despite the hardest of conditions. This understanding can supplement the conclusions drawn from the previous proverb.

A critique of the point made above is that proverbs are indeed sources of knowledge. They inform us about a particular culture's beliefs, attitudes and world views. However, what seems to be problematic is the time origin of those "words of wisdom", that is, when were they said and why were they uttered. It could be the case that because we have no exact idea of when they came to be uttered and accepted as words of wisdom and thereby informing a culture, we face a problem of believing a misconception which has been accepted as true. The worst case scenario is that these particular proverbs have become a source of identity, a framework of both self-knowledge and self-determination in the case of women. Some women then have thrived to become these pain-bearing figures. They bear their suffering with a sense of pride, meanwhile, they are unaware that this particular world view is misguided and has not always been the case, even in their culture. Since the original context of these proverbs is unknown, inhabitants of the postcolonial context have accepted these to have been uttered in the past, which is either the precolonial or colonial era. A contradiction emerges in this case because through the works of scholars such as Amadiume and Diop, women were self-determining figures and their place in the society was not identified as bearers of pain. This shows then that the proverbs may have had their source in a different timeline which could possibly be during the colonial period where suffering became magnified, and women experienced a great deal of it. Amadiume (2005) highlights that in precolonial Africa, there was matriarchy, which is female rule and matriliny. The latter is visible in historical narratives of queendoms; part of the female rule was extended to the reverence of queen mothers. It is also explained that children had their matriarchal surname, and at times husbands went to wives as opposed to what we currently know. Hence, women possibly structured the culture of the day and the

rules of conduct. It could be accepted that the law and order of the precolonial times was formulated with a higher regard for women's status than it is now. According to Mutwa (1998), women were not only respected, but were worshipped. This is reflected in the high laws of the Bantu. Women were more than just mothers; they were creators and sources of life and its continuity. There is also evidence that there was no conflict in the duality of the social structure and, in retrospect, traditional African culture gave both men and women the space to flourish and self-determine, contrary to what Africans in the postcolonial era have been taught (Amadiume 2005). Here, the focus is extended to understanding how women were perceived in colonial Africa. The idealisation of subordination and passivity is most likely to have emerged during this period. During the colonial invasion, the family structure in the African society – in the southern parts of Africa to be precise – shifted abruptly. Men had to work in the mines, meanwhile women remained in the rural areas managing the family. Due to the harsh experiences of the working conditions in the cities and in the mines, black men struggled with having a positive outlook for their lives. In what is known as the frustration-aggression hypothesis, failure to achieve one's goals or expectations leads to frustration which manifests itself as aggression (Breuer and Elson 2017). In colonial times, where men adopted the idea of being the provider of the family, failure to provide and meet all the needs of the family led to the use of women as outlets for their anger. African women were expected to absorb the pain and the anger from their men. The expectation that women must bear pain and be passive became nuanced during this period. Coetzee and Du Toit (2018) explain how an image of the black man as a barbaric being was created during colonialism, and this has been carried over to the postcolonial era and has become a self-fulfilling prophecy in which black men oppress women because they believe what they have been taught about themselves. This given identity of black men normalised the violence and subordination which women experienced in the colonial era. The need for dominance for the black male was exercised on the women in society. Another idea to keep in mind is how black women were considered "unrapeable" during the colonialial era. What this reveals is how deep this kind of belief is entrenched in society, such that in the present context, female subjugation continues to thrive due to the existence of such ideologies (Coetzee and Du Toit 2018). This shows that women in the colonial era viewed themselves in a negative light and some may have struggled with an inferiority complex since, in the social hierarchy, black women were at the bottom of the list.

Women in postcolonial Africa appear to have been more independent, empowered with an understanding of their human rights, in comparison to women in colonial Africa. It appears that women in this context were more liberal, self-aware and self-determining. However, statistics on gender-based violence and the number of educated women compared to men seem to reflect the opposite of what is widely accepted. Women still face the demon of subordination in both direct and subtle ways. Sesanti (2016) shows concerns for the fact that there is no woman who has ever led the ruling party in South Africa. Women are restricted and sidelined in the economic and political sphere. The same goes for the multiple spaces that women venture into, be it in academics, or social spheres as the #FeesMustFall protests have shown. Young male academics (in the #FeesMustFall protests) failed to show respect to female leaders even when they were thought of as progressive. During the colonial era and to date, in some families, the education and liberation of men is held to a higher standard than that of the female child. The oppression directed towards women, particularly in Africa, is partly due to colonialism through cultural distortion.

To elaborate on the claim that women are subordinate to men in various African contexts and that it in some part is due to their culture, it is essential that the perception of African women in different timelines is explained. By considering Sesanti's work (2016), we see that in this modern context women are inferior to men for a couple of reasons, among these, the patriarchal nature of the society. However, this has not always been the case. It is also evident in spiritual and religious matters, such as the supreme being, conceptualised variously in Africa as female, neutral, or androgynous.

The role of colonialism in cultural distortion

This section will try to establish the causal relationship between colonialism and cultural distortion and how that in turn has resulted in female subjugation on the continent. It aims to highlight that the

intent of colonialism was indeed to distort the cultural world view of the indigenous inhabitants of the continent. This, of course, was not the sole intention of colonialism. This part will draw heavily on the work of Steve Biko (1978), who called out colonialism for the damage it caused to Africa and how its results have haunted and continue to haunt the inhabitants in the postcolonial context.

For the purposes of this article, two definitions will be examined. The first definition states that colonialism is "a practice of domination which involves the subjugation of one people to another" (Kohn and Reddy 2023). The second states that "colonialism is the direct domination of one country by another on the basis of state power being in the hands of a foreign power" (Ocheni and Nwankwo 2012, 46). Both definitions place an emphasis on the idea of domination of a particular group of people by another group. To talk of domination is to talk about the establishment of unequal power dynamics through the use of force. What is produced by the dominating group is glorified and set up as a standard against which everything is measured in life, including knowledge production. Coetzee and Du Toit (2018) show that the dominating group perceives itself as superior, and this is evident in the words of Cecil John Rhodes who has been known to have devoted his entire life to taking over the continent of Africa. Coetzee and Du Toit (2018, 214) quote Rhodes' words: "Africa is still lying ready for us [and] it is our duty to take it…more territory simply means more of the Anglo-Saxon race, more of the best, the most human, most honourable race the world possesses".

Based on that, one of the reasons for imposing colonial power in Africa is the perception that Africans were both unworthy of the territory they inhabited, and that they were unable to advance the territory and to put it to good use, even though that means different things for the parties involved. Mutwa (1998) protests in the introduction of his book *Indaba, My Children* that the kind of thinking which produces the claims and justifications such as those mentioned above are fallacies which stem from a misunderstanding. For him, the reason why Africa has been subject to such dehumanisation is because there was a misunderstanding between two groups of human beings and one group in particular (the dominant group) was reluctant to pursue an understanding of the other (Mutwa 1998). This also meant that the dominated group in a way gradually came to accept the idea of being subhuman and of the reality of different and higher ideals than those previously known in their culture and world view. Biko (1978) lamented this when he challenged the solidification of the beliefs which painted the African as inferior. Biko's fears have come into existence, because the African in the postcolony experiences some sort of identity crisis. In reflecting on Biko's concerns, it becomes true because in a postcolonial context, there are more Africans who have adopted the Western lifestyle in comparison to the individuals of European descent who have adopted the African lifestyle. There are a few individuals of European descent who have immersed themselves in the African way of life and have a lived experience of it in the same manner as those individuals of African descent who have internalised a Western lived experience. Both the educated and the uneducated African people aspired to be well versed in the Western way of life and its norms. The works of Western philosophy and literature are embedded in most education curricula in Africa. Traces of these aspirations are more vivid in contemporary Africa because one who is considered educated is one who can speak English or French fluently and one who is well versed in the works of Western literature.

The natural inclination then is to ask how this was established. How did the colonialists assert and ensure the longevity of their colonial power and ideals? I am particularly interested in conquest since it brings out the characteristics of how the colonial powers solidified and achieved their quest to distort the African cultural world view. Without veering off the point of focus in this paragraph, "conquest or use of force was the most effective and efficient strategy which enabled the European colonialists to maintain direct control and domination of African economic and political administration" (Ocheni and Nwankwo 2012, 49). It was the divide-and-conquer strategy which set in motion the "de-tribilisation" of the people in the continent, especially in the southern parts of the continent. This is not to say that conflicts among the tribes on the continent did not exist prior to the colonial invasion. Rather, it is an acknowledgement that different cultures may have contended against each other, but the motive was utterly different from that of the colonialists. The example of Shaka of the Zulu kingdom can be cited to explain this difference (Hamilton 1998). Shaka's consolidation of the Ngunis into one group of people was not driven by a superiority complex,

neither was it driven by a perspective which viewed the inhabitants of a particular territory as undeserving of ownership of that place. Rather, his motive was to unite the people into one single powerful state.

Inevitably, the sovereignty of African states was not only compromised, but was undermined. This is evident in the rise of puppet chiefs and rulers who, in order to maintain their power, were tricked into (some willingly) carrying out the plans of the colonisers. Another strategy which was used to establish colonial power was forced labour and displacement (Ocheni and Nwanko 2012). Here, we learn that a new system of labour was introduced to dominate the African people who seemed set in their ways of life and were not in pursuit of European ideals of life. This is how this was achieved: the African people were forced to pay taxes which demanded a different monetary value from the one which their economy had been based on (Ocheni and Nwanko 2012). All this meant that work was to be found in particular places which were not home for the African people (in the southern parts of the continent) and so the structure of the family collapsed, with women becoming domestic workers, while men worked on the farms or in the mines.

Consequentially, the cultural world view of the African was distorted. This new way of life undermined the economic, political and social system of the indigenous inhabitants of the African continent. Much time was invested in serving the new colonial master instead of continuing with the known way of life. A different type of education was introduced for the African people to be fully equipped to serve. In addition to the force, the manner in which the African people were educated and the content of that education fostered the distortion of the cultural world view of the African people by demonising and dismissing the knowledge produced in those spaces. In fact, it was not taken as knowledge at all since the African person in her indigenous state was taken as a primitive as reiterated in Jan Smuts' Rhodes Memorial lecture in 1929 (Smuts 1930). Ocheni and Nwanko (2012) argue that the colonial education only produced workers who were used to further the exploitation and disarticulation of the African world view. What this meant is that if teachers were equipped in colonial education, they in turn were used to manipulate more students (usually male) into believing that what traditional Africans believe in – their attitudes, paradigms and practices – was barbaric.

Locating women in this narrative proves that there is a link between cultural distortion and female subordination. At the height of colonialism when men were educated in the colonial education tradition, women remained illiterate and the colonial law placed men at a higher position in society than women (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1997, 15–17). So, through colonial education, there was a gap between African men and women. That gap is still a relevant subject in the postcolonial context. If men worked in mines and some in white collar jobs as clerks, teachers and so forth, they began to earn more money than women which led to the creation of a power relation dynamic where African men were now more economically advanced than African women. Inequality between African men and women became prominent. These impacts have lasted for generations and generations. Women in the postcolonial era have inherited all these struggles, although notable progress has been made to counter the inequality. However, the point that is being made here is that colonialism legitimised the subordination of women by intentionally distorting the traditional African cultural world view.

However, upon close consultation, it could be seen that the understanding of women or females in precolonial traditional societies was one in which women were perceived differently, not as subordinates to men, but as equally worthy of being human as men were. Various pieces of literature have highlighted that women took on different roles that were not related to gender. For example, in the works of Sesanti (2016) and Amadiume (2005), women were rulers, warriors, law givers and the line of the family was matrilineal. All this seems to be foreign in our modern postcolonial society and it seems that part of African history in which the identity of women was of high value has been distorted.

Insights from the previous analysis

The work of Oyěwùmí (2011) on male dominance in the Yoruba culture allows for a new gaze with which we can understand male dominance in contemporary Africa as fuelled by ideologies inherited from colonialism. Her understanding of male dominance in contemporary Africa helps us

understand how to move forward in addressing female subordination in Africa. The major aspect of Oyěwùmí's work is to show that the current idea of male dominance is contrary to the manner in which life was lived in precolonial African societies. By using this, we will be challenging violent masculinities which appear to be present in postmodern African and this means we can mention that this was not always the case. It can be said that contemporary African men need to emulate some of the values of men from the precolonial African societies who viewed women through a different lens. That lens involved appreciating women and treating them with honour, as indicated earlier here. Therefore, a way to combat female subordination is by embracing some of the values from precolonial African societies, especially those which embraced women as honourable in society. A similar approach to Oyěwùmí's is that of Sesanti (2016) who calls for the liberation of African women through what he calls an African renaissance. This approach is useful in addressing the subjugation of women in Africa in the sense that it highlights how women have been oppressed and neglected in the liberation process. Sesanti (2016) argues for the embrace of African values and culture which supported women as matriarchs and as the life givers in society, where they were respected and taken to be similar to the creator. Embracing this view in contemporary Africa will ensure that women are seen in a different light and consequently treated in the way that they deserve. This approach is a potential solution to addressing the problem of the subordination of women in African societies with the aim that the commonly held conceptions about women will be erased and a space will be made for a different kind of thinking. A concern raised against this proposed solution is the difficulty of having to recreate, rediscover and revise the values from precolonial African societies because the context has changed. What might have worked in that timeline may not simply fit in this context because postcolonial African society has been merged with other cultures to create a different way of living. In response, it could be said that there is no need to recreate all the values from precolonial African traditional societies, but we can access those which are helpful in changing our current perception regarding women's place in society.

On how to handle cultural distortion and female subjugation, I draw from Coetzee and Du Toit's work which calls for the remembering of precolonial identities which are not laden with the dominant Eurocentric masculine ideologies that permeated the minds of Africans during colonialism. In our case, this kind of thought enables women who have been subject to oppression and are potential victims of subordination to reconsider their given identities and to recreate identities that do not subjugate them. This also allows contemporary African men to be conscious men who do not physically abuse women to prove their manhood, but who see women as equals. It also means that contemporary African men will be cognisant of the subtle and unseen ways in which violence against women is being fostered.

Through the work of Gqola (2007), we seek to highlight another way that we can adopt to address the problem of the subordination of women in African societies. Gqola (2007) explains that men in contemporary Africa need to question the ideologies that support male privilege and the subordination of women. They also need to reject these kinds of epistemologies which promote male privilege as it is apparent that what troubles women also troubles men in this context. She further explains that this type of discourse need not be restricted to classroom setups or to universities, but needs to be embraced by every person; that is, both the intellectual and the layperson. The solutions proposed in this work seem to be viable in the sense that they call for a different kind of thinking and a different way of interpreting the experiences of women.

Considering possible objections

A possible counterclaim could be raised that African women had been the subject of oppression before colonialism began. The problem with this is attempting to locate the contexts of that oppression. What this means is that there must be evidence brought forward which is not written from a Western perspective to avoid misrepresentation. Acceptable evidence for this claim could be given by Africans themselves; however, what they seem to remember about precolonial times has been largely affected by the colonial ideologies which intended to distort the African cultural world view. Therefore, this claim cannot be substantiated because it points to the very idea of cultural distortion. Failure to produce the relevant evidence indicates the distortion of the cultural world

view. One could argue that the claim which states that women were treated as equals in precolonial African societies cannot be accepted because the evidence to support the claim is disputed. To this I would point to the example of the communal laws in Bantu societies. These laws held women in high regard. Such communal laws still exist in the current context. Thus the evidence is trustworthy because the laws still exist. A second objection which I briefly pay attention to is the idea that cultures change over time and so surely the African cultural world view was bound to change at some point. What I reject pertaining to this claim is that it can be used to justify and downplay the detrimental effects of cultural distortion. As indicated in the definition of culture, which I noted above, the transition process of the culture is strongly affected by the paradigms in that culture. What is passed on in the culture must be those aspects of it which are desirable and better serve the culture. In this case then, African cultures were not given the space to transition in a way that fostered the passing down of desirable parts of the culture, but through colonial imposition many of those elements were neglected. Based on the plight of the modern postcolonial African woman, the realisation that colonialism led to cultural distortion is one of the ways in which she can begin to encounter the historical narratives which have legitimised her subjugation. This will then reflect that parts of her culture were made to subjugate her.

Conclusion

The two parts of this article were assigned to unpacking the problem – that is, explaining the idea of cultural distortion and how that is linked to the subordination of women in our given context – and discussing the idea of colonialism and how it fostered cultural distortion which then led to the legitimisation of the subordination of women in our current context. Potential objections were considered and one such objection was that African cultures considered women as subordinates or second-class citizens before colonialism had begun. A brief reflection on how to proceed, having understood the weight of cultural distortion and its impact on women in postcolonial Africa closes the discussion.

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