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The Role of Women in Kemet, Dogon, Mayan and Tsalagi Societies

Aziza Braithwaite Bey

In this paper, I discuss similarities among the women of four cultures—Kemet, Dogon, Mayan, and Tsalagi. This discussion provides an historical and cultural foundation to the study of the role of women in traditional societies. The study of these cultures is intended to broaden the learning experience of children and to strengthen the self-concept of marginalized children in particular because it relates to the role of indigenous women. It is the shared belief of the aforementioned cultures in the dual nature of humanity, the role of female divinities, and the leadership of women that can instruct young people to recognize the important roles that women of traditional societies have played.

Sandy Bernard, President of the Association of University Women has stated, “. . . in spite of all our advances toward equity, girls still struggle to succeed on an uneven playing field, in school, at work and in life.” Because we as educators are faced with tough challenges with girls on issues such as low self-esteem, sexual harassment, violence, eating disorders, and teen pregnancy I feel it’s important to explore women’s roles both today and historically. Because women’s roles in the leadership of their communities are often overlooked and forgotten in the documentation of history, it is the purpose of this paper to explore these dynamics.

The anthropology of women suggests that women who are neither acknowledged by name nor gender are probably the creators of the anonymous artifacts collected from non-European peoples—the makers of many of the textiles, pottery, adornment, and jewelry in art and natural history museums.

In the Egyptian, Dogon, Mayan, and Tsalagi cultures, women are the culture bearers and caretakers; those who are responsible for teaching tradition and oral history to the next generation. Here women regularly passed down the cultural and aesthetic histories of their societies, beliefs, and family genealogies through images painted on hides and homes, pottery, cloth, basket weaving, and adornment, including, quill work, beading, jewelry, and finger weaving. It should be noted that this art was originally created for utilitarian purposes, and was not usually art made for its own sake.

Women in indigenous societies often made utilitarian objects that were decorated. Theirs were not specialized roles; nearly every woman learned these skills and was an artist in her own right. Through her pottery, cloth, basket weaving, clothing,

adornment, and the decorative arts such as painting on cloth, hides and skins, stenciling, bead or quill work, she created utilitarian objects that reflected cultural technologies, and to some extent her own unique aesthetics.

Kemet

The religion of Kemet (Ancient Egypt) showed profound respect for women. The ancient goddesses Isis, Mut, Hathor, and Bast were exemplars of divine female energy. Judging from the numerous women depicted in daily life on temple walls and in sculpture, women appear to be highly respected and important figures in Egyptian life. A matrilineal system common in African societies was prevalent during the dynastic periods in Kemet, which ranged from 4000 BC—200 BC.

The ancient Egyptians believed in the balance of male and female energy. For example, although usually referred to as female, Bast (an Egyptian god) represents the androgynous twin spirits of nature.

Queens were also celebrated from the Archaic Period (lasting from 3100 BC to 2650 BC). At least four women sat on the throne and held the reign of power in Ancient Kemet. They included Hatshepsut, Tiy, Tetisheri, and Meryt-Nuth.

The pharaoh Hatshepsut ruled Kemet for over twenty years during the 18th Dynasty. She launched massive building programs which brought prosperity, and law and order to her country, enabling Egypt to flourish (Tyldesley, 1996, 10). Queen Tiy, wife of the Pharaoh Amenhotep III, and mother of the pharaoh Tutankhamun led a very public life, and owned property from which she derived a good income. She was the center of the royal family life. (Tyldesley, 1998, 19).

The Ancient Egyptians believed that women would assume prominent roles in state affairs, and acknowledged the importance associated with the positions of king's wife and king's mother.

During the 18th Dynasty, women in Egypt enjoyed a unique legal freedom compared to their counterparts in Asia, Greece, and Rome. Women could own property, bring legal action, work outside the home, and live alone. Few women were educated or could read or write, yet women were greatly respected in their communities (Roberts, 1999, 99).

Dogon

*There is a man in every woman and a woman in every man.
Women are the pillars of the world,
A complete person is one who can nurture both sides.
(Drabo, Skirt Power/Taafe Fanga, 1997)*

According to Dogon tradition, the one God Amma created twins (the Nummo pair) who were complete beings of both sexes. From the original twins came four males and four female Nummo (descendants) who were able to fertilize themselves due to their dual nature. Many Dogon myths say that they are the descendants of these eight Nummo (Griaule, 1970, 24).

Skirt Power/Taafe Fanga, a film made in 1997 by modern-day griot Adama Drabo, tells a story about women in a Dogon village in the 18th century. The men of the Bandigaa village had become arrogant and dictatorial, and exercised almost complete power over the women of the village. The women, however, secured a sacred mask which allowed them to terrorize the men, forcing the men to take on the roles of women, and to do all the women's hard labor. In its exaggeration of the reversal roles of men and women, this hilarious film drives home the point that the work of women should be respected and that it is complementary and equal to the work of men.

Ibu Battuta, the 14th-century Arab traveler who interacted with and wrote about black African people prior to European contact visited Mali. In his description of his visit to the part of the area where the Dogon reside he stated that the women were "of surprising beauty, and were shown more respect than the men" (Weatherwax, 1962, 56). He writes, "No one claims descent from his father, but on the contrary, from his mother's brother. A person's heirs are his sister's sons, not his own sons" (Weatherwax, 1962, 56; Ibu Battuta, 1304 - 1369, cited in Weatherwax). While the people of Mali were Muslim during this period, they regarded family relations as a matrilineal succession line.

Mayan

In the *numenistico*, the order of things as explained in Mayan mythology, woman and man are on the same level. According to myth, the god Quetzalcoatl traveled to the mythological underworld Mictlan in search of the precious bones with which to create woman and man. Quetzalcoatl sacrificed his blood and let it drip on the precious bones. The other gods joined Quetzalcoatl, and woman and man were born simultaneously from their lifeblood. This myth support the equality of men and women at the point of their creation, and as a direct result of the sacrifice of the gods.

Another Mayan myth tells of the gods Oxomoco and Cipactonal, who created woman and man after they created fire and the sun. Woman was created before man, who was born in a cocoon between the leaves of the white Ceiba tree (Diaz, 2002). Here we see the woman preceding the man (unlike in the Judeo-Christian creation myths).

When I was in Oaxaca, Mexico in March 2002, I noticed that many families had a goddess or fertility figurine on their altars as well as the black Madonna and Child, and the Virgin del Rosario or Lady of Lucerne. These figures are thought to be associated with those invented about 1800 BC in Mesoamerica. They are mostly female and were associated with the fertility of crops.

Archeologist William Rathje, writes that “Women were important and honored among the Mayan elite (Stuart, and Stuart, 1977, 73; Rathje, cited by Stuart and Stuart, 1977, 73). Indeed, some may have actually ruled at important centers like Naranjo and Coba” (Stuart, & Stuart, 73).

In Mayan religion, there is little difference between the power of men and women; they are equal with regard to the sacred. Women had their own deities and goddesses as protectors of the feminine life, who shaped their mental and social attitude and behavior.

Examples of Mayan goddesses include Tlazolteotl and Xochiquetzal. Tlazolteotl is the “Great Mother” who helps the corn to grow with a good outcome and is associated with the fertile earth. Xochiquetzal, the “beautiful flower,” represents the young woman at the height of her fullest sexuality. Xochiquetzal interacts with all things beautiful including the song, the dance, happiness, and the flowers. She is the protector of artists, painters, embroiderers, weavers, sculptors, and silversmiths.

Tsalagi

To the Tsalagi, Cherokee, the twin sons of Star Woman are opposite in nature. The first son was born “in a natural way,” while the second son fought and argued against the natural order. He was born beneath his mother’s arm, causing her death. In death, her body fertilized the earth with plants and grains, things for people to eat. The Tsalagi tale of twins is also a tale of duality, life, death, and rebirth (Ywahoo, 31, 32).

Tsalagi writer/healer Dhyani Ywahoo equates the twins with positive and negative nature in wo/men (women and men), capable of change and cultivation. Before the descent of Star Woman to earth, the male and female were in one body. This descent corresponds to the Dogon belief of the twin souls, the dual natures (Nummo pair) (Griaule, 198).

Families in the Tsalagi nation were traditionally organized in matrilineal clans. Women held property, including the home and garden. In addition to their work in farming, they maintained family life. Tsalagi women owned the land they farmed, the homes they built, and mothers could bequeath to their children (in other words, children inherited from their mothers). The beloved clan mother, or “Ghigan,” headed the council of women who voted on matters of government and elected the chief. The Ghigan or clan mother had as much say as the head of the men’s council, and, in general, the women’s council had as much to say as the men’s council. The high position of the Tsalagi women greatly contributed to the advancement of their people (Underwood, 14 -16).

There are several well-known mythical and real Tsalagi women. White Buffalo Calf Woman, it is said, appeared 2000 years ago to two warriors in the sacred Black Hills of South Dakota. Turning into a beautiful woman, she spent several days with her people teaching them the seven sacred ceremonies. She is revered among the Tsalagi who say that she brought them the law of right behavior. (Chasing Horse, 11 June 1997, <http://www.kstrom.net/isk/arvol/buffpipe.html>).

The Lady of Cofitachequi, Queen of the Chiefdom of Cofitachequi in what is now Georgia, escaped from capture by the 16th century Spanish explorer Hernando De Soto after treating him and his entourage well—with the best of hospitality, food and precious stones.

The role of Tsalagi women changed as the people became increasingly acculturated to European values, including the view that men should be sole heads of households and that women were to be submissive to them. Furthermore, European colonization disrupted Tsalagi values, including the existing order of balance and harmony between men and women.

The role of women in Tsalagi society further declined when European traders married native women. Tsalagi women who married European men lost control of the properties they held. Particularly disruptive was the practice of native wives going to live with their husbands. In matrilineal Tsalagi society, women owned their own property and the domain of the home and garden was in the control of wives. These traders learned the customs and languages of their wives, and in commerce, these native wives served as interpreters. Inevitably, the control of property and wealth lay in the hands of their European trader husbands, which contributed to the eventual impoverishment of the Tsalagi (Underwood, 21).

Comparison, Analysis and Conclusions

A comparative analysis of the role of women in Kemet, Dogon, Tsalagi, and Mayan cultures reveals several similarities. The Tsalagi and the Dogon are matrilineal societies. Women harvest, farm, spin, weave, care for, and teach the children. They are culture bearers, who pass the history, religion, ritual, and ceremony to their children and grandchildren. Each culture had female deities based on the female principle. Ancient Egyptian, West African, Mayan, and Tsalagi women were depicted as goddesses. Mayan women could achieve their highest potential by imitating their goddesses. Similarly, West African women were priestesses, medicine women and healers, who played (and continue to play) an essential role in sustaining balance and harmony in their communities.

The dual nature of wo/men was also a belief of the four cultures; to the Tsalagi, the twin sons of Star Woman were opposite in nature. Before the descent of Star Woman to earth, the male and female were in one body. This corresponds to the Dogon belief of the twin souls, the dual natures (the Nummo pair) (Griaule, 198). The Tsalagi believe they are descendants or creations of Spider Woman who descended from the stars and the “tla” (thought beings). The Dogon believe they came forth from Mother Earth’s womb after the God Amma mated with her. The womb is symbolized by mother earth, from where all creation and life emerges. A common thread between the Tsalagi and the Dogon, for example, is a profound reverence for the mother (the womb as symbolic of Mother Earth) (Giraule,1970, 21).

Women in Tsalagi and Dogon societies were drastically affected by the advent of colonialism and European contact. Europeans often belittled and ridiculed Tsalagi and African men for the prominent role of women in their societies. European refusal to acknowledge, negotiate, or trade with indigenous women eventually took its toll, and gradually undermined women’s roles, which placed them under the control of men.

Among the Dogon, as in Ancient Egypt, children inherited from their mother’s brother, hence the important position the sister of the king held in society, which placed the husband of the king’s sister next in line for the throne. They also shared the responsibilities and rights of tribal organization, and held important roles in government.

Women in “first world” (pre-European colonial) cultures enjoyed a great deal of power and influence due in part to their control over the food supply, creation of homes and utilitarian objects vital to harmony, balance and stability of family life. The matrilineal system was prevalent among West African, Ancient Egyptian, and Tsalagi women. Although it is not clear that Mayan societies were matrilineal, Mayan women were

regarded as equal to men and were highly respected in their communities. Mayan women were rulers in centers such as Naranjo and Coba, and several Egyptian queens ruled Kemet, as in the case of Hatshepsut, who became Pharaoh.

Many Tsalagi women come from a long line of priestesses and medicine women. It was their responsibility to learn the healing formulas and herbs needed to heal conditions of individual patients based on their medical and family history. As with Mayan, Tsalagi and African women, knowing your client's history was essential, as was an understanding of the connections between the individual and his or her community. If one member of the community was mentally, physically or emotionally ill, it could bring consequences to the entire community (Some, 1998; Kouyate, February, 1995; Shostak, 1983; Contreras, presentation at Union Institute & University seminar in Oaxaca, in bib) March, 2002).

It is these similarities of belief in the dual nature of humanity, the role of female divinities, and the leadership of first world women that can instruct young people to recognize the important roles that women of traditional societies have played. It is equally important for young women and young men to understand the contributions that women have made throughout various cultures and times.

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