The Role of Indigenous Knowledge in African Women's Theology of Understanding Motherhood and Maternal Health

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Abstract

Community life is believed to be one of the indigenous essences of African life style. Traditionally the need to live together as a clan or village in the African setting is accorded high value. These communities shared indigenous knowledge with one another on various issues for the promotion of life. Although this pattern is slowly diminishing, we still find communities that have managed to respect this kind of lifestyle. The individualistic life style seems to be more preferred than a communal life which in some communities is slowly beginning to be seen as primitive. Historically, from a woman's perspective communal life meant working together towards common good. Some of the occasions that always brought women together were childbirth and bringing up of a child which were seen as a community event needing companionship and partnership among women. This article explores the role of indigenous knowledge in African Women's understanding of motherhood and its effect on community life within the African context. In an era where

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issues of maternal and infant mortality rates are on the agenda, the communal approach to childbirth becomes inevitable for women's participation. Through the use of the theory of liminality the article shows how the transition from conception to childbirth is articulated as a rite of passage and how society upholds the concept of community life in providing support to the mother and child. Throughout the article the value of liminality and collective action in theologizing of motherhood is acknowledged. The article is a contribution to the existing body of knowledge in the works of African Women Theologians on the motherhood and maternal health.

Keywords: indigenous knowledge, maternal health, liminal space, motherhood, birthing rituals, liminality.

> 'When a knowledgeable man dies, a whole library disappears' (An African proverb).

Introduction

Motherhood is one of Africa's most revered and celebrated acts in human life. This is reflected both biologically and metaphorically. The term mother is used to speak of nations as well as nature. In many African cultures giving birth is celebrated through ritual events which involve the whole community. Among most Zambian cultures childlessness in a marriage relationship is mostly associated with failure of the woman to conceive. In such communities a woman's identity is hidden in motherhood. Proverbs defining women who are not able to conceive always depict them in a negative sense such as *'one who ate her baby's placenta'.* A woman who experiences miscarriages or still births is called '*one whose basket leaks*'[2]. These proverbs go to show how a woman's womb is theorized as a significant space for nurturing and celebrating life. Apart from indigenous cultures, religion also

[2] In this sense the womb is reflected as the basket, by nature a basket cannot hold water. The fact that the women keep having miscarriages reflects that her womb is despised to be weak and not able to hold a child.

has a lot to say about motherhood and child birth. Within the Christian tradition, narratives related to motherhood are recorded in the Biblical texts either from positive or negative perspectives. For example the story of Hanna in (1Samuel 1:1-20)[3] reveals a situation of a desperate barren woman who was also mocked by her rival in marriage. From an African woman's perspective, Oduyoye (1999) in her article *A Coming Home to Myself*… uses her own story to relate the experience of barrenness in an African context. Reading through her story one is able to identify the value attached to biological motherhood in her context, and how women are associated with child birth. Oduyoye 1999 narrates how both the church and African Tradition Religions are used as tools of oppression to barren women. In another article Oduyoye (1992) discusses how among the Akan people child birth is celebrated as a channel for the return of ancestors and how the woman who has given birth is valued by the community. In describing her own journey of childlessness, Odoyoye (1999) uses what she calls a 'child factor' to show how African women are tied to biological reproduction which views childlessness as a taboo. Emphasising how the reality of childlessness dehumanizes women's lives, Oduyoye calls her narrative a story of women's experience that is yet to be told. Her experience of being childless taught her that motherhood is one of the most important aspects of a woman's life. She further states that African societies have in many ways used an essentialist approach to talk about motherhood as though being childless is being less human 1999. The experiences of Oduyoye to childlessness where she had to live with spiritual and emotional separation from the community and live between 'hope for' the child and despair due to shame associated with childlessness can be associated with one who is in a liminal space. Although Oduyoye condemns this kind of approach to childlessness she remains optimistic about the value of motherhood and its significance within African communities. The aim of this article to discuss the significance attached to motherhood and maternal health among African Women and the role that indigenous knowledge derived from rituals, beliefs practices and norms play

[3] This is the story of Hanna and Penninah the wives of Elkanah. Hanna was not able to have children while Penninah had children and the rival between these women was on the fact that Penninah always despised Hannah for not having children and yet she was the most loved wife of the two. Hannah prayed to God so fervently in order to have the son Samuel.

in defining motherhood and maternal health. The article uses a theory of liminality to show the different stages that women go through in their experiences of motherhood. Sherwin (1998), Turner (1967) and van Gennep (1960) are among the key scholars in the theory of liminality. The scholars have demonstrated how liminal space when used to discuss rites of passage can have both negative and positive effect. In the case of motherhood, a feminist critique of the *liminal persona* will show that women's lives who are the persona in this case are also put at risk during the performance of some of the rituals. Apart from the risks involved this article also reflects the positive aspects of liminality in that it becomes a space where women experiencing motherhood find support from those who accompany them in this journey of birthing. The article also uses the concept of liminality to show how indigenous knowledge is used to address women's health and wellbeing during pregnancy. As an emotional space liminality also has aspects where the novices who are the initiates have to deal with both an already occurred event and something still to happen. It's a place where new responsibilities and values are learnt and embraced by the *liminal persona*. This is reflected in the next section where I discuss some of the rituals associated to childbirth.

'Buried under the *Mupundu* Tree' – Traditional Indigenous Rituals in Childbirth

In addressing motherhood in traditional African societies we also relate to the value of indigenous knowledge systems to addressing issues related to maternal health. In this article I commence the discussion by looking at the indigenous rituals associated with childbirth. Many African communities treat child birth as a life cycle and a communal event associated with rites of passage. Kanyoro states that rites of passage such as birthing rites, naming rites … were all performed as affirmation of individuals within a religious and cultural setting. They were seen as community building and never as a way of diminishing persons (2002:60). The process entails the involvement of nature, the spirit world and the world of the living and the dead. One of the contentious issues during the period in most Zambian cultures is the disposal of the placenta. Among the Tonga people of Zambia the placenta is buried

either under the *mupundu* tree, while others bury it behind an ant hill or at the centre of the family hut; and others bury it on the veranda of the family hut. The burial site depends on the clan line where the child comes from. Each of these sites hold significant traditional meaning to the life of the mother and child. One of the interpretations given is that the process of disposing the placenta symbolise the rites of passage that the child undergoes. Turner contends that rites of passage are found in all societies but tend to reach their maximal expression in small scales where change is bound up with biological and meteorological recurrences rather than technological innovations (1967).

Therefore treatment of the placenta signifies its biological value as part of the child's life cycle. Communities that adhere to this kind of teaching believe that although the child is separated from the placenta, ritualistically they is still a spiritual connection that needs to be delinked through ritual performances. That is why for those who bury the placenta of the first born child in the family hut of the homestead, they symbolically announce to the child that he/she belongs to that particular homestead. And when this child dies later in life, there is a demand that the body is brought back to be reunited with the placenta in the homestead. Words such as *'let him/her come to lie where his/her home is'*, will be used to illustrate that the home in this case is the placenta which is seen as the initial home for the baby.

The use of the *mupundu* tree is an illustration of how nature is connected to birthing. The fertility of the *mupundu* tree is used to relate to the fertility of the woman. Therefore burying the placenta under the *mupundu* tree is another way of evoking the spirit world through nature to continue blessing the womb of the woman so that she can be as fruitful as the *mupundu* tree. The proverb that says *the mupundu tree that ate the placenta* simply symbolises the value of the decay of the placenta under the *mupundu* tree to women's reproductive health. As a result of this connectivity, in most of the Zambian communities the *mupundu* tree is one of the most significant trees for discussing indigenous knowledge systems associated to women's reproductive lives. For example among the Bemba people one of the puberty rites observed during initiation ceremonies the introduction of the girl to the *mupundu* tree by asking her to sit under the tree during some of the initiation lessons. The association to the *mupundu* tree is a sign of productivity demonstrating that childbirth is a continuation of life. Just like the child is expected to grow die and become an ancestor so does the *mupundu* tree grow to provide enough fruit and dies and regenerates through the seed.

Apart from the disposal of the placenta and the umbilical cord, traditional African life also celebrates the transition that the expectant mother undergoes from conception to childbirth. Burying of the placenta is seen as a life giving ritual which celebrates the continuation of life. During all this transition both mother and child are said to be in a liminal space. In connection with the value of indigenous knowledge, liminal space is one of the most crucial periods in the life of the mother and the child. Different forms of rituals continue to be performed on the mother until the time when the child is born and introduced to the outside world. Some of the rituals that are performed during this period are ambiguous and can be dangerous to the life of the mother and child. For example in some cultures the control over the mother's diet such as denying her of nutritional foods and the demand for hard labour in order to easy the labour pains on the day of delivery and to easy the delivery process can be detrimental to the mother's health and affect the unborn child. Following strict rights and obligation the *liminal persona* who in this case is the mother is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms, ethics and standards.

Transition through the Liminal Space – The Separation Ritual

Van Gennep (1960) observe that important role transitions generally consist of three phases: 1) *separation,* in which a person disengages from a social role or status, 2) *transition,* in which the person adapts and changes to fit new roles, and 3) *incorporation,* in which the person integrates the new role or status into the self. In most African communities the transition period that a mother undergoes during pregnancy involves the stages mentioned by van Gennep associated with ritual observance. One such ritual found in most ethnic groups in Zambia is called a separation ritual. An expectant mother is identified as a patient requiring to be separated from the rest of the community for the safety of both mother and child. This ritual entails that the expectant mother is now handed over to the world of ancestors who become the custodians of the pregnancy. This is done in the very initial stages of the pregnancy before it is seen by many people. The ritual is performed secretly mainly within the family confinements for fear of attacks on the mother by the evil spirits. Among the Tonga people of Zambia the practice is called

kwaanga da[4]. The ritual is meant to announce the pregnancy to both the community of the living and the living dead. This ritual involves tying the mother with white beads around her waist and wrist. During this ritual the mother will also be advised on what food to eat, how to dress and other prohibitions that may also relate to her sex life. The herb stringed to the beads is believed to be a protection against all diseases and spiritual powers that may be targeting the child. Once this ritual has been performed the mother now enters another phase of life where she is treated differently from the rest of the women in the community. Turner acknowledges this statement stating that the first stage of separation comprises of symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual from an early fixed point in the social structure or a set of cultural conditions (1967). The mother to be is no longer part of the community; she is in the liminal phase going into the unknown world. In the Bemba culture the name used for this phase is *balipakati* meaning the woman is in a midpoint of life. She is also seen as one who lives between life and death one whose future is unknown. Victor Turner (1967) described the transitional or liminal phase as a limbo between a past state and a coming one, a period of personal ambiguity, of non-status, and of unanchored identity. In primal societies, culturally prescribed rituals (rites of passage) provided individuals an experience of 'communitas' or shared psychological support throughout major status passages. During this period the unborn child will not be named as its life is not yet determined. The child's life is in a limbo therefore naming the unborn child is seen as exposing the child to the spiritual world that may cause harm since the evil world is also part of spirit world. According to Sherwin (1998), in Benin there is a saying that when a woman is pregnant she has one foot in the grave, and on the day of delivery she is said to be between life and death. Among the Bemba people of Zambia when a child is born the community greets the

[4] The term literally means to tie the womb. This however does not mean that womb will be physically tied but it simply means that the womb is no longer loose and vulnerable but is tied up to the other world for protection. Symbolically women in this state receive a medicinal loop which they have to wear around the waist. In the biomedical world such symbolic assets will be condemned and women would sometimes be forced get rid of them as they are considered to be primitive.

family with the words *mwapusukeni*.[5] Therefore such interpretation associated with death at childbirth is generally communicated in religious forms such as accepting it as God's will should death occur (1998:159-160). Although there are cultures where a death of a mother or child at birth is associated with promiscuity such as the Bemba ethnic group of Zambia.

In describing the transition that the mother undergoes van Stadan's (2014) quotes Campbell and Cilliers who describe liminality as an in-between space where people are caught in an ambiguous phase between two situations (2012:41). This liminal space the betwixt life and death is significant in that it forms part of the indigenous knowledge that is found in motherhood.

Liminality also has its own positivity and negativity for example, within the Tonga community, liminal space sometimes also involves separating the couple from each other so as to protect the child from any contamination that may occur due to the father's promiscuity. This is done by allocating the mother and child in a separate house away from the rest of the family. According to this ethnic group, the liminal space also becomes a safe space for the health of the mother and child. This kind of separation may have some negative effects on the bonding of the father with the child by denying the father the opportunity to be part of the birthing process. Despite this negative aspect it is also clear that liminality theory has the power of communal support as displayed by women.

Analysing the Concept of Liminality and Motherhood through Feminist Cultural Hermeneutical Lens

Among the African women theologians, the works of authors like Kanyoro (2002), Oduyoye (2001) and Oduyoye (1995) emerge as the foci for defining feminist cultural hermeneutics. A renowned Asian feminist theologian Kwok Pui-lan sees cultural hermeneutics as an important tool that African women theologians have developed in order to analyze their culture, religion and Christian heritage (2001:15). Kanyoro sees cultural hermeneutics as analysis and interpretation of how culture conditions people's understand of reality at

[5] The word literally means you have survived ordeal of death. Following the concept of communal living this kind of greeting entails that the whole family was in the liminal space between life and death.

a particular time and location (2002:9). Context and time plays a very important role in any cultural analysis. This is because cultures are neither similar nor static (2002:64). This is despite the fact that there are some cultural rituals that are common within the African continent. For example practices and beliefs discussed on birthing though they may have similarities have strong cultural ideologies that are understood differently according to time and contexts. In this section, I wish to discuss three points relating to how we can respond to these cultural practices using feminist cultural lens while upholding the indigenous knowledge found in these practices.

First, Kanyoro (2002) cautions that cultural hermeneutics also means learning to question, scrutinize and examine culture practices of their essence to women's lives. This is because the author understands culture as the most authoritative cannon to the African worldview. Therefore any attempt to change these cultural practices must take into account the value attached to culture by the custodians of these practices (Kanyoro 2002). This is because in every culture there are certain elements of cultural that a community will value as the lens through which a community is nurtured. For example in the discussions on birthing l have also outlined some of the practices that are observed during liminal period that are a danger to both mother and child and yet society continue to uphold them. Therefore in as much as there can be oppressive elements in the practices addressed in this study, the idea of abandoning these cultural practices comes with caution and fear of losing these societal norms. Kanyoro further argues that such dilemma is highly influenced by the fear of breaking cultural norms (2002:56).

Second, it is also significant to note that same ritual practices that were identified in the liminal space are slowly diminishing as the practice lose momentum due to challenges emerging from outside influences. In most sects these practices are being discouraged and seen as primitive. While in other communities there is a strong advocate for a pluralistic model where women embrace both the traditional and modern forms of health care services. Kanyoro states that:

> Africa has reached crossroads between an inherited culture and the challenges of modernism. This confusion and dilemma will continue to tear Africa apart. Indeed the present is the consequences of the past and the future is the result of what is done today. To get out of

> this estrangement … cultural hermeneutics need to be given the space and seriousness that it deserves in the discipline (2002: 57).

Thirdly, while it may be a positive thing to say that these practises need to be abandoned there is need to challenge the idea of doing away with these practices. This is because in some cases negligence of such practices sometimes come too early even before some rich indigenous knowledge is retrieved and passed on to the next generation. Kanyoro poses a challenge that so long as we continue to look at our own heritage as inferior and only to be studied as anthropological curiosity, then we will indeed be torn apart while following someone else's aroma. For example the need for a mother to go through liminal space can be encouraged in our current generation of young mothers. This is because most of the girls who become pregnant are too young to understand what is going on their lives and therefore passing through stages of liminality may help them appreciate the value of motherhood. What is needed is to combine an affirmation of culture and a critique of it through the feminist hermeneutical lens (2002:57). One good example why we need to protect some of the cultural values in these practices is the communal aspect that the liminal space provides to the novice the practice bring together women who in most cases act as traditional midwives to the young mother. The communal aspect found among women in the liminal space embodies a kind of theology that calls for collective action in supporting life. In this article l propose this theology of collective action as a model that has been used by women in their sustenance of the role of motherhood.

Towards a Theology of Women's Collective Action within Liminality

As stated above, traditional birthing rituals do not only carry negative acts but have in many ways helped to bring out the support that women need from their fellow women in the period of liminality. The support that women offer to each other during this period of liminality goes to illustrate women's activism and collaboration. The story of Oduyoye who despite not being able to have children of her own and yet she enjoyed being called mama Mercy is a good example of how women offer support to each other during the liminal

space. Reading through her story it becomes evident that Oduyoye enjoyed the presence of midwives. Women who helped her to come out of the liminal space a journey she has had to undergo during her period of discovering her childlessness.[6] A theology of collective action as used in this article reflects on the role that women play in support of their fellow women that go through the liminal space during the period of experiencing motherhood. Theological reflection in this sense becomes significant due to the fact that the liminal space has also been identified as a space with religious norms and values. Therefore be it in African Tradition Religions or Christian perspective the Supreme Being/God is revealed in these liminal spaces. A theology of collective action in relation to motherhood is also a manifestation of God's own life-giving, liberative, sustaining love, and presence that encourages women to find hope in this space of limbo. This is because the creator God is also part of this liminality.

For example Raveh talks about the role of Hebrew midwives in Egypt as presented in Exodus that these Hebrew women displayed the power of women's resistance to political influence in an effort to serve the lives of the boy children. The author further explains:

> The book of exodus opens with the description of the crushing slavery that Pharaoh King of Egypt, imposes on the children of Israel. Among other decrees, Pharaoh commands the Hebrew midwives that all male infants born are to be cast in the Nile. The midwives defy the king's order which violets natural morality, and allow the children to live. Their motivation to disobey the decree stems from their devotion to a profession whose essence is helping to create life, as well as from their being women (2013:12).

Raveh seems to equate the role of protecting life to women, from a feminist stand point it can be argued that women's position in childbirth is to protect life. The statement also reveals women's resistance and resilience to providing health care in the context of childbirth. Variel Swai observes that women occupy a special place in the improvement and promotion of health care services mainly because they participate in and manage many health

[6] For a full story on Oduyoye's journey of childlessness, see *A Coming Home to Myself* ….

activities that affect the health of their families. The author further comments, research on the determinant of infant mortality further show that the mother is the most important health worker for the child (2006:36). As a result of all these factors women are socialised into motherhood even at a very tender age. Motherhood is not only valued but expected of every woman (Sherwin 1998:164). Therefore the participation of women in the promotion of life makes women's role of motherhood a unique concept that demands for unity and companionship of collective action which is also part of God's call for humanity to care for one another.

The story of the birth of Moses in Exodus chapter one brings out yet another dimension into the collective activism of women in an attempt to save life. From an African feminist perspective biological reproduction is apprehended as primarily social event and not as an individual experience. As a result when a child is born all members of the community are required to participate in the birthing process of the child. Revah states that childbirth has never been a neutral sphere (2013:12). The story in (Exodus1:19) where a group of women displayed resistance to the King's order by lying to him that they were not able to have the Hebrew baby boys killed at birth is a good example of communal approach to sustaining life. The baby boys' lives were in the liminal space where there was determinant of death and life, thus the Hebrew midwives as the gatekeepers had the power to protect these baby boys. These women did not only help the actual birthing of mothers, but they also played a symbolic role in the story of birthing of a nation of Israel (2013:12). The scenario set by Raveh in the birth of Moses also designates communal approach to providing health care services. The author relates how Jochebed the mother of Moses, Miriam the sister and Pharaoh's daughter worked together to rescue the slave boy. The collaboration of these three women reflects a communal and collective action. The partnership that is reflected in the story of Moses reflects the traditional African women's perception of motherhood. From an indigenous knowledge perspective the story of Moses can be concluded as, three women in the story went against their culture and all other barriers to save the boy child using their assets, all means available, for the survival of the baby. Cochrane, discussing religious health assets specifically, articulates the concept of assets well:

> When we speak of religious health assets we mean something quite distinctive. The language… points to what people have available to

> them, no matter how disadvantaged they may be materially, politically and in other ways, though this is not to suggest that socio-economic conditions are in themselves not critical to transforming the conditions of health in any context. Clearly the more assets people have to work with, the greater these assets are (2006: 63).

Women creatively used all the resources at their disposal as they worked together to resist death and protect life. Rabera further justifies women's communality and collective action concept using the scenario at the cross that:

> The gospel stories record images of a strong collective action of women. The phrase 'a group of women' appears many times in the Jesus narratives. The strongest evidence of this group was at the foot of the cross. The women stood in solidarity with each other in a situation that must have been frightening and bewildering to them. Their collective support empowered them to keep going when there seemed to be no hope. Later when the disciples refused to believe Mary's report of her encounter with the risen Christ, a group of women went back to the empty tomb, women believing in women (1992:48).

These scenes reflect women's experience of connectedness with each other and solidarity through their experiences. Ruether discussing women's experience observes that women's experience is in itself a grace event, an infusion of liberating empowerment from beyond the patriarchal cultural context that allows women to critic and stand out against andocentric interpretations of who and what they are (1985:114). For example the scene at the cross of Jesus that is discussed by Rabera gives us an illustration on how these women embraced the death and resurrection as a 'group of' women during this liminal period between the death and resurrection of Christ. Their collective action behaviour brings out the power of motherhood that was demonstrated by each one of them as they accompanied Jesus on this painful journey.

Intersection between Religion and Maternal Health and its Relation to Motherhood

Before I draw the discussion together and come to the conclusion of the article, it is pertinent to mention some specific areas related to motherhood, and especially maternal health, that are indicative of tensions between traditional indigenous knowledge and modern western ways. For example the modern ways of disposal of a placenta which is said to de-link the child from the African traditional religious worldviews. Therefore one may question its viability in a globalised Africa where women are now exposed to modern ways of disposing placenta, with chimneys that burn the placenta and create an 'eternal separation with the child'. Although this seems to be the scene at hand, it is also important to take into account the religiosity associated with the practice. From an indigenous perspective this kind of disposal of the placenta is sometimes condemned by the advocates of indigenous knowledge systems who believe that burning the placenta may bring some misfortune in the life of the child who is believed to be eternally separated from his/her initial 'home'. Disease and infant mortality is sometimes blamed for the act of disposing the placenta. This is because this kind of separation carries along religious rituals meant to appease the ancestors.

Although this kind of advocacy can be upheld in our society today there is also a need for those of us operating in the modern era to appreciate the tension and danger that such worldviews can create to the mother and child who are trapped in the cultural domains of their society as custodians of their culture (Kanyoro 2002). Such kind of approach can sometimes contribute to the negative attitude towards biomedical health care services by advocates of such ritual practices. At the same time it may also create a pluralistic ideology where people embrace both the African and western methods of health seeking. Therefore Glenier would argue that research aimed at engaging local knowledge systems must capture the different sets of knowledge and pay attention to whose knowledge is being included or excluded (1998:39). A feminist approach to indigenous knowledge systems will argue that in as much there is a paradigm shift to biomedical health services from indigenous African traditional methods, the shift may not have affected every aspect of human life especially in as far as rituals associated to child birth are concerned.

Conclusion

Motherhood has traditionally been one of the most important aspects in most African women's lives. African Women Theologians have in many ways written on the value of motherhood and maternal health. These women theologians have argued that Motherhood is not only a biological factor but it's about nurturing, protection and promotion of life. This article has shown the role that the concept of motherhood still plays in our society and the value of indigenous understandings and practices in the journey of creating and protecting life, extending to the health and life of the mother and child. In this article I have also argued that within the African context most ethnic groups are still observing a community approach to motherhood where the whole community is involved in the journey to child birth, this includes the community if the living dead as well Especially women who collectively work together to resist oppressive forces to support, protect and sustain the life of the mother and child. The article has used the theory of liminality to show the transition that women go through in their experiences of motherhood and how this period helps them to develop support structures for their wellbeing.

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