



## Unsilencing Women's Voices: Feminists Perspective on Leadership and Spirituality in African Religion and Islam in Nigeria

Hosea Nakina Martins, Ph.D.<sup>1</sup>, Auwalu Abdullahi<sup>2</sup>, Salihu Muhammed Barau, Ph.D.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Religion and Philosophy, Department of Christian Religious Studies, Taraba State University, Jalingo

<sup>2</sup>Doctoral Student of the Faculty of Humanities, North West University, Kano

<sup>3</sup>Department of Islamic Studies, Faculty of Religion and Philosophy, Taraba State University, Jalingo

**Corresponding Author: Hosea Nakina Martins**

**ABSTRACT:** African and Islamic Religions are monotheistic in nature, where religious roles seemed to have been dominated by the male due to embargoes, customary stereotype and subjugating of female roles by the male mantra which has serious backing from the religious traditions and customs of the two religions. The paper is aimed at unveiling the leadership roles of women looking at it in a feminist perspective in Nigeria. The significance of the study will help women to agitate positively for renewal leadership role where necessary, and to expose the terrible impact of male mantra on leadership role in the two religions. Qualitative research design using a feminist and intersectional approaches. The feminist theoretical framework was also used to sample data using historical, participant observation. Data was analysed using thematic analysis. The study highlights that, the significant and equal rights for women leadership in African and Islamic Religions have been subjugated, suppressed by the patriarchal and customary norms, values and teachings of both religions. Women's leadership role has been marginalised, silenced and considered as weaker exercise. The study contributes to the existing knowledge by entering women's voices and perspectives, which uncover the suppressive tendencies of a patriarchal system. The research recommends amidst the challenging of patriarchal and religious doctrines or teaching and silencing women leadership role. Leadership role of women should be highly respected and given proper support as their voices cry out for marginalisation which continues till day.

**KEYWORDS:** African Religion, Feminist, Islam, leadership, Spirituality and woman

### CLARIFICATION OF TERMS

**African Religion:** is a very complex concept with variant definitions from different authors. Sarwuan defines it as "the indigenous religion of the African people" (1). In another definition, Anyacho puts it as the religion of the African people and it is qualified by the word "traditional" traditional used here to refer to that which is aboriginal, foundational or handed down from generation to generation (14). Ugwu asserts similarly that "it is the indigenous beliefs and practices of the people of the African continent which as a legacy is handed down from one generation to another" (115). Kanu defines African Religion in an elaborate way to mean "a religion that has been with Africans for many generations, and with which they have lived their lives and solved their existential problems from time immemorial. It is a religion that is co-terminus with the African people and other society" (7). Adasu recapped also that "African Religion is also referred to as that which is aboriginal as handed by forebearers of the African, and which is still practiced by them" (1-2).

**Feminist:** A feminist is a female member of a folk who agitates for equal rights and opportunities for same sex members. In another recap, a feminist is a female folk who is referred to as a champion of women's liberation. Alana posits that "a feminist is a champion for reforms on issues that concern women's rights" (11).

**Islam:** Etymologically, the root "Islam" in Arabic means to be in peace, to be an integral whole. From this root comes Islām, meaning to surrender to God's law and thus to be an integral whole (Ogwuche, Madaki & Nwaimo 28). Islam is a religion of clear dogma and simple worship, but with a deep vigour of expression, which was founded by the Prophet Mohammed the son of Abdallah and Amina of the country of Arabia in the year 610 AD (Omuregbegbe 53). It was said that, the religion began in Arabia at the beginning of the 7th Century of the Christian era in a Pagan-Jahiliya Arab environment (Jomier 5). According to Anyacho "Islam is an intensely monotheistic religion founded by the prophet Mohammed. The word "Islam" meaning complete submission to the will of Allah, represents the doctrine preached by Prophet Mohammed to his followers, the 17th Century A.D is now one of the world's largest religion" (221).

**Woman:** Woman designates an adult female human being ( as distinguished from man with a distinctively feline nature and characteristics ( Adama 44). A woman is also defined as " an adult female human being"( Hornby1373 ). In view of the above also, Fairchild defines a woman as " the feminine half of humanity. Specifically, a mature human of the female sex" (339).

**Spirituality:** Spirituality has been defined as a personal and collective search for meaning, purpose and connection with the divine ( Mbiti1). It has also been defined by Hornby as " the quality of being concerned with religion or the human spirit" (8th ed.1435).

**Leadership:** The process of influencing and guiding others towards a shared vision or goal ( Northouse 1). Hornby defines it as " to mean the state or position of being a leader"(844). Leadership also means a situation - process in which a person or person's because of his or her actual or supposed ability to solve problem in then field of current group interest, is followed by others in the group and influences of their behaviours (Fairchild 174).

## **INTRODUCTION**

The complex relationship between gender, power, and spirituality has been a critical area of inquiry in the study of African and Islamic Religions in Nigeria. Despite the significant contributions of women to the spiritual fabric of these religions, their voices and experiences remain marginalised within patriarchal religious structures. The dominant masculine mantra in both religions often relegates women to subordinate roles, limiting their participation and leadership opportunities (Anjov 3). This phenomenon has sparked intense debate among feminist scholars, who argue that women's spiritual roles should be exercised alongside their male counterparts (Alana 4). Women are not given equal opportunities to showcase their roles in both religions. The marginalisation of women in African and Islamic Religions is a pressing issue that requires attention. The quest for equality between men and women is greatly increasing in contemporary society (Anjov 59). There is no doubt that adherents of both religions have been identified as very religious people (Ugwu 73). African and Islamic Religions recognise the supreme existence of God. Women's struggle for equal rights and opportunities in all spheres of human endeavour has been a subject of considerable discussion (Gbenda 17). The study of women's roles in African and Islamic Religions is crucial for understanding the complexities of gender and power. The intersection of gender, power, and spirituality is a complex issue that requires indepth analysis.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts the Intersectionality theory, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (140), which recognises that individuals possess multiple identities that intersect to produce distinctive experiences of oppression and marginalisation. The framework is employed to examine the silencing of women's voices in leadership and spirituality within African and Islamic Religions. The intersection of leadership and spirituality in these religions is explored, highlighting the remote causes and effects associated with feminist agitation for equal exercise of spiritual roles. Women's roles have been relegated to the background in both religions.

The disadvantages position of women in African and Islamic Religions clearly reiterate the need for women to submit to their husbands as their heads (Kuye 14). This submission has been translated as a domineering order that men should relegate women's spiritual roles to some extent. The theory explores the ways in which women's spiritual roles are limited due to challenges faced by them as a result of limitations from the teachings, culture, and customs of their religions.

The Intersectionality theory provides a useful framework for understanding the complexities of gender and power in African and Islamic Religions. The theory highlights the importance of considering multiple identities and experiences in understanding social phenomena. The study employs feminist theoretical framework to examine the silencing of women's voices in leadership and spirituality. The theory also highlights the need for considering the experiences of women in African and Islamic Religions.

## **Women's Leadership in African Religion: An Exposition**

Women in African Religion have historically played significant roles, including diviners, midwives, healers, oracles, and concubines (Mbiti 123). Their roles are rooted in life-giving and nurturing, which are revered in many African cultures (Oduyoye 12). Women's leadership roles in African Religion are diverse and multifaceted. They have been involved in various aspects of religious life, including rituals, ceremonies, and spiritual practices. Women's experiences and perspectives are essential in shaping African Religion theology.

African Feminist theology seeks to reclaim and reinterpret African Religion traditions from feminist perspectives. The significance of women's roles in African Religion cannot be overstated. Women's leadership roles have been crucial in shaping the spiritual lives of African communities. The study of women's leadership in African Religion provides valuable insights into the complexities of gender and power. Women's experiences in African Religion are unique and multifaceted. The role of women in African Religion is vital for understanding the dynamics of power and **spirituality**.

## **Feminist Foundation in African Religion**

African Feminist theology seeks to reclaim and reinterpret African Religion traditions from feminist perspectives. The bedrock foundation for feminism reiterates the significance of women's experiences and perspectives in shaping African Religion theology

(Kanyaro 12). Women's roles in African Religion are diverse and multifaceted. They have been involved in various aspects of religious life, including rituals, ceremonies, and spiritual practices. The study of women's roles in African Religion provides valuable understanding into the complexities of gender and power in all religions.

Women's experiences in African Religion are unique and multifaceted. The role of women in African Religion is vital for understanding the dynamics of power and spirituality. African Feminist theology highlights the importance of considering women's experiences and perspectives in shaping African Religion theology. The foundation of feminist thought in African Religion is rooted in the experiences of women (Olufemi 63). The study of feminist foundation in African Religion provides a nuanced understanding of the complexities of gender and power. Women's roles in African Religion are essential for understanding the dynamics of spirituality and power (Osunwole 17).

### **Challenges Facing Women Leadership in African Religion**

- I. Customs and traditions that have evolved over time and are often resistant to change (Lin 40).
- II. Demoralising comments, slogans, and stereotypes can reduce women's creative potential and performance levels, perpetuating their marginalisation.
- III. The societal expectation that women should be submissive and consider themselves as second-class citizens poses significant problems for women in leadership positions (47).
- IV. In traditional African society, women's roles were limited to sexual and commercial labour, satisfying men's sexual needs, working in the fields, carrying loads, and tending to babies, thereby impeding their active participation in spiritual activities (Member 33).
- V. The disadvantageous position of women in the African Religion and most African societies has its roots deeply embedded in parochial traditions and customs (Kuye 14).
- VI. These abuses are the subject of considerable discussion worldwide, particularly when it comes to the expression of feminine roles in African Religion (Gbenda 17).

### **Women Leadership in Islam**

- I. Women have played important roles in spiritual leadership throughout history, including as scholars, teachers, and Sufi leaders (Wadud 12).
- II. The Quran and Hadith provide several examples of women's leadership and wisdom, such as the Queen of Sheba's leadership and wisdom (Quran 27:23) and Aisha's leadership role in the battle of the Camel (Hadith).
- III. Women's leadership in Islam is rooted in the Holy Quran and Hadith, where women are encouraged to participate in religious songs and hymns (Quran 21:2-3).

### **Challenges of Women Leadership in Islam**

- I. Patriarchal interpretations of the sacred text of the Glorious Quran, which often limit women's leadership roles in Islamic religion.
- II. Men often assume the dominant role in interpreting the holy book, which is observed by every Muslim believer.
- III. Cultural barriers, including local customs and traditions, can restrict women's participation in leadership.
- IV. Educational attainment is another impediment to women's leadership in Islam, as limited access to education hinders their ability to take on leadership roles.
- V. The limitation on women's leadership roles in mosques and other Islamic institutions is also a significant challenge.
- VI. The interpretation of certain Quranic verses, such as Sura An-Nisa 4:34, which states that "men are the maintainers of women," has been used to limit women's leadership roles.
- VII. Other verses, such as Sura Al-Baqarah 2:228, which notes that "women have rights similar to those of men, but also notes that men have a degree of authority over women," have also been subject to interpretation.
- VIII. The inheritance rights of women, which are typically half of those of men, have also been a subject of debate.

### **The Leadership Role of Feminists in African and Islamic Religions**

#### **In African Religion:**

- I. Women served as musicians or song composers (Mbiti 123).
- II. Women served as priestesses, performing rituals and offerings (Elejo 147).
- III. Women acted as midwives, assisting in childbirth and providing care to new mothers.
- IV. Women served as birth attendants, providing care and support during childbirth.
- V. Women acted as herbalists, specialising in administering herbal medication to those in need.
- VI. Women served as oracle mediums, using their spiritual gifts to communicate with the divine (Mbiti 334).
- VII. Women acted as concubines, often involved in complex socio-economic relationships (301).

### In Islam:

- I. Women are encouraged to participate in religious songs and hymns (Quran 21:2-3).
- II. Women served as Imams, leading prayers and providing spiritual guidance (Quran 33:35).
- III. Women acted as midwives, encouraged to assist in childbirth and provide care to new mothers (Quran 46:15).
- IV. Women served as herbalists, specialising in diagnosing people with related health challenges.
- V. Women are not prohibited from serving as oracle mediums or receiving revelations from Allah (Quran 42:51).
- VI. Islamic law provides certain rights and protections for concubines (Quran 23:5-6).

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- I. Women in African and Islamic Religions should be supported and encouraged to experience their roles as specialists in both religions.
- II. Women should seek true feminine humanity in the context of divine purpose, human culture, and custom (Adama 64).
- III. African and Islamic Religions should promote inclusive leadership models that value women's perspectives and experiences.
- IV. Religious teachers and custodians should foster and promote collaborative relationships between feminist scholars and activists and religious leaders.
- V. All relevant stakeholders should support women's empowerment programmes and initiatives to ensure equal opportunities for both men and women in leadership roles in African and Islamic Religions.

### CONCLUSION

The paper concludes that parochialism and colonialism have historically silenced women's voices in leadership in African and Islamic Religions. Despite these challenges, African women have demonstrated a fervent spirit of total commitment and spiritual authority. Women leadership in African and Islamic Religions constitutes a significant role in promoting gender equality, requiring a practical combined effort to critique parochial systems and recommend a balanced and active religious contribution to an equal and just society. Despite socio-religious, cultural, and embargoes placed on women, they have continued to exercise their inestimable religious role in many meaningful ways for the welfare of society.

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