

Gender and Women in African History

The portrayal of gender and women in African history is interesting because it can vary from region to region on a need basis. Due to the diversity found in Africa's cultural practices, African societies developed different languages, social norms, and traditions. ¹Some concepts that are prevalent in African societies are "seniority over gender, motherhood as social institution, matrilineal clans, bride-wealth in patrilineal societies, polygamy and 'female husband', and history of gender equity". In this essay we will take a closer look at the role gender and women played in traditional African societies.

When it comes to gender in traditional African societies, we can take a look at how matrilineal and patrilineal societies are portrayed in African history. Matrilineal is where the lineage and inheritance is traced through women. In Matrilineal societies it was common for women to hold positions of power and played a big part in political and economical decisions for the community. ²This can be seen in places like "Aksum, Ethiopia, Berbers, and Somalia". On the other end of the spectrum we have patrilineal societies, where the lineage and inheritance is traced through the men. This meant that men held positions of power but this didn't mean women weren't important because often they were the ones taking care of agriculture and family related matters.

To get a better understanding of the role gender and women played in African societies we can look at the Bantu migration. The Bantu migration is known as one of the most noteworthy population shifts found in African history. The Bantu society would start off as a matrilineal society that would eventually become a patrilineal society. ³I believe the Bantu could

¹ Yacob-Haliso, "WOMEN AND GENDER" (University of Texas,Austin).

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Gender and Women in African History

also be seen as a hybrid society because of their ideals of “gendered division of labor, gender equity, and share of decision making”. Along with this Bantu women were also responsible for Agriculture, community problems, and adapting to their environment as they migrated.

Another things that affected the portrayal of gender and women in traditional African societies was the slave trade. ⁴Due to the slave trade there was an “unequal gender ratio based on western assumption that affect the gender dynamic in African societies”. This would go on to affect African societies everywhere and in some cases women would have to take the role of the man in their communities. In other cases it led to a rise in polygamy as the male population was vastly smaller than the women population.

In the end we can see that in traditional African societies women had power and status, put an emphasis on age over gender, and promoted the idea of gender equity. We also know that women in African societies had to stay adaptive as they were responsible for different aspects that kept their communities running properly. Historically women have had their hardships but overall they are portrayed positively in African history.

⁴ Yacob-Haliso, “WOMEN AND GENDER” (University of Texas,Austin).