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The African masculinity and values in contemporary society

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the connection between African masculinity and cultural values, tracing its historical roots, significance, and modern challenges. Prior to colonisation, African societies emphasized communal responsibility, respect for elders, and provider roles, to shape masculine identity. However, post colonisation, urbanization, globalization, and changing gender dynamics introduced new complexities to these values. African men try to harmonize customs with modernity, meeting role expectations alongside contemporary demands. Furthermore, economic shifts challenge provider roles, while evolving gender norms reshape relationships. The study employed literary method and qualitative content analysis to examine the subject in-depth and argued that amid such changes, embracing inclusive masculinities, collaborative leadership, and gender equality empowers African men. Findings showed that dynamic adherence to values integrates customary practices and modernity to safeguard culture. This interaction shapes African masculinity, impacting norms, equity, and identity; and remained a crucial part of modern society, adapting to challenges while reshaping fundamental principles.

KEY TERMS: African masculinity, contemporary society, cultural identity, gender roles, gender dynamics, pre-colonial values, values

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INTRODUCTION

The African continent is rich in cultural diversity, shaped by centuries of history, colonization, and globalization. As African societies evolve, so does the role of the African man, influencing his identity, relationships, and responsibilities. Rapid social, economic, and technological changes have created a crossroads where pre-colonial values now intersect with modern expectations, prompting a re-evaluation of masculinity and societal roles.

This study explores the transformation of African man's values in the modern era, examining the tensions and synergies between the pre-colonial period and contemporary demands. Drawing from sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies, the paper investigates historical influences, catalysts for change, and the challenges and opportunities these shifts present. Ultimately, it seeks to understand how evolving values shape personal identity, family dynamics, and societal contributions. By analysing these intersections, the study offers insights into how African men navigate an increasingly globalized world while maintaining cultural integrity.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research utilises a blend of literary research method and qualitative content analysis to investigate the topic comprehensively. Literary method facilitates a critical examination of themes, narratives, and symbols. Eagleton (2008), whose writings focus on literary theory and criticism, provided a foundational grasp of textual analysis in this paper. Furthermore, qualitative content analysis on the other hand, methodically evaluates textual material to uncover patterns, meanings, and underlying viewpoints (Krippendorff, 2018).

Combining these methods helps the study to capture the depth of textual material thereby enabling a careful analysis of views, complexity, and cultural influences of African masculinity. In this work, data is implied and categorised in qualitative content analysis to expose reoccurring themes, latent messages, and changing discourses inside the text. This methodological structure guarantees a comprehensive and context-sensitive interpretation, thereby improving the capacity of the research to expose more profound findings.

In the end, these methods offer a thorough knowledge of the topic together with a well-rounded analysis that connects the facts with textual interpretation, thereby promoting a whole viewpoint on the changing dynamics of African masculinity.

The research has been organised based on the contents identified such as the intersection of custom and modernity with their challenges, opportunities, and strategies for reconciliation. The paper further examines the key values shaping African masculinity such as Ubuntu: interconnectedness and communal responsibility, respect for elders and authority in Africa: a cultural pillar, provider and protector roles: a core value for the African man, Adaptation to changing gender roles and spirituality and ancestral values. The paper finally discusses the challenges and opportunities of African masculinity and values in contemporary society and concludes with the findings.

The intersection of custom and modernity

As African societies modernize from the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras, there is a tension between pre-colonial values and the demands of a globalized world. The African man must navigate these conflicting expectations, often facing challenges in defining his identity within a changing landscape. Many African men strive to maintain their cultural heritage while adapting to modern roles and responsibilities (Nwobodo, 2021). A significant aspect of African masculinity involves navigating the complex interplay between deeply rooted mores and the rapid changes brought about by modernity. This intersection shapes the identity, behaviours, and roles of African men in contemporary society. This section delves into the intricate relationship between customs and modernity, exploring the challenges it poses, the opportunities it presents, and the strategies that African men employ to reconcile these seemingly contrasting forces (Mules, 2021).

Challenges

The collision of customs and modernity presents several challenges for African men. Historically, pre-colonial values have defined the roles, responsibilities, and behaviours of men within their families and communities (Amadiume, 1987). The advent of modernity disrupts these roles, as urbanization, globalization, and technological advancements reshape economic opportunities, family structures, and societal norms (Nwobodo, 2021).

African men face the challenge of preserving their sense of identity while adapting to the evolving demands of modern life. This can lead to feelings of disorientation, conflict, and a sense of loss as they grapple with the changing expectations and shifting definitions of masculinity (Chigudu, 2016).

Furthermore, the patriarchal nature of many societies can clash with the principles of gender equality advocated by modernity. The need to balance the preservation of cultural heritage with the pursuit of equitable relationships can create tension for African men as they navigate their roles within families and society (Connell, 2005).

Opportunities

While the intersection of customs and modernity presents challenges, it also offers opportunities for African men to redefine and shape their roles in innovative and adaptive ways. African men are increasingly recognizing the need to reinterpret pre-colonial values to align with contemporary circumstances. They are embracing the potential for partnership, shared responsibilities, and collaboration within families and communities (Dube, 2018; Mules, 2021).

The integration of modern education and technology provides African men with tools to engage in critical dialogue about the intersection of customs and modernity. Through education, they gain the skills necessary to assess the relevance of pre-colonial values in the context of changing social and economic landscapes (Amadiume, 1987). This includes the understanding of the equality of the sexes before the law.

Additionally, African men are becoming advocates for change, challenging harmful aspects of the pre-colonial masculinity while preserving the positive aspects of their heritage. They are working towards dismantling patriarchal structures that inhibit gender equality and are engaging in discussions on consent, gender-based violence, and shared caregiving responsibilities (Chigudu, 2016).

Strategies for Reconciliation

African men employ various strategies to navigate the intersection of customs and modernity. Many are actively seeking balance by adopting flexible and inclusive interpretations of pre-colonial values. They engage in open conversations with elders, women, and peers to reshape norms in ways that align with evolving societal dynamics (Connell, 2015).

Embracing mentorship and intergenerational dialogue is another strategy employed by African men to bridge the gap between custom and modernity. Younger generations seek guidance from elders who possess wisdom rooted in customs, while also integrating insights from their own experiences in the modern world (Dube, 2018).

The interplay between custom and modernity is a dynamic and continuous process that influences African masculinity. While challenges arise from the clash of cultural norms with changing socioeconomic conditions, African men are finding opportunities to adapt, redefine, and innovate. Through education, collaboration, and strategic dialogue, African men are crafting identities that honour their cultural heritage while embracing the complexities and opportunities of modern life. By navigating this intersection thoughtfully, African men contribute to the ongoing evolution of masculinity in a way that respects customs while fostering progress.

Key values shaping African masculinity

African masculinity is deeply intertwined with cultural values that have evolved over centuries, guiding the behaviours, identities, and roles of African men within their societies. These values are not only integral to the concept of masculinity but also reflect broader societal norms and expectations. This section explores key values that shape African masculinity, delving into their historical origins, cultural significance, and impact on contemporary gender dynamics.

A. Ubuntu: interconnectedness and communal responsibility

Explaining Ubuntu, Mugumbate et al (2023) says it is the overarching philosophy of Black people of Africa known by different names but Ubuntu is the most popular. Ubuntu, often described as African humanism, emphasizes the interconnectedness of people, country, environment, and spirituality (Kaunda, 1966; Mbiti, 1969). Mbiti (1969:106) captures this philosophy succinctly: "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am," reflecting the deep relationship between individual and community. Ubuntu, a central African philosophy, emphasizes the interconnectedness of all individuals within a community (Tandon, 2019). This value influences how African men approach their roles as family members, neighbours, and citizens. It promotes cooperation, empathy, and the sharing of resources, challenging the stereotype of the African man as solely focused on individual success.

In African philosophy, the concept of Ubuntu holds significant importance, embodying the idea of interconnectedness and communal responsibility. Ubuntu, often translated as "I am because we are," underscores the interdependent nature of individuals within a community and emphasizes their shared responsibilities (Nworu, 2023). This value plays a crucial role in shaping the behaviours, relationships, and roles of individuals within African societies. This essay delves into the origins and cultural significance of Ubuntu, its influence on interpersonal relationships and societal contributions, as well as the challenges it faces in a contemporary context (Mboule, 2023).

Historical Origins and Cultural Significance

The term "Ubuntu" finds its roots in various Bantu languages spoken across the African continent, reflecting its

widespread significance (Mugumbate et al., 2023; Bolden, 2014). The concept is deeply embedded in African cultures, guiding moral conduct and shaping interpersonal dynamics. Ubuntu highlights the idea that an individual's well-being is interconnected with that of the community. This interconnectedness reflects the deeply communal nature of African societies, where individuals' actions are understood to directly affect the collective welfare of the community (Bolden, 2014).

Ubuntu and Interpersonal Relationships

Ubuntu has profound implications for the way African individuals, particularly men, navigate their interpersonal relationships. The value encourages empathy, cooperation, and compassion, motivating individuals to prioritize the needs of the community over personal gain (Wiredu, 1996). Within family settings, African men are guided by Ubuntu in their roles as fathers, husbands, and sons. They are expected to provide emotional support, guidance, and assistance to family members, recognizing that their well-being is intertwined with that of their kits and kin (Bolden, 2014).

In a broader context, Ubuntu encourages African men to actively participate in community development projects, share resources, and support those in need (Lefa, 2015). This value underlines the belief that individual actions have a direct impact on the well-being of the entire community. Ubuntu-driven behaviours are reflected in communal rituals, where individuals come together to celebrate, mourn, and address societal challenges collectively.

Ubuntu and Societal Contributions

The Ubuntu philosophy extends to the role of African men in broader society. As integral members of the community, they hold the responsibility of contributing to the overall well-being of society (Munyaka and Motlhabi, 2009). Whether through professional endeavours, civic engagement, or volunteering, African men are guided by the belief that their contributions have a ripple effect that positively influences the community and nation at large.

Furthermore, Ubuntu informs conflict resolution strategies. Instead of resorting to confrontation, African men are encouraged to engage in dialogue and seek reconciliation (Tutu, 1999). This approach aligns with the communal responsibility inherent in Ubuntu, where the preservation of harmonious relationships takes precedence over personal pride.

Nevertheless, as African societies undergo rapid urbanization and globalization, challenges arise in reconciling Ubuntu with modern realities. The rise of technology and increased urban living can sometimes dilute the sense of interconnectedness that Ubuntu seeks to foster (Lefa, 2015). Balancing pre-colonial values with the demands of individualism in a globalized world poses a complex challenge for African men.

Furthermore, the interpretation of Ubuntu can vary across different contexts and generations, leading to potential conflicts between pre-colonial values and evolving societal norms (Wiredu, 2014). Navigating these complexities requires a delicate balance between preserving the core principles of Ubuntu while adapting its applications to address contemporary challenges.

One can deduce that Ubuntu remains a central pillar of African philosophy, shaping the behaviours and responsibilities of African men within contemporary society. This interconnectedness and communal responsibility promote empathy, cooperation, and a sense of duty towards the collective well-being. While challenges persist in the face of modernization, Ubuntu's enduring significance underscores its capacity to adapt and guide African men in fostering harmonious relationships, contributing to community development, and upholding the essence of interrelation.

B. Respect for elders and authority in Africa: a cultural pillar

African cultures deeply value respect for elders and authority, shaping social dynamics and interpersonal relationships. This respect, rooted in customs, influences the African man's interactions within family and community, emphasizing harmony and deference. Historically, both centralized and segmented social structures, such as those in Nigeria, upheld authority as sacrosanct, with decisions by elders considered beyond reproach (Ogbujah, 2014). In centralized systems, like the Yoruba kingdoms and Ashanti kingdom, authority rested with kings and chiefs, while segmented systems involved collaboration between chiefs and clan heads. Regardless of the structure, African societies fostered a profound reverence for authority, particularly among male elders. In either of these systems, the decisions made by figures of authority were held as beyond reproach. Appeals were virtually non-existent, compelling individuals to accept and abide by the verdicts pronounced by the elders, irrespective of their accuracy. Consequently, a prevailing sense of profound reverence and admiration for authority took root in the hearts of the majority of Africans, often vested in the hands of their esteemed male elders (Ogbujah, 2014).

Africans, as a general cultural norm, hold a profound and deeply rooted reverence for old age. Even in situations

where it might be challenging to identify admirable qualities in an elderly individual, the significance of their grey hair remains a reminder of the respect and deference they have earned (Conton, 1966).

The custom of respecting elders and authority figures finds its origins in the rich tapestry of African cultures. Oral histories, rituals, and customs have been vital in passing down this value from generation to generation. Respect for elders is linked to the notion of wisdom and experience accumulated over time, and authority figures are revered for their role in guiding the community (Conton, 1966).

The elders have consistently upheld their role as guardians and conveyors of *Omenala*, (an unwritten foundation of governance that shapes human interactions within Igbo societies). They serve as conduits for translating the collective social, political, moral, and religious aspirations of the community into action. Regarded as stewards of the people's values, the elders are thought to maintain a deep connection with the ancestors, with whom they judiciously and equitably oversee the course of human affairs. Consequently, they hold a position of utmost importance in the social framework, commanding unparalleled reverence and esteem (Ogbujah, 2014).

In many African societies, the elderly are often seen as repositories of knowledge, custodians of cultural heritage, and moral compasses (Ogbujah, 2014). The value attached to their guidance is a reflection of the communal nature of African societies, where intergenerational relationships contribute to the cohesion of the community.

Respect for elders and authority figures profoundly influences family dynamics and community interactions. Within the family, children are taught from a young age to show deference to their parents and grandparents (Ogbujah, 2014). This respect is not merely a show of obedience; it underscores the belief that elders possess valuable insights that contribute to the family's well-being. Elders, in turn, play crucial roles in providing guidance, mediating conflicts, and imparting cultural values.

Grey hair was emblematic of an individual's progress in knowledge, lived experiences, and integrity, especially the men. African youth became so accustomed to receiving guidance and instruction from those with silvered hair that they began associating the greying locks with sagacity and insight. Among the Igbo, a saying goes: "*onye nuru olu ndi okenye di ka onye jere n'afa*," which translates to: he who heeds the advice of elders is akin to one who has consulted an oracle. Much like oracles, which are believed to convey the infallible stance of deities on specific matters, elders are viewed as unwavering in their positions on various societal issues. Consequently, their counsel is heeded and followed, fostering good conduct and harmonious coexistence among individuals in the community (Ogbujah, 2014).

The reverence and honour attributed to old age stem from the deep-rooted desire for longevity amid the challenging circumstances that people face daily. In this context, the Igbo saying holds: "*onye sopuru okenye, okenye eru ya-aka*," meaning that whoever respects the elderly is destined to attain old age. Instances of misfortune and untimely deaths among the young are perceived as taboo, preventable only through strict adherence to the principles of *omenala* and unwavering deference to its guardians – the elders. This stands true regardless of the seemingly logical justifications an individual might provide to the contrary. Respecting the elders, therefore, serves both as a means of preparing for one's own old age and as a way to ensure that respect endures into old age (Ogbujah, 2014).

In the broader community, respect for authority extends to leaders, chiefs, and religious figures. These figures are not only responsible for governance but also for upholding the moral fabric of society. The principle of respect ensures stability, fosters a sense of collective identity, and encourages cooperation.

Globalization and modernization challenge the pre-colonial African value of respect for elders and authority. Urbanization, education, and external influences introduce new perspectives, particularly among younger generations, leading to a re-evaluation of how respect is expressed. African societies are adapting, finding ways to balance respect with critical thinking and individual expression (Idang, 2015). Communities blend customary values with modern education, ensuring that respect remains central while fostering open discourse. While some cultural practices in Africa face challenges, the resilience of African cultures is evident in their ability to preserve core values while embracing modern complexities.

Change is more readily accepted when it aligns with existing cultural frameworks, and those that preserve or enrich customs are favoured over changes requiring complete behavioural shifts. The limitations of enforcing change through force are apparent, especially when reconciling some African beliefs with contemporary norms. This highlights the complexities of adapting to externally driven transformations, emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive approaches.

C. Provider and protector roles: a core value for the African man

The pre-colonial roles of African men as providers and protectors endure, but economic changes, urbanization, and evolving gender dynamics have prompted a re-examination. Men influence policies affecting women in both public and private spheres, impacting gender equality (Farré, 2013). Adapting to modern challenges while maintaining identity is crucial for African men.

The roles of provider and protector in African societies originated from historical agrarian economies, where men

provided through farming, hunting, and trading. These roles, deeply ingrained in cultural narratives and customs, shaped the African concept of masculinity, linking them to notions of honour, respect, and duty (Connell, 2000; Reardon and Govender, 2013).

While the provider and protector roles share common threads across African societies, their manifestations can vary based on cultural nuances and historical circumstances. In some societies, the provider role extends beyond economic provision to encompass emotional support, guidance, and mentorship within the family. Protectors, on the other hand, are entrusted with upholding communal values and ensuring the safety of the community against external forces.

For instance, among the Maasai of East Africa, men are customarily responsible for protecting livestock from predators, showcasing how the protector role extends beyond human safety to encompass the welfare of valuable community assets (Ameso et al, 2018). In urban settings, African men may adapt the provider role to include contributions to household expenses while also engaging in caregiving and childcare responsibilities.

The provider and protector roles in African societies face challenges due to evolving socio-economic conditions and changing gender dynamics. Economic shifts and the rise of women in the workforce have reshaped these cultural roles. However, these challenges offer opportunities to redefine them, aligning with modern values of equality and shared responsibilities. African men are adapting by engaging in discussions to uphold their roles while embracing contemporary values, maintaining their identity within families and communities (Godenzi, 2000; Reardon and Govender, 2013).

D. Adaptation to changing gender roles

Modern African societies are witnessing changing gender roles, with women increasingly active in education, work, and leadership. This shift challenges customary masculinity, prompting men to redefine their roles as partners and fathers. Attaining manhood in Africa is often linked to financial independence and family establishment, particularly in regions with bride-price customs. Marriage and parenthood are seen as key milestones, reflecting evolving dynamics. These changes, driven by education, urbanization, and globalization, require African men to adapt, fostering more inclusive and equitable societies (Barker and Ricardo, 2005).

Historically, African societies often upheld distinct gender roles that prescribed specific behaviours, responsibilities, and expectations for men and women. However, as African societies undergo transformations, these rigid gender norms are being challenged (Connell, 2005). Urbanization has led to increased exposure to diverse perspectives and values, while access to education has empowered women to pursue careers and leadership positions.

Adapting to changing gender roles can be a complex process for African men. The customary roles of provider and protector, once the cornerstone of masculinity, now coexist with the realities of women's participation in the workforce and public life. The pivotal criterion for reaching manhood in Africa involves achieving a certain degree of financial self-sufficiency, securing employment or a source of income, and thereafter establishing a family. Additionally, elderly men play a significant role in exerting influence over younger men, thereby contributing to the shaping of the concept of manhood across the African context. Men may experience a sense of displacement or confusion as they navigate new expectations and redefine their identities in a rapidly evolving world (Barker and Ricardo, 2005).

The erosion of customary gender norms can also evoke feelings of emasculation or insecurity in some men, particularly in societies where masculinity has been closely tied to authority and dominance (Connell, 2005). The challenge lies in reconciling these changing norms with cultural customs that still value certain aspects of pre-colonial masculinity.

African men are responding to these challenges by adopting various strategies that enable them to navigate changing gender roles while preserving their sense of identity. Some men are embracing a more participatory approach to household chores and childcare, thereby sharing responsibilities with their partners (Barker and Ricardo, 2005). This shift acknowledges the changing dynamics of family life and supports the aspirations of women to balance work and home life.

In education and career settings, African men are becoming allies in the fight for gender equality, advocating for policies that promote equal opportunities and representation (Connell, 2005). By actively engaging in discussions on gender issues, they contribute to dismantling harmful stereotypes and promoting inclusive workplaces.

African men are increasingly redefining masculinity to be more inclusive, compassionate, and respectful of women's agency. This shift towards egalitarian gender relations benefits both women and men, fostering healthier relationships and stronger communities (Barker and Ricardo, 2005). Efforts include addressing gender-based violence and promoting open discussions on consent and emotional expression (Connell, 2005). By embracing inclusive masculinities, African men are adapting to modernization while supporting gender equality and creating safer, more equitable societies.

E. Spirituality and ancestral values

Spirituality and ancestral reverence are central to African societies, deeply influencing the African man's worldview, moral compass, and interactions. These values shape behaviour, relationships, and societal norms, rooted in cosmological beliefs about the interconnectedness of humans, nature, and the divine (Oduyoye, 2001).

Historically, spirituality and ancestral reverence have played vital roles, with practices like libations and commemorative ceremonies linking the living with the ancestors (Mbiti, 1990). These customs emphasize empathy, compassion, and a sense of responsibility, guiding the African man to act with consideration for the community and spiritual realm.

In modern times, despite challenges posed by urbanization and globalization, spirituality and ancestral values remain significant. They offer solace and guidance, fostering a sense of identity and belonging amidst rapid change. African men are also leveraging these values to address contemporary issues such as gender-based violence and environmental degradation.

Nevertheless, these ideals encounter threats from urbanisation and the possible exploitation of spiritual beliefs. Reconciling customs with modernity necessitates managing these complications while maintaining authenticity and fostering interfaith conversation.

Generally, spirituality and ancestral values continue to provide guidance and resilience, reinforcing their integral role in the African man's identity and daily life.

Challenges and opportunities of African masculinity and values in contemporary society

Cultural values have a great impact on the identities of African men, but there are also difficulties associated with them. Going along with antiquated masculinities can result in mental illnesses, broken relationships and stunted growth (Aamadiume, 1987).

In Africa, men grapple with complex challenges that come from the intermingling of pre-colonial values and modern lifestyles. There is a conflict between customary roles and contemporary demands caused by rapid urbanization, globalization and technological advancements leading to identity and purpose crises (Sotunsa, 2017). Additionally, changes in economic patterns have affected the role of a provider or protector since industrialization and urbanization have disrupted customary livelihoods leading to low self-esteem and loss of masculinity (Barker & Ricardo, 2005). The empowerment of women as well as changing gender roles may disrupt established power dynamics thereby eliciting resistance and insecurity particularly among men (Chigudu, 2016).

However, these challenges can be surmounted through growth opportunities provided by the current society. Urbanization alongside improved education equips African men with skills to have conversations around their own roles which encourage reasoning abilities as well as cultural adaptability (Barker & Ricardo, 2005). Moreover, having more women holding positions of power means that male African social leaders must take up collective leadership so that they promote inclusivity while guarantee gender parity for all genders (Chigudu, 2016). Men sharing domestic chores like childcare may lead to better marital ties or even serve as a way of minimizing discrimination against women in homes (Sotunsa 2017).

Education plays an important part in helping Africans navigate this changing world by providing them with necessary tools to adjust their role in life using critical thinking skills; it is because education is responsible for producing generation after generation who can think outside the box (OECD., 2018). In order to encourage open discussion regarding positive masculinities and masculinity, the need to re-evaluate customary values arises in modern challenges (Barker & Ricardo, 2005).

From the above, it is clear that African men are presented with both challenges and opportunities by their interaction with pre-colonial customs and modernity. This means men embracing changeable gender roles, engaging in collective leadership and making use of education may address present-day dilemmas while staying authentic (Barker & Ricardo, 2005). Therefore, a delicate balance between maintaining cultural identities while simultaneously adjusting to new societal norms is a factor necessary for creating an equitable and all-inclusive future.

CONCLUSION

African masculinity is transforming amid the complex interaction between customs and modernity. Although ancient principles like Ubuntu, respect, and social responsibility persist in influencing identity and interactions, contemporary exigencies necessitate change. African males negotiate this equilibrium by reinterpreting their responsibilities in the context of evolving gender dynamics and economic transformations. Customarily, values such as respect for elders and the role of provider have been profoundly ingrained in African civilisations. Globalisation and societal transformations, however, threaten cultural practices, compelling African males to embrace inclusivity, equality, and collaboration into their identities. Through intergenerational discourse, the promotion of gender parity, and the pursuit of education, they connect the past with the present. This evolution encompasses not only individuals but also families and communities, promoting empowerment and advancement.

African masculinity is a dynamic and robust entity that respects cultural norms while adopting modern principles to foster a more open and progressive society.

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