
A Critical Appreciation of the Dual-sex System in the 'Traditional' Shona Family: In defence of African Culture-derived Gender Perspectives

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Introduction

Nnaemeka (1998: 11) makes the observation that Kamene Okonjo, Zulu Sofola, Flora Nwapa and Sabine Jell-Bahlsen extensively discuss "The Igbo dual-sex institutions of shared authority and power". In their discussion of the Igbo dual-sex system, these scholars generalise their findings and, in the process, create the impression that this gender ontology is a global African cultural experience. In other words, the dual-sex system, as articulated by these scholars, potentially operates at the level of an African-centred theory on gender. Of the four African Womanist scholars, this discussion derives inspiration particularly from Sofola (1998: 530) who makes the submission that:

The African perception of the gender question is thus more healthy, positive, and allows for a wholesome development of a human society. Consequently, the woman has always had a vital place in the scheme of things within the African cosmology, the most relevant to our present discussion being the dual-sex system of socio-political power sharing fully developed by African peoples and based on the following perceptions of womanhood 1) as the divine equal of a man in essence, 2) as a daughter, (3) as a mother, (4) as a wife.

What is at stake in this chapter is establishing the extent to which the concept of the Igbo dual-sex system can be related to other African cultures. This task is managed within the discourse of the feasibility of generalisability, exploring its strengths and weaknesses in African cultural studies. Maxwell (2002) identifies five types of qualitative validity, that is, descriptive, interpretive, theoretical, evaluative and generalisability. Theoretical validity and generalisability are crucial to this discussion. Generalisability "refers to the extent to which one can extend the account of a particular situation or population to other persons, times or settings than those directly studied" (Maxwell, 2002: 52). Following Maxwell's notion of theoretical validity, this chapter discusses the validity of concepts that are at the centre of African interpretations of gender such as "dual-sex system", "parallel channels for self-expression and self-realization", complementary roles of men and women and others when they are applied to Shona culture. For instance, the chapter discusses how the concept of "parallel channels for self-expression and self-realization" applies to gender relations in a society which adheres to a dual-sex system, and how the same concept promotes both parallel and complementary gender roles in that same society.