

Summary of PhD Dissertation: GENDERING DIVINITIES, ENDANGERING HUMANS?

Theological and Anthropological Constructions of Gender Equality and Ambiguity among the Wanyaturu-Iraqw of Tanzania

Gender Equality and ambiguities or contradictions are the common features in the sociology, economics, religion, culture, philosophy and psychology of Wanyaturu-Iraqw people. The daily conversations, sayings and acts are done either to favor or discriminate one of genders. The dissertation on Wanyaturu-Iraqw of Tanzania has surveyed the two categories of theological and anthropological constructions of gender. One, the thesis discusses those values which place women in the lower and discriminated class at the same time placing men in the privileged and respected class. Two, the thesis discusses those values which present women as people worth respecting and recognition, equally to men. The emphasis of my thesis is on this second category of gender construction. If there are African values of gender and sexuality that may give self-esteem to women, such are the values not to forget. Rather they have to be given room and scientific explanation so that they may help the local communities to address issues of gender. This existence of constructive texts, about women, needs scholarly attention for those studying African culture and gender.

The dissertation has seven chapters including the introduction. Introductory chapter address the research problem, background and the aim of the study. The main argument is based on the question why women are regarded high in the sayings and beliefs but are treated otherwise in the daily social interaction and in the religious shrines? Chapter two informs the cultural-religious basics of Wanyaturu-Iraqw, about the beliefs and socio-economic structures of the natives. Chapter three is about the ethnographic methods used in conducting the research. Ethnography of the dissertation was so sensitive to the cultural beliefs and superstitions in order not to devour the culture but to get the right information, in the right way from the right people. Chapters four, five and six are main chapters of the dissertation. Chapter four describes various oppressive and biased cultural-religious constructions of gender which give men the strong part and give women the weak part. Men are described as lions, women as cows. The metaphor implies predators and preys, whereas the former are men and the latter are women. This biased and domineering alignment is seen in almost every area of life right from birth, puberty and initiation, marriage, production, inheritance, death and burial. The birth of baby girl is something 'other', contrary to that of baby boys. Likewise the female corpse and its burial are quite different to that of male members of the community. In every area, from birth to death, men are perceived and treated favorably unlike women.

Contrary to oppressive texts in chapter four, the same cultural-religious context provides constructive texts of gender as shown in chapters five and six. Those gender favorable beliefs, sayings and symbols about women are identified, in this dissertation, as the resourceful tools of empowering women and mainstreaming gender among the Wanyaturu-Iraqw community. The two chapters have addressed local traditions called ukuta yuva, mbura, mboto, diu, uroghi, ulisiwe, mughosya which all indicate that women have potential for gender equality, struggle and liberation. Looking at chapters four, five and six one can see that the same context exhibits dual face of contradictions bearing values that can foster equality at the same time advertising values that can enhance oppression. This is a paradoxical and critical situation out of which anyone doing a research among the natives is always needed to discover in order to extract the liberating texts and handle the oppressive texts. The study on this dual phenomenon can give a clue as to why there are marks of gender oppression and ambiguities among the Wanyaturu-Iraqw but it can also provide a possibility for developing a gender liberation model from within the same traditions and beliefs of the natives. That is the academic assumption and possible contribution of the dissertation.