

Interrogating Gender and Religion through Seniority, Language and Liminality in Kasena Marriage Rituals (Northern Ghana)

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ABSTRACT

Since the arrival of European missionaries in Africa, there has been a charged debate over people's marriage choices. This paper outlines the major elements in the academic, African feminist, and popular discourses on marriage in Africa, focusing on two core issues: the conceptual divide between the marriage practices of the Kasena, a Ghanaian ethnic group, and the context-dependent social construction and production of gender in marriage through the marriage practices of the Kasena people of North-East Ghana.

Marriage among the Kasena people is predominantly viewed as a lifeline, as it ensures – or promises to ensure – the continuous existence of the people and the society. Therefore, in many ways, the sole purpose of procreation through marriage is the continuation of the lineage through children. Marriage is also perceived as the acceptable social institution for procreation.

Furthermore, marriage is considered in this society as important for tracing kinship ties through a male ancestor, which has implications for inheritance rights.

By comparing these functionalist assumptions of the purpose of marriage in the literature on marriage in African societies with ethnographic material from Navrongo, this paper demonstrates that marriage in Kasena society does more to individuals and the society than it has been seen to do in the functionalist explanations of marriage offered by earlier anthropologists researching on marriage in African society. In this paper, I strongly argue that the marriage practices of the Kasena people that I document in the paper contribute to a context-dependent social construction and production of gender in Kasena society. That is the point of entry of this paper to the academic literature on marriage and religion in African societies. What this paper brings new to earlier research on marriage in Africa by anthropologists is the African feminist conceptual understanding of the core gender issues in marriage practices discussed in the paper. The paper frames the marriage practices of the Kasena people in clear

African feminist conceptual discourse and on relevant conceptual ritual themes that enable me to make the analyses of how the marriage practices documented in this paper contribute to the context-dependent social construction and production of gender in Kasena society. This interdisciplinary conceptual framework of the paper adds new knowledge to the functionalist view of marriage in African societies by earlier anthropologists.

INTRODUCTION

On 8th May, 2018 when I submitted my thesis to the Faculty of Theology for adjudication, I briefed a sigh of relief and thought to myself, “that stage of writing and making analyses of the marriage practices of the Kasena was finally over!” Little did I know that the date of the submission of my thesis marked the beginning of my ‘academic marriage’ with the academic community? The title of this morning’s lecture;

“Interrogating gender and religion through seniority, language, and liminality in Kasena marriage rituals (Northern Ghana)”, chosen by the evaluation committee, is, in my opinion, a confirmation of my ‘academic marriage’ with academia. Therefore, this lecture marks the performance of some of the ‘marriage rituals’ of the first stage of this ‘academic marriage’ that commenced on the 8th May, 2018. In this lecture, I aim at going about “Interrogating

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gender and religion through seniority, language and liminality in Kasena marriage rituals (Northern Ghana)” in three broad sections; first; I will make a brief recap of the presentation and analyses of the concept of gender in African feminist scholarship, second; I will make a brief presentation of the analyses of gender in Yoruba society by Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997) as a specific case of the interrogation of gender in an African society by an African feminist scholar, and third; I will make a detailed interrogation of gender and religion in the Kasena patriarchal marriage system by using the categories of “seniority” (Oyewumi 1997), “language” (Cassiman 2006) and “liminality” (Turner 1969; 1978) as trajectories through which to present and analyze context-driven conceptions of gender in postcolonial contexts. This is because in my thesis, I pointed out several sites of gendered disruptions in, and through the Kasena marriage rituals and proposed the privileging of the concepts of “seniority”, “language” and “liminality” through which to present and analyse Kasena and Catholic marriage practices in Navrongo. Therefore, I will pick up some of those contentious areas of gendered disruptions from where I left it off in my thesis and further problematize them in this lecture.

A BRIEF RECAP OF GENDER IN AFRICAN FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP

At the beginnings of African feminist discourse in the early 1970s, some African feminists like Oduyoye (2002: 88) were of the opinion that Western feminism had stirred fears in Africa of a disruption in the family. Family life is at present dependent on the good will and life-loving nature of women as wives and mothers; therefore, any move, however small, to tamper with the nature of women (or men) in marriage is too radical to ignore. To overcome the bio-determined unequal value assigned to women and men on the basis of gender, even before they have uttered their first cry, some Western feminists have raised loud their voices. They have taken it upon themselves to speak for their “inarticulate” sisters. This action by some of these Western feminists reminds me of the ancient patriarchal Jewish proverb by Abraham Cohen that says, “The strength of a woman is in her tongue.” (John Murray 1911: 103 in Oduyoye 2002: 88). Soon, African women began to speak up for themselves on issues about African women taking their own

experiences as the necessary starting point for any discussion on the issues of women.

Therefore, African feminists discourse emerged so as to highlight issues of particular concerns of African women engaged in the feminist project in Africa. African feminists may share a common continent by birth or choice, but when it comes to their use of feminism as a political as well as an analytical tool, African feminism holds significant differences. The differences range from feminist discourses that are particularly invested in how gender has been understood in African history and African traditions to feminist discourses on development issues that affect women (Mikell 1995: 405).

One important recurrent issue in African feminists discourse is the subject of gender equality in African societies. African feminists discourse on gender equality advocate for collaboration between men and women. African feminisms disagree with radical feminism that calls for a deconstruction of the modes of organizing society (Nnaemeka 2005: 32). This disagreement with radical Western feminists’ advocacy is often hesitantly conceived when taken to mean resistance, subversion, and rejection of men as household heads, the rejection of the family as a social institution, or the abolition of marriage between a man and a woman (Olurode 2013). An instance of this misconception of African feminism is the disagreement and resistance within African feminisms to Western feminisms that suggest a radical rejection of marriage, motherhood, men as superior partners in marriage, and the universalism of Western gender notions and concepts (Nnaemeka 2005: 32).

African feminist writers are arguing for the importance of highlighting their own experiences, situated in diverse and localized contexts. Nnaemeka (2005: 32) sees this as the reason for the emergence of African feminisms as resistance from all fronts by African women. In particular the resistance of African feminisms to the perceived Western feminist imperialism and the imposition of radical Western feminists’ gender notions and concepts by Western feminists.

African feminist discourse has also been engaged in creating a unique brand of analytical thought that distances itself from some Western feminists’ concepts and ideologies. An example of this type of unique African feminism is ‘womanism’. ‘Womanism’ emphasizes the

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experiences of African women both on the continent and in the African diaspora as the necessary starting point for any discussion on the issues of women. ‘Womanism’ also questions some of the basic assumptions of Western feminism. The Nigerian scholar Mary E. Modupe Kolawole (1997: 24-25), for example, argues that the Western concept of ‘feminism’ does not thoroughly accommodate African women’s emphasis on the bonds of the family and the importance of being a mother. Kolawole instead proposes the term ‘womanism’ (1997: 24).

Similarly, Nigerian-born British novelist Buchi Emecheta endorses the term ‘womanism’. Womanism, for her, captures the contentious areas of disagreement and resistance in ‘feminism’ that African feminisms represent. ‘Womanism’ is an inclusive term that captures the collaborative nature of African feminism and at the same time resists the inordinate attempted domination and imposition of Western notions and concepts of gender on African feminism.

Finally, ‘Womanism’ has also been adopted by other African feminists, like Ogunyemi (1996: 116) in order “to avoid the distractions attendant with [the term feminism].” Womanism is a preferable term to Ogunyemi because it “addresses the otherwise separatist nature of feminism by recognizing men as partners rather than foes” (Ogunyemi 1996: 116).

OYERONKE OYEWUMI’S (1997) POSTCOLONIAL DECONSTRUCTION OF GENDER

The Nigerian scholar, Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997) made her appearance on the African scene at a period when the African feminists’ scholarship landscape was still heavily dominated by Western writers. In no time, Oyewumi (1997) made inroads into the hearts of many African feminists with her work; *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997). In this ground-breaking work, Oyewumi makes a sustained argument against the Western-derived concept of gender. Oyewumi’s main argument in this book is that biological sex difference as structuring social relations in Euro-American culture is irrelevant in many African societies.

With specific reference to the Oyo-Yoruba of south western Nigeria, Oyewumi argues that gender distinction is not coded within Yoruba

language and social practice: “...I came to realize that the fundamental category ‘woman’ – which is foundational to Western gender discourses – simply did not exist on Yorubaland prior to its sustained contact with the West” (1997: 9). Oyewumi contends that biology does not determine or influence social relations, access to power or participation in institutions. Rather, she claims that in place of gender, seniority is a key organizing principle in Oyo-Yoruba society (Oyewumi 1997). She argues that the introduction of gender as a social category is attributed to the linguistic and cultural translation of Yoruba into English, where Western paradigms were used to write Yoruba history. Moreover, Oyewumi (1997: 9) claims that through colonization gender was institutionalized in Yoruba land.

The overall claim of Oyewumi’s central argument is that, historically, the Oyo-Yoruba ‘don’t do gender’ (Bakari-Yusuf 2004). Oyewumi’s argument shifts the attention of feminists away from biological determinism, and it also places importance on the need to pay attention to other categories of social organization within a culture. In Oyewumi’s conclusion, she accuses Western feminism for the contemporary influence that gender has gained as an organizing principle in Oyo-Yoruba society.

According to Bakari-Yusuf, Oyewumi’s conclusion makes the continuous use of gender as a main organizing principle of social relations in Africa reflects a European cultural and epistemological imperialism (Bakari-Yusuf 2004).

Through the study of traditional Yoruba society, the work of Oyewumi (1997) challenges Western feminism by suggesting that gender is an imported European concept that imposes Western oppressions, conceptual schemes and theories upon African feminist scholarship.

Nonetheless, there are a few areas of Oyewumi’s (1997) argument that have been problematized by African feminist scholars, particularly by Bakari-Yusuf (2003). Bakari-Yusuf endorses the central argument of Oyewumi. However, Bakari-Yusuf (2003), from her unique position of sharing the same national background with Oyewumi, is not entirely convinced by Oyewumi’s claim on language as ‘cultural truth’ (Bakari-Yusuf 2003: 126-7). Bakari-Yusuf makes reference to the Yoruba words *Okunrin* (male) and *Obinrin*

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(female) and how these words have been watered down by colonial symbolic and gender-based equivalence, i.e. ‘man’ and ‘woman,’ respectively. Citing a few examples from Yoruba proverbs as illustrations, Bakari-Yusif (2003) delves deeper into Oyewumi’s argument on the Yoruba language as gender neutral. The evidence that Oyewumi uses to claim the non-existence of gender as an organizing category of Yoruba society derives primarily from foregrounding the Yoruba language as gender neutral. However, this applies to dozens of African languages, Kasem language of the Kasena of Navrongo (Ghana) being one such example.

In my thesis, I deployed my contextual knowledge as a male Kasena insider, and used ethnography to observe and interpret the gendered marriage ritual among the Kasena people. My major aim in my thesis (which I hope I sufficiently achieved) was to contribute to academic discussions on gender, rituals, religion and society in a West-African Ghanaian context. Therefore, Oyewumi’s (1997) departure from Western feminist interpretations of African gender systems, afforded me with new analytical registers through which I examined the ethnographic data I collected on the Kasena marriage practices. However, I took a risk with my application of Oyewumi’s (1997) conceptions of gender in Yoruba society as a trajectory for my presentation and analyses of context-driven conceptions of gender in my context. The fine line between my work and Oyewumi (1997) that I chose to walk did not escape the critical eyes of the adjudication committee of my thesis. The committee observed (and rightly so) that “in the concluding chapters of the thesis the author seems sympathetic to, and draws on the western conceptions of gender critiqued earlier in the thesis.” Therefore, as I stated in the thesis, let me be more explicit here on my choice of analytical framing again. I did not make an application of Oyewumi’s (1997) categories of gender in my interrogation of gender in the Kasena context oblivious of the inherent consequences. Oyewumi (1997) proposes the alternative categories of “seniority” and “slavery” to the Western bio-determined category “gender” as ways of categorizing social reality in Yoruba society. In my work, I

proposed privileging seniority (Oyewumi 1997), language (Cassiman 2006) and liminality (Turner 1969; 1978) as analytical categories to interrogate gender and religion in the Kasena marriage practices. However, it would appear as though my use of Oyewumi (1997) implies a rejection or a denial of gender as an organizing principle in Kasena society as claimed by Oyewumi (1997) for same in pre-colonial Yoruba society. The basic agreement between the claim of Oyewumi (1997) and my thesis is that; first, Oyewumi makes it clear that gender is socially constructed. Second, she points out that gender is not only socially constructed but also context-dependent and thus flexible regarding meaning and symbolism. Third, she makes a critical point that studies of Africa should not rely on Western-derived concepts to map the issues of gender in African society. Instead, we must ask questions about the insistence on “gender” as the central organizing principle in African societies and how to best understand gender in particular times and places (Oyewumi 1997).

I use the concept “gender” in my thesis as a classificatory term. That is, I explore the areas of the Kasena marriage practices that classified women and men solely based on their participation in/or not in the marriage rituals of the Kasena or the Catholic Church. Furthermore, women and men are also categorized in the society based on the roles they play in the marriage rituals either for themselves or for ritual participants of the Kasena and Catholic marriage rites. Therefore, the gendering processes inherent in the marriage practices and rituals of the Kasena and the Catholic Church in Navrongo eventually construct and produce context-dependent conceptions of gender in the Kasena marriage system. Eventually, marriage has become a context-dependent organizing principle in Kasena society. Therefore, I concluded that gender is not the sole organizing principle in Kasena society for women. Marriage, as I argued out in my thesis is a major organizing principle for women in Kasena society.

My context-dependent presentation of and analyses of the construction and production of gender in Kasena society illustrated by the marriage practices is a marked departure from

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Oyewumi's (1997) postcolonial deconstruction of western-derived conceptions of gender as a category for organizing Yoruba society in South western Nigeria.

INTERROGATING GENDER AND RELIGION THROUGH SENIORITY, LANGUAGE AND LIMINALITY

Gendering through "Seniority"

Oyewumi (1997) outlines three primary ways in which social reality is organized in Oyo Yoruba society of Nigeria without using the category of "gender" as the basis of this organization. Replacing the category of gender is that of "seniority", which Oyewumi (1997) argues is the central organizing principle in Yoruba society, which includes relations of marriage.

Among the Kasena, post-menopausal women (most of whom are widows and who have grandchildren), are considered 'old men/elders.' These 'old men/women' are allowed to share the same gendered space with all men (the elders) in deliberating family or social issues in public. Such women are obviously still biologically women, yet there appears to be an interphase or an overlap between the gender of these women and their sexuality. Why does the society not just recognize these "old women/men" to be the old women that they already are? It appears to me that the focus of this recognition is men and rather not the old women/men as it is made to appear. The gender "man" is the norm in public space in Kasena patriarchal society. Therefore, women must 'grow up' to become 'men' in this society if they are so lucky to be blessed with old age.

Furthermore, the concept of "seniority" is a relational category. An individual is either "senior" or "junior" comparative to the age, qualification, or status of another person. "Seniority" as a relational category in society is gender neutral. However, in northern Ghana it is not a neutral category. In Kasena society, seniority is a gendered category. Seniority is used to categorize women differently than it is used for same for men. Old men are considered as "senior" to all younger men and all women. But not all old women are considered as "senior" to all men in Kasena society. Not even the elevated status of the so-called "old women/men" is considered as "senior" to all men in that society. These "old women/men"

only have a limited "seniority" status. They are only "senior" to men considered as younger than the men in the same age-set group with these "old women/men." There is no universal "seniority" for women as a social category for organizing women in Kasena society. Even among women, "seniority" is considered according to marital status. All women who are married first into a Kasena lineage are automatically considered as "senior" to all women that marry later into the same lineage irrespective of the individual biological ages of these wives. The gendering process that "seniority" as a social principle for organizing Kasena society helps to illicit is that; "seniority" is selectively applied as an organizing principle in Kasena society with regards to women. This assertion is aptly captured in the proverb of the Dagbomba people of Northern Ghana which says that "even a young boy is wiser than an old woman". There is a patriarchal preference for men in this part of northern Ghana and this I can understand and I accept. But as an indigenous researcher, I am of the opinion that it is also my responsibility to interrogate some of the gendering practices of my people that continue to produce gender stereotypes for women in Northern Ghana.

In the marriage negotiation processes, women are expected to defer their marriage decision-making to men at almost all stages of the process. The important decision as to which man to marry is not taken by the women concerned. This decision is taken in accordance with the principle of seniority. The principle of seniority, which Oyewumi (1997) describes as a social gender category for organizing society in some African societies, functions in the following paired categories of seniority: father – daughter, husband – wife, father in-law – daughter in-law, mother – daughter, Father's sister (aunt) – daughter (niece), and elder sister – younger sister. These social categories show the significance of the principle of seniority in the marriage decision-making process for Kasena women and the reason why women must always concede to a senior in marriage decision-making.

In my thesis (and hopefully this morning), based on a convincing ethnography illustrated with compelling elaborations of the context-dependent conceptions of gender in Kasena marriage, I have demonstrated that "seniority" is

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a useful trajectory through which to interrogate gender and religion in context-driven constructions of gender in postcolonial societies.

Gendering through Language

Marriage is a status symbol for both women and men in Kasena society. The marriage practices legitimize a union between a man and a woman and as such justify the importance that is placed on the marriage practices in Kasena society. A man becomes a husband only if he has performed the customary marriage rituals. A husband is, therefore, by definition someone who accepts that marriage is central in how the society is organized, that is, if he wishes to become a father.

The same is true for women. However, in the case of women in Kasena society, the language of marriage is a way of categorizing women in the society. According to an earlier study done by Cassiman, *Stirring life: women's paths and places among the Kasena of Northern Ghana*; marriage takes place according to the residential rule of virilocality. The woman moves into the husband's house where she is first seen as a stranger, since, as the Kasena say, "she is someone's child" (2006: 207).

The very process of marrying among the Kasena is embedded in male discourse as in "kaane dim" (marriage). "Kaane dim" reports the active voice of a second person male describing the act or the entire customary processes of marrying a wife in Kasena custom (2006: 197). Cassiman compares this with women's active second person voice produced in the same process ("banzuri"). She observes that "marriage, from this perspective, becomes a movement made by the daughter in a processual way to trace a path of relationship for two lineages to which she will doubly belong" (Cassiman 2006: 197).

There are also gendered words and expressions in Kasem that signify men in ways that are not positive. The Kasem word "badem" for an unmarried man (not a widower) is regarded as derogatory. A "badem" is considered a child in the society. He cannot take part in deliberations of men in the "minchongo ni." (Front entrance of a traditional Kasena family compound house). He cannot take part in the marriage negotiations between his family members and the family members of suitors who come to take wives from his lineage. Also, a "badem" can never become an ancestor after his death even if he leads a good life or performs a heroic deed

for the society. Language is therefore also a social principle for organizing men in Kasena society.

However, again, like with the principle of "seniority", the language of marriage in the Kasena marriage system requires further interrogation because of the influence of language on gender and religion in the marriage processes. The Kasem word used to refer to a married woman is different from the word used to refer to an unmarried woman or an adolescent girl or teenager. A 'kaane' (wife) is perceived to be someone who lives with her husbands in the husband's house and most likely that woman should be a mother to be recognised by the society as a complete married woman. 'Kaane' (wife) is thus a language category used to describe a particular group of women and used to distinguish them from other women in the society. A 'bisankana' or a 'buko', on the other hand, refers to a female who is either a teenager (bisankana) or an adolescent girl (buko) still living with her parents and under the authority of her parents. 'Katogo', importantly, refers to a teenage girl who is now at the age of marriage and thus open for suitors to bid through her parents. A 'katogo' could also refer to a girl whose would-be husband has commenced the customary marriage processes. However, there are no such words describing men in the Kasem language in the marriage practices. The language of marriage thus has different implications for women than for men in Kasena society. Therefore, it is my claim that language in marriage is used as a gendering mechanism; it is a form of social organization in Kasena society. My findings are contrary to Oyewumi's argument that language was gender neutral in precolonial Yoruba society. Just as Oyewumi (1996) was critiqued by Bakari-Yusif (2004) for assuming that the gender neutrality of language in Yoruba society necessarily implies the absence of gender inequalities in the society, so is my claim that women's active second person voice produced in the language of marriage to trace kinship and the function of marriage in Kasena society (Cassiman 2006) does not outweigh the role of language as a gendering mechanism for women in the Kasena marriage system.

Gendering through Liminality

In my ethnographic account of the Kasena marriage ritual practice known as "gwoɲina" (ritual sacrifice of a dog), I recount my personal

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struggles with the physical killing of a dog in the customary marriage processes. I still share the same feelings this morning but let me add that what is at stake in this marriage ritual for the Kasena is far beyond the personal feelings of an individual member of the community. The “gwoŋina” customary marriage ritual is a ritual that involves the sacrifice of a dog by a husband for his invited in-laws. The ritual also involves the sacrifice of a goat whose waist portion of the meat is given to the wife who now resides in her husband’s house. The normative narrative about the significance of the gwoŋina ritual is that it is meant to ratify the marriage between the two families through the sharing of a sacrificial meal. However, the timing of this ritual and the portions of the sacrificed goat offered to wives who take part in this ritual suggests a profound link between the gwoŋina ritual and the fertility of wives.

The symbolism of this ritual in Kasena marriage needs further interrogation in order for us to come to a better appreciation of the significance of the ritual to the entire Kasena marriage system.

First, the dramatization that accompanies the arrival of the relations of the wife to her husband’s house for the performance of this ritual is a statement to the family of the husband that the wife’s paternal relations will not easily give up their authority and reproductive rights (as children born by an unmarried daughter belong to her father’s lineage) over their daughter and sister without a ‘fight’.

Second, the “gwoŋina” ritual functions as part of a series of actions to redress the social breach caused by unmarried persons in the society. The “gwoŋina” ritual puts the ritual participants of a marriage (husband and wife) in the liminal stage of marriage. Victor Turner (1969), building on van Gennep’s (1960) concept of rites of passage, refers to rituals that accompany a change or transition in his work; it might be a change of season, marriage, birth or death. According to van Gennep (1960: 10-11), several of the rituals accompanying a change would manifest in three phases: “separation” (“preliminal”), “transition” (“liminal”) and incorporation (“postliminal”). It is the second phase in a rite of transition that Turner calls “liminality” and van Gennep calls it “separation.” Liminality refers to a threshold condition or person. That means that persons in the liminal stage of a transition ritual cannot be

placed under the recognized modes of categorizing individuals in a society. Liminal ritual participants are seen as being “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” according to Turner (1969: 95). Therefore, until the “gwoŋina” ritual is performed, the wife is neither considered fully married nor is the husband regarded the legal husband of the wife. The liminal status of married women has grave implications for categorizing such married women in the society.

Third, the “gwoŋina” ritual has a critical symbolism through the exegetical explanation of the ritual. This explanation of the symbolism of the “gwoŋina” ritual has an inverse correlation with what happens during the funeral rites of a married man, where a dog is sacrificed as a companion to the deceased man and used to send off the dead man from this world to the spiritual world. During the “gwoŋina” ritual, “it is as if the loss of the woman to her paternal family is represented by a reduced funerary rite” (Cassiman 2000: 126).

However, unlike Cassiman (2006), as an indigenous scholar, I am of the opinion that the exegetical symbolic meaning of the “gwoŋina” ritual has implications for context-dependent constructions of gender in postcolonial Kasena society. If a wife is symbolized by this ritual as dead to her paternal family, has this got any connection with the increasing reported cases of domestic violence against women in Northern Ghana (DOVVSU: 43, 431 reported cases nationwide in 2017 (162 cases of spousal battery)? The “gwoŋina” ritual has also assumed the status of a fertility test for married women in Navrongo because of the link between the ritual and the legitimacy of children in marriage. The ritual has become a means for husbands to control women in marriage by giving husbands the power to perform this ritual only after a wife is able to bear children for a man in her marriage. (Also cite examples of the “jwom pia” analyses: The ritual shows that the bodies of women seem to have a higher spiritual value than men in the scheme of things in Kasena society. That is why both deities and human beings compete to possess and control the bodies of women).

Beyond these collateral critical gender implications that come with the exegetical symbolic meanings of the “gwoŋina” ritual and the “jwom pia” bride wealth that “liminality”

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can be a useful trajectory to analyse ritual in the Kasena marriage ritual, there is yet another important reason for the performance of this ritual. In the context of Kasena society, the real essence of marriage is procreation and the continuation of lineage through children born out of legal marriages. Meyer Fortes (1978: 23) earlier on observed that “fertility was traditionally and still is valued above all other human endowments, in all strata and among all of the African societies. It is valued primarily as the indispensable condition for the achievement of parenthood.” The question however, to most married women in Kasena society is not “are you married?” but “do you have children?” Therefore, the religious ritual sacrifice of the dog which is meant to be a covenant between the families of a husband and a wife has become a ritual that validates the fertility of women in the Kasena marriage practices. This is clearly a patriarchal ulterior motive enshrined in the customary marriage practices and heavily endorsed by the Catholic Church in Navrongo. This endorsement of the “gwojina” ritual by the church raises legitimate questions about marriage in the Catholic Church. If wives are symbolized in the “gwojina” ritual by the sacrifice of a dog to signify a loss to their paternal families, then how do we compare men and women in marriage? Are women servants of men in marriage or are women companions to men in marriage? There are still lingering questions on the Church’s social teachings on the indissolubility of marriage in the Catholic Church in Navrongo. The church in Navrongo has premised church weddings on the performance of this “gwojina” ritual. That pastoral policy of the church in Navrongo makes the church complacent in the conceptions of gender as portrayed by the “gwojina” ritual.

CONCLUSION

In this lecture, I have tried to achieve basically three aims; to present to you my audience, a brief recap of the concept of gender in African feminist scholarship, to make a brief presentation of the analyses of gender in Yoruba society by Oyewumi (1997) as a specific case of the interrogation of gender by an African feminist scholar, and finally, to do a detailed interrogation of gender and religion in the Kasena patriarchal marriage system.

The indigenous ethnography of Kasena marriage ritual that I have been speaking about this morning will be meaningless unless I am able to

communicate with an academic audience like you seated here in this auditorium this morning. That is the core essence of indigenous ethnography; which is, research carried out by academics from groups of people who are usually represented by others in academia. The major strength of my presentation this morning as an indigenous ethnographer is that I have been able to begin a change in the way the marriage practices of my people are understood in the academic literature.

Drawing on the analytical concepts of “seniority” (Oyewumi 1997), “language” (Cassiman 2000), and “liminality” (Turner 1969; 1978); I have sufficiently developed an argument that these concepts can be useful frames through which to present, analyse, and interrogate context-dependent conceptions of gender and religion in the postcolonial context of the Kasena marriage practices in Navrongo, Northern Ghana.

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