

The Role of Women in Africa: 5000 BCE-Late Antiquity

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In civilizations throughout all of global history, the role of women has been limited by their portrayal in stereotypical roles such as mothers, wives, daughters, or even mistresses. These portrayals of women are constantly reinforced throughout society, media, and cultures, subliminally, and overtly training the mind to illustrate women as inferior to men. In history there are limited narratives about powerful, influential, and leading women's triumphs and stories discussed at length, and when we do hear of them, people tend to only speak of nobility, such as Cleopatra or Queen Elizabeth. This phenomenon begs two questions: have women *always* been treated as inferior to men? And if not, where in history did the role of women change, causing society to be so male dominated and view men as superior to women? After a study of ancient Egypt and Ethiopia civilizations, it is apparent that women have not always been viewed as inferior to men. The objective of this essay is to demonstrate how initially in ancient Egyptian and Ethiopian society women were viewed equally to, and at times superior to, men.

Women of ancient Egypt and Ethiopia civilizations often held powerful, spiritual roles that garnered them respect and admiration in society. These women contributed greatly to spiritual, political, and economic developments across their countries. Learning the roles of women depicted in ancient African civilizations is essential for honoring and respecting the past of African women, while reinstating them to their dignified place in history and contemporary society. It is important to note that, not only did some societies allow women to hold a superior position in society, there were different ways for women to achieve superiority, whether it be aesthetically, politically, spiritually, or socially. This is a testament to how advanced some early

African civilizations were in terms of gender roles, relations and societal structures. The role of women in Egypt and Ethiopia civilizations was such a unique factor of society, not only because women led diverse and decisive roles in their communities, but also because the gender roles practiced in Egypt and Ethiopia were not commonplace in contemporaneous societies in Europe, such as Ancient Greece and Rome. When describing the role of women in ancient Graeco-Roman society, Walter Scheidel, an Austrian historian and researcher who teaches ancient history at Stanford University, chronicled, "all in all we may assume that an absolute majority of all women in ancient Graeco-Roman world either belonged to households that lived by agriculture and had, at least at times, to rely on labour of all its members or women were compelled as slaves or dependents to fulfill whatever tasks they were assigned."¹ This analysis by Scheidel is significant because it shows that women in the Graeco-Roman world did not have access to achieve the level of status in society that women in Egyptian and Ethiopian civilizations were privy to. In contrast, when describing ancient Egyptian society, Herodotus, an ancient Greek writer, geographer, and historian, stated that, "the Egyptians themselves, in their manners and customs, seem to have reversed the ordinary practices of mankind. For instance, women can attend markets and are employed at trade, while men stay at home and do the weaving."² Herodotus' claim is significant because it indicates that gender relations and norms in Egypt were very different from what he had seen in the deeply rooted patriarchal system he was accustomed to in Greece. Another example of the gender relations that existed in early African societies can be seen in ancient Greek historian Diodorus' description of the equality between

¹ Walter Scheide, "The Most Silent Women of Greece and Rome: Rural Labour and Women's Life in the Ancient World (I)." *Greece & Rome*, vol. 42, no. 2, (Classical Association, Cambridge University Press), 199

² Beatrice Lumpkin, "Hypatia and Women's Rights in Ancient Egypt." *Black Women in Antiquity*. Rev. ed. Edited by Ivan Van Sertima. (New Brunswick: Transaction Press, 1987), 157

men and women more than half a millennium after Herodotus. Diodorus claimed, "it was ordained that the queen should have greater power and honor than the king and that among private persons the wife should enjoy authority over her husband, the husband's agreeing in the marriage contract that they will be obedient in all things to their wives."³ Diodorus' explanation illustrates that these elevated views of women were not something that existed only to make it seem as if these early civilizations were just and equal, but it also signifies that these gender relations and views of women by men were maintained and expected behind closed doors, in families and marriages, just as they were in public. In addition to the above examples, another approach in which women achieved social status was through beauty and their bodies.

Body adornment in society was more than just an act of beautification in ancient African civilizations. Body adornment is the combination of magic, medicine, and religious practices, used to beautify one's appearance and to project social status. Women in these early societies who had undergone scarification and cicatrization signified higher levels of status. Scarification is the practice of scratching, etching, burning/branding, or superficially cutting designs, or words into the skin as a permanent body modification, while cicatrization is the process of healing a wound by contracting tissue in order to form scarring.

"The markings were a language clearly understood by those who could read their symbolic meanings. They were an indication of social status. The markings varied according to cultural group but would generally tell the following story; 'See the design on my breasts, arms and back? I have had my first menses. I have come of age. Give me honor. See the design on my abdomen? I carry my first child. Give me honor. Or, see the design on my face? I am a married woman. Give me honor. You can read my achievement and the strength of my character when you see the art and accumulation of my adornment. Read me and behave accordingly.'⁴

³ Lumpkin "Hypatia and Women's Rights in Ancient Egypt," 157

⁴ Camille Yarbough. "Female Style and Beauty in Ancient Africa." *Black Women in Antiquity*. Rev. ed. Edited by Ivan Van Sertima, (New Brunswick: Transaction Press, 1987), 89-90

This quote from historian Camille Yarbough is noteworthy because it details the cultural importance of the scars that existed on these women's bodies and illustrates their level of status in society. It also signaled respect as women continued to go through the stages of womanhood and motherhood; the level of status and respect they received from people in society should ascend similarly. The role of motherhood was not taken lightly in these early African civilizations. Mothers were often considered to be the foundation of society and the creators of Gods. American poet, writer, and professor Sonia Sanchez claims, "the fact that women as spiritual beings were considered full partners in civilization-building was reflected historically in Egyptian society by records kept on women-pharaohs and indicated a widespread belief that women also housed the Divine."⁵ This statement by Sanchez is crucial to the understanding of women achieving higher status in society, because it provides reasoning on why women were so highly thought of and treated superior to men. The people believed that if it were not for the women, then the kings or Gods that they have looked up to and respected would not have existed. Mythical Gods and characters played a big role in the spirituality of many early African societies. Another unique claim in this reading was the one made by Ptahhotep, an ancient Egyptian vizier, who is a high ranking official or political advisor, appointed by the pharaoh. Ptahhotep advised his son, "be unstinting in lavishing attention on your wife because she is the foundation of your family."⁶ Essentially, this quote symbolizes an example of men in higher positions advising other men to treat women with the utmost respect, which illustrates that even men in the upper echelons of society believed and followed these matriarchal views.

⁵ Sonia Yarbough, "Nefertiti: Queen on a Sacred Mission," *Black Women in Antiquity*. Rev. ed. Edited by Ivan Van Sertim, (New Brunswick: Transaction Press, 1987), 49.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

Lastly, another example of women achieving higher social status and being treated superior to their male counterparts in society, are the many queens that once held power in some of these ancient Ethiopian and Egyptian societies. There is a chapter titled "The Great Queens of Ethiopia", in Ivan Van Sertima's book *Black Women in Antiquity*. This chapter was written by Charles Finch and Larry Williams, and in the chapter they expressed the following, "the most important of the Ethiopian queens we are considering were independent rulers; their husbands were consorts to them. These queens ran the civil administration, led armies against military foes, promoted long-distance commerce and diplomatic relations, and engaged in massive building programs."⁷ This reveals the fact that in ancient Ethiopia women had the opportunity and access to work in all positions of society, and at times were able to gain leadership positions or roles. Finch and Williams go on to claim that, "in every way, they [women] exercised the full prerogatives and powers of rulership. Such independent female rulers are found throughout Africa in time and space and it is our contention that this relative frequency of the queenship—compared to other parts of the world—reflected the persistent matriarchal patterns in Africa through the course of history."⁸ This means not only were women placed in positions of power, but also that women exercised the power given to them to its full extent. While also actually being trusted in these roles and expected to run these civilizations no different from if it were a king in power. While this pattern of queenship seems to be a rarity, it was not only evident in ancient Ethiopia, it also existed in ancient Egypt.

Although Egypt is known for its ancient civilizations and the monuments of the pharaohs, history tends to forget about the queens that reigned during those times. The

⁷ Charles Yarbough and Larry Williams, "The Great Queens of Ethiopia" *Black Women in Antiquity*. Rev. ed. Edited by Ivan Van Sertima, (New Brunswick: Transaction Press, 1987), 15-16

⁸ *Ibid.*, 15-16

Queens of Egypt were a powerful force in their own right, such as Queen Hatshepsut or Queen Tiye. Dr. James Harris, leader of the investigation of the royal mummy collection in the Egyptian museum in Cairo, describes Queen Hatshepsut as, "a former queen who ruled Egypt as pharaoh and undertook titles of raiment of a king as depicted in temple scenes and in statuary after the death of her husband Thutmose II and during her coregency with her stepson Thutmose III."⁹ Dr. Harris' quote illustrates that when women were placed in power, they were trusted to complete all tasks that were required of them due to inhabiting the role of a king, rather than just being someone placed in power with no real expectations or duties, or as placeholder for a heir in the family to come up and take the position. Queen Hatshepsut was not the only woman to attain this level of leadership, another example of that can be Queen Tiye. When discussing Queen Tiye, Dr. Harris stated, "Queen Tiye was the beloved wife of Amenhotep III and mother of pharaoh Amenhotep IV also known as Akhenaton. Queen Tiye played a crucial role in leadership during her husband's reign and her son's Akhenaton. These examples of Queen Tiye's leadership was reflected in statuary inscriptions, and reliefs in temples and tomb chapels, and she was even involved in diplomatic correspondence with heads of foreign states."¹⁰ The women in these Egyptian societies had important responsibilities and were not domesticated or confined to the home like many would assume, and they often took on roles that today are commonly referred to as a 'man's job'. Ultimately, the women of these times set the foundation for the empowerment of women and are not credited enough.

⁹ James E.Harris, et al., "Mummy of the 'Elder Lady' in the Tomb of Amenhotep II: Egyptian Museum Catalog Number 61070." *Science*, vol. 200, no. 4346, American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1978, 149.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 149–51

To conclude, women in ancient Egyptian and Ethiopian societies were far more than just wives and daughters confined to the home; they had much more status than commonly believed and were highly respected in society. Throughout ancient Egyptian and Ethiopian civilization these elevated views of women were very prominent and practiced normally, while in Greece and Rome they were developing patriarchal societies that confined women to the home, and viewed women as inferior to men. These Greek and Roman societies would later influence the Western world, and these ideas of gender relations and norms in society would later become the dominant ideas of the New World. Fundamentally, this was problematic because these stereotypical notions of women, and the constant degradation of women began to be planted all over the globe through colonialism and imperialism, and as a result, it has shaped the way people view women in contemporary society. It also has created the idea that patriarchy is natural, and something that has existed in all societies throughout history, when in reality it has not. Ultimately, this has led to the society we live in today, where women find themselves still in the middle of multiple movements, in hopes of creating a society where women are viewed, paid, and treated equally to their male counterparts. While this is just a basic understanding of the oppression women in today's society face, it contradicts women's place in society of ancient Egypt and Ethiopia, and the notion that women have always been treated second-class to men. Barbara S. Lesko, author and Administrative Research Assistant in the Department of Egyptology at Brown University claims, "four thousand years ago women in the Nile Valley enjoyed more legal rights and privileges than women have in many nations of the world today. Equal pay for equal work is a cry heard now, but seems to have been the norm for thousands of

years ago in Egypt."¹¹ In sum, when looking at the role of women in today's Western society most would agree women are treated far too poorly and unjustly in comparison to men, due to the norms of the patriarchal society we live in. In order to fix this problem it is essential that representation of women in power, like those of ancient Egypt and Ethiopia civilizations are discussed, because stories of the past, such as those expressed here, can be critically used to incite inspiration, to spread knowledge, and to break down the patriarchal structures that dominate American contemporary society.

¹¹ Lumpkin, "Hypatia and Women's Rights in Ancient Egypt," 157.

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