



## FEMALE RELIGIOUS FUNCTIONARIES AND THEIR ROLES IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

BY

JOSEPH, ESTHER OJONE (PhD)

DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES, PRINCE ABUBAKAR AUDU UNIVERSITY, ANYIGBA KOGI STATE



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### Abstract

*Female religious functionaries are the women who hold office or a trust and perform certain religious functions in a given religion. This study examines the role of women within several particular religious' faiths and doctrines in relations to gender, gender roles, and particular women in religions history. There is often a dualism within religion which exacts women on the one hand, while demanding more rigorous displays of devotion on the other. It further examines the roles and extent of women's involvement and contributions made in spiritual and national development process. Previous discussions on women deals with the several contributions of women to national development. This paper however paid attention to the roles of female religious functionaries in relation to national development. The paper adopted a socio-religious approach and a feminist perspective of conflict theory in its methodology. Findings from this study shows the effective roles women have played as religious functionaries and create more enlightenment to the society on the functional roles religious women can play in national development. The paper concludes that when religious women perform their functions in the society, development is guaranteed.*

### Introduction

God did not stop creation until women manifested in the scene. No human society is complete without the women folk. This is equally applicable to the nations of the world. Development of any human society could hardly be attainable when women's role is not factored in, nor acknowledged and appreciated. This is because women form about half of the world's population (Akabue, 353). It is noteworthy to say that women deserve adequate recognition in every sphere because they have played several roles in contributing to the development of communities from all ages ranging from family, social, economic, political, and religious roles. A few religions and denominations are more gender-equal but male dominance remains the norm of most. This gave emergence to feminist theology because it is often lamented that, although women are typically the ones who socialize children into a religion, they have traditionally held very few positions of power within religions. This paper, therefore, brings to fore the involvement of religious women in national development.

### Religious Functionaries

These are people who hold office or a trust and perform certain religious functions in a given religion. Religious functionaries devote themselves to a particular religion when viewed organizationally, of a religious system.

### Development

It is the process of economic and social transformation that is based on the complex cultural and environment factors and their interactions. It is also the act or process of causing something to grow or become more advanced. Development, however, can either lead to positive or negative advancement.

### Female Religious Functionaries

Women are exceptional beings created with special qualities that makes them outstanding in every society when compared to their male folks. They are creative, innovative, industrious, and hardworking (Adekanye 29). In the same vein, the same rigour put in everything creative they embark upon. They also act as religious functionaries in a very effective way. One can notice in the society that women tend to be very religious than their male folks. Through their creativity, they have been able to make land strides in all endeavours, and the religious sphere is not left out of their impact.

Female religious functionaries and their roles in national development can be traced to biblical issues as Olujimi and Jegede (294) posits that activities of women such as Abigail, efforts of Deborah who went to war with men when they became vegetables in the face of confrontation of Israelites' enemies cannot also be rubbished. Esther's intervention is the saving grace of Israel's nation from woe and calamity. It is believed that women can take a cue from Abigail to save

nations from destruction through the use of their feminine nature if they are given the opportunity in the religious, socio-economic, and political terrain.

Folarin (44), saw 20<sup>th</sup> century Pentecostal movement restoring women back to substantive role in the church, but they were still limited to supportive role in some regards. During this period, women serve as prophetesses, founders, and evangelists. These positions were earned by training and not by ordination because women's ordination in some churches around this period was considered to be an aberration. Most affected churches during the period was Christ Apostolic Church. Folarin noted that, where some of the women ministries were ordained as founder, their husbands are made leaders like Pastors, Reverends, and Bishops with controls of the church resting in the hand of the founder. This application is found mostly to have affected the Yoruba Christian ministry. The thesis of Bakut (12) to the above was supportive, as he clearly identifies patriarchal principles in the Old Testament and that women were allowed personal relationships to God in religious matters whereas in worship, they are to play a supportive role as they were restricted from priestly ministry.

Olademo's research on women's ordination as priest indicates that some main mainline churches are yet to ordain women as priests in Christendom but sparingly, they function at the leadership cadre in different capacities as lay readers (Anglican and Methodist) or deaconesses (Baptist). This may be right, but the position among the Baptists as regards women's ordination in gaining positive influence these days. This is not so in Anglican. This could be affirmed from Olademo's comments:

The ordination of three women into the Anglican priesthood on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December, 1993 in the Ilorin diocese, Nigeria... Much controversy greeted this development, and eventually, the House of Bishops Episcopal synod at Aba, Nigeria annulled the ordination on the 5<sup>th</sup> of January, 1994 (167).

The implication of the commute shows that women's position as substantive leaders in the Christian ministry were still being maligned and held at bay. Women's tolerance can thus be seen to be given a setback. According to late Abdul Haleem Abu Shuggah, a high reliable contemporary scholar, mention in his priceless voluminous work "Women's Liberation at that time of the Prophet", more than 300 authentic sayings and practices of the prophet that confirm women's full participation in social activities during the prophet's time. Dopamu and Awolalu (288-298) also submits that women are also considered as mediums among the Yorubas because they act as mouthpiece for the deities that possess them. In some cases, there are divinities that have mediums from both male and female sexes. An example of this deity is *Sango*, the cult which has both male and female known as *elegunsango*. Also applicable in this category is *Ogun*, women could also become exposed to a particular divinity while they remained unmarried to mortals. Some also

are involved in divination and healing practices through their commitment to a particular oracle who prescribe to them sacrifices and herbs to be used in healing processes.

These among other services are the areas where women are given freedom to operate in traditional religious ministry among the Yoruba people. It shows a peculiar area where only women can perform religious duties despite prejudices that occur in other areas.

Women play important part in every aspect of life. No one completely rule out the valuable contributions women have played in the spread of religious beliefs particularly in Africa. At this juncture, we will view the role of women as religious functionaries from the three major religions practised in Nigeria.

### Women in Christian Religion

The Bible's paradigm for womanhood, while allowing for diversity and uniqueness, is nevertheless entirely consistent and without contradiction in its presentation of the creator's plan for the nature and purposes of womanhood (Brand and Draper 679). The Old Testament identifies women who were active in the ancient Israelite society, Deborah, a prophetess and judge, Huldah's political and religious life was not devoid of what women were in ancient Israel. Esther, a queen whose skills in diplomacy saved the Jews from extinction.

During the time of Jesus, Women played active roles. The place of women in Jesus' ministry and his dispositions to them brought a total change to the traditional ways of relating to women in his time which is also a form of development. We begin our belief survey of women in the ministry of Jesus with a woman whose role occurred before Jesus was born. Elizabeth, wife of the priest Zechariah, was noted to be "upright in the sight of God" and frilly obedient (Luke 1:6). When Mary visited Elizabeth, "the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and pronounced a blessing on Mary (Luke 1:41-45). The mother of Jesus set a marvelous example with her words, "I am the lord's servant... may it be to me as you have said" (v 38). Mary was also inspired to say a poem of praise that is now part of scripture (v 46-55). She again set a good example when she "treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart". She was instrumental to Jesus' First Public Miracle (John 2:1-11). At the cross, Jesus assigned John to take care of his mother, and Mary was counted among the disciple after his resurrection (Acts 1:14). Borland writes,

the woman whom God chose to have the most extensive association with Jesus was his mother, Mary. Mary's life was significant for at least three reasons; she was a first-hand witness of Jesus' divine origin and true humanity, she was a tremendous model of godliness, faith dedication, and patience among other good qualities. she, along with other women, was incorporated into the new life of the Church at Pentecost (67-68).

When Jesus was taken to the temple to be dedicated, a prophetess named Anna "gave thanks to God and spoke about

the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jesus (Luke 2: 38). For instance, Mary and Martha listened to him as well as made their house the teaching center of Jesus (Luke 10:38-39). The conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well is the longest recorded discussion Jesus had with anyone she, was a great Gentile woman. Further, the lesson given to her about living water was just as profound as the lesson Jesus gave to Nicodemus. The woman had a better response. Unlike Nicodemus, she was willing to be associated with Jesus. She told her neighbours about Jesus, and many of them believed in Jesus” because of the woman’s testimony (John 4:1-42). Luke tells us that several women who had been healed, helped to support Jesus “out of their own means” (Luke 8:3). These included “Mary Magdalene, Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod’s household; Susanna; and many others”, although they were probably involved in meal preparation. Luke indicates that their most significant role was to pay the bills. Graham writes, “some of these women possibly widows had control of their own finances. It was out of their generosity that Jesus and his disciples were at least partially supported.

Research has shown that women’s roles have gone from being oppressive and limited to open and innovative, because of tolerance and understanding of the importance of women themselves (Akorede 11). Though the status of women in Christianity is shrouded with controversy, it is apparent that they are no pushover when important decisions are taken. In what can be considered to be analogous to political leader’s wives is the office of the wife of the Pastor, General overseer as the case may be. Among the greatest assets of any church are its women. According to scripture, women are full heirs of grace (1Peter 3:7), equal recipients of the saving work of Christ (Galatians 3:28), and partakers of the Holy Spirit and His gifts (Acts 2:17; 1 Corinthians 12:4-6, 12, 13:1; 1 Peter 4:10-11). Women serve throughout the church around the world exalting God in countless ways

Women play the role of stabilizing the mission work by holding to their credibility and teaching other women to be conservative, conform to what the church wanted. Women help to sustain and maintain high principles and doctrines of the church and likewise hand it over to their children. Women establish churches and Christian centers as a way of propagating the Christian religion. An example of such women in faith Sarah Omakwu of Family Worship Center, Margaret Idahosa of Church of God Mission, Evelyn T.B. Joshua, etc. Other women have been actively involved with their husbands in the Christian ministry. For instance, we have the likes of Folu Adeboye, wife of the General overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church Of God, who takes care of the hospitality department of the ministry. Dr.Becky Enenche, wife of the senior pastor of Dunamis International Christian Centre, who together with her husband travels around for evangelistic outreaches and support the welfare of people in the society. Sis Sade Akanni, wife of Bro Gbile Akanni of Peace House Revival Labour, who resigned from her medical profession to support her husband’s ministry and also cater for the educational needs of the ministry. Faith Oyedepo, wife of

David Oyedepo of Living Faith Church who is also in charge of all educational matters in the ministry translating to national development. Their contributions to the Christian ministry has in no way impacted the society leading to development in terms of human morality, education, poverty reduction, etc. Due to enlightenment, women are now becoming bishops and presbyter, especially in the mainline churches.

### Women in Islamic Religion

Islam prescribes a complete way of life of the Muslim (social, cultural, religious, military, and political). It governs the Muslim’s life from the cradle to the grave. The status of woman is defined by Islam. The woman is a mother and it is said that “paradise lies under her feet” (Reported by Al-Tabarani). There have been cases of strong women who played important role in the life and mission of the prophet Muhammad and the foundation of religion. The prophet’s first wife Khadija, supported his cause and became known as “mother of believers”. Another wife, Aisha is portrayed as a powerful influence, both on the prophet and his followers. The prophet’s daughter, Fatima, stood by him during his lifetime and played both political and religious roles after his death. Although the role of women in Islamic religion is not equally pronounced because Islam is a religion which is based on gender hierarchy, there are quite significant roles that Muslim women play such as; educate their children on Islamic education and prepare them with their husbands on how to defend their faith when need arises, they prepare food for their husbands and some wealthy Muslim women even built mosques in front of their houses as a way of propagating the Islamic religion. Federation of Muslim Women’s Association in Nigeria opined that their mission is to propagate the religion of Islam in Nigeria through da’awah, establishment of educational institutions, and other outreach activities and to improve the socio-economic status of the populace especially women, youth, and children through training, provision of qualitative education, health, and humanitarian services, micro-enterprise scheme and advocacy. This clearly shows the various ways women function in Islamic religion in order to enhance development. Through the federation of Muslim women, the Amira delegate women to various polling station as election observers in order to ensure a peaceful election. Another instance is Aisha Yeesuf of the “End SARS Protest” who championed a group of people to speak against the ills of governance and seeking for redress of the situation.

### Women in African Religion

Women play a very strong role in African religion. Awolalu and Dopamu extensively discussed the religious roles of women in African religion. They emphasize the leading roles of women in African religion in areas of worship, mediums, wives, diviners, and healers, coupled with other special services which shows that women are highly recognized and significant in religious services of their communities. Their opinion shows that women who perform the role of female priesthood with responsibilities are indispensable in African religion. Some of the deities in Africa are females and their

affairs are classified to be monitored by women. Traditional Yoruba women have been identified as important religious functionaries for example, among the Yorubas of Nigeria, Osun, Oya, Olokun and Oloso are female deities (288-298). These among other services are the areas where women are given freedom to operate in traditional religious settings. We have women who serve as birth attendants even in contemporary times and providing health services to women in rural areas. It shows a peculiar area where only women can perform religious duties despite prejudices that occur in other areas and this has been of great influence in African development.

### Women as Potent Agents for Development

The contribution of women as religious functionaries is as old as the era of development of the continent cannot be forgotten from generation to generation. Their relevance cannot be ignored as their contributions to all facets of life are innumerable. Despite the changing trend, women are still important elements in the family especially their role in reproductive activities which are exclusive and inalienable. Therefore, they remain partners in progress in respect of child bearing. The contributions of women towards the social, economic, political, educational, and religious development of particularly African societies cannot be underestimated. This has led to several improvements in the society. Women are largely and universally appreciated because of their roles of supporting their husbands and nurturing of their children. They are the major instrument and the primary mode of transmitting belief, art, morals, law, custom, and religious habits from one generation to another.

Olajobu (131), asserts that women are the fundamental human reservoir of every society as they control most of the non-monetary economy (subsistence, agriculture, bearing children, domestic labour, etc.) and play an important role in the monetary (training wage labour, employment, etc.). Women in most societies, whether developed or developing are regarded as currency with which political and economic alliances are cemented. Thus, in social anthropology, the transfer of women between lineages and clans is regarded as a medium of communication more potent and clearest than language itself (Oguntoye 29). The woman as a person is an agent of reproduction of life itself. This places her in the position of the life itself. This places her in the position of the lifeblood of the entire humanity.

They have used religious initiatives to empower, innovate and establish forums to improve the society. Through religious institutions, women create forum for skill acquisition, widows' empowerment scheme, poverty alleviation, health and nutrition programmes entertainment, economic empowerment, political awareness, family support programmes among others. Women have contributed enormously to national development through the above-mentioned ways. Religious women have used their offices to acquire and impact knowledge geared towards reliance of the individuals in the society.

Women have contributed greatly to the development of the African community spiritually. Women pray for their homes, visit churches and mountains for spiritual guidance and protection. In the past, some women gave up their lives for the survival of their community. For instance, the legendary princess Inikpi of the Igala kingdom, Queen Moremi, Queen Idia, etc. they have also contributed largely to some of the resources in religious institutions, missions, and development of the society. In reality, the presence of a religious building especially church in any community brings development. For instance, these church provide good water, road, welfare, and relief packages to some communities. Women contribute financially to the expansion of religious work. Women strengthen the religious economy of religious institution, especially the church, and makes it financially viable for the purpose of mission.

The contribution of Women to the health sector cannot be overemphasized. For instance, a number of missionaries came with female nurses when they brought Christianity. In African religion, some female religious functionaries are involved in healing practices through their commitment to a particular oracle who prescribe to them sacrifices and herbs to be used in healing practices. Today, we find women of various religious backgrounds working hard to restore health to sick people in the hospitals through traditional herbs. This has also contributed to development because sick people cannot contribute to national development.

Women preach morals. Moral here means standards of behaviour and norms which human conduct should conform. They are guides of human conduct. Women inculcate morals in their children and help to establish positive values in the society. Women are the first contact in child training and development. Their ability in the children translates to human development which is in the essential part of societal development.

### Challenges of Women as Religious Functionaries and its Effect on Development

In reality, challenges are part of life. Women have been subjected to various kinds of challenges from the inception of the world. The following challenges hamper development:

**Family challenges:** family is extremely important to most Africans. A woman is considered successful if she is able to cater to her family fully without neglecting some vital aspects of the home. Women hold a complementary position to men. They play common roles such as domestically oriented jobs and the range of economic activities. A woman that is religiously engrossed may find it difficult to cater for home appropriately. This can affect her family and the society which hereby threatens development. Some families have disintegrated because of women's activities in religious centers. Another aspect is that a woman who cannot manage her home is regarded as failure.

**Illiteracy:** an uneducated fellow naturally has a feeling he/she cannot talk to certain people. An illiterate woman will not be

able to function religiously if she lacks the basic skills on how to go about it.

**Poor health care facilities:** poor health care facilities result in high women mortality. A woman having health issue cannot think of embarking on a religious mission.

**Cultural norms:** some cultures relegate women to the background. They are expected to be seen and not to be heard. This can kill the potential in a woman and this can also affect development. The role of the woman in the African society may not give her full opportunity to explore her capabilities and potentials. Leadership roles of the wife can oppose a man's authority in the home. The woman may not give her husband the due respect or puffing which may affect their relationship. This may lead to separation and this will affect the children in their home which can further endanger development.

**Religious indifferences can also be factor:** For instance, women are expected to reproduce but the nature of some religion expects a woman that is a religious functionary to be unmarried so that she can fully carry out her religious activities. The Roman Catholics do not permit a Reverend sister to be married, this hinders reproduction. Another thing this does is a woman that is expected to get married and support her family is denied the privilege of her bride prices or financial assistance. This can generate poverty and we know poverty is a manifestation of underdevelopment.

## Conclusion

Women religious functionaries are very important in bringing about development and sustenance of our religious beliefs. Women, to an extent determine the future of any living organization or faith; hence, they are needed in every religious institution. When women are allowed freely to operate in religions, this religion will survive and get to the people in every parts of the world and positive development will be experienced. However, their involvement can also bring a negative toll on development but in comparing the both sides, we can say that their activities have brought a lot of change and development to the society.

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