

Women and the Land: the case of the Ovimbundu women of Angola

> >
> >By Rev. Luciano Chanhelela Chianeque
> >
> >Abstract
> >
> >In this paper the writer argues that the issue of women and the land in the
> >Angolan context (before independence) does differ from that experienced by
> >other women in the Southern Africa Region, despite the fact that the
> >colonizers (Portuguese) confiscated the land of African people for their
> >own use. There was a lack of control over the land, and
> >over decision-making regarding land issues from the community to the
> >national level. The writer's opinions are:
> >1. That women should participate more in decision-making from local up to
> >the national level;
> >2. Women's concerns should be taken and addressed in the community as
> >well
> >as at the national level;
> >3. Women's organizations should be empowered at the community level;
> >4. That some of the cultural barriers (outdated ones to today's
> >world-view)
> >to women should be adapted to meet today's women's needs.
> >
> >In certain traditional societies women sometimes do not have a
> >well-defined
> >role to play (in society) after the death of the husband, who is regarded
> >in most traditional cultures as the (up)holder of the land. In addition
> >to
> >this the Angolan women have faced the scourge of a bloody war, where
> >their
> >role can be very confused.
> >Women are generally disadvantaged, compared with men of the same race and
> >class, in access to land (in most African traditional societies),
> >employment, labor and training (Meer, 1997:1). In the Angolan case,
> >women's
> >access to land and resources is clearly linked to women's power and
> >authority within and beyond household. Power is denied to them by
> >politicians (by virtue of force of the gun) whom previously they carried
> >in
> >their wombs and raised them. Thus empowerment should be seen to include a
> >range of acts, from individual resistance to mass mobilization, that
> >challenge basic power relations in the Angolan society.
> >
> >1: - Introduction
> >
> >This paper discusses the role of the Ovimbundu women in the issue of
> >Land.
> >The writer confesses that the paper is written from a male Angolan
> >theological perspective, so in his analyses these features may appear
> >strongly. In doing so we will be guided by the following propositions:
> >(i)
> >what do Ovimbundu of Angola consider to be land; (ii) who does own land;
> >(iii) the danger and challenge of land in Angola; (iv) conclusion.
> >
> > From the outset one can see that Angolan history has been
> >characterized by different patterns of domination: whites over blacks,

> >rich men and women's ideologies over poor, men over women, and human beings
> >over nature. Ackermann (1996:121) says: "we are a society critically in
> >need of healing in every aspect of our relationships with our selves, with
> >one another, with God, and most urgently with the earth" .
> >
> >In this paper the writer wishes to bring together some religious and
> >cultural perspectives from a black Christian viewpoint in Angola that focus
> >on indigenous world-views and practices that will bring some insights on
> >the issue of women and land.
> >
> >2: - The land in the understanding of the Ovimbundu people of Angola
> >
> >In what follows land will be used to refer to actual "earthly turf" where
> >people can be safe and secure, where meaning and well-being are enjoyed
> >without pressure or coercion. In the Bible, for instance, land is used
> >symbolically to express the wholeness of joy and well being characterized
> >by social coherence and personal ease in prosperity, security, and freedom,
> >(Brueggemann, 1988:2). In a symbolic sense land is never simply physical
> >dirt but is always freighted with social meanings derived from historical
> >experience. Land is always fully historical but is always a bearer of
> >over-pluses of meaning known only to those who long and yearn for it. Our
> >humanness is always about historical placement in the earth, but that
> >historical placement always includes extra meanings both rooted in and
> >moving beyond the literal. In dealing with the issue of land, a literal
> >sense of the term will protect us from excessive spiritualization, so
that
> >we recognize that the yearning for land is always a serious historical
> >enterprise concerned with historical power and belonging. Land is a major
> >concern of contemporary persons.
> >
> >The sense of being lost, displaced and homeless is pervasive in the
> >contemporary politics of Angolan culture and women are the victims. The
> >yearning to belong somewhere, to have a home, to be in a safe place, is a
> >deep and moving pursuit. Hinga (1996:179) says that the colonial ideology
> >of domination that led to the alienation of African land also led to the
> >gross abuse and exploitation of women since colonial ideology and praxis
> >were also very sexist.
> >
> >One can easily realize that the colonial presence and ideology in Africa
> >led to the radical patriarchalization of African societies. For instance,
> >before 1482 , the Ovimbundu peoples lived on a basis of mutuality between
> >the sexes. This applied both in running the affairs of the group and in
> >working to produce goods and service for the community.
> >The Ovimbundu people are mainly agricultural people, so, they had clear
> >divisions of labor that were complementary, without valuing the role of
one
> >gender over the other. Both women and men participated in the preparation
> >of land for planting (okulima), weeding (oku supila), harvesting (Oku
> >ungula) and even the building of a shelter; these were shared
> >responsibilities.
> >
> >Women were not passive observers or considered like slaves. Instead women
> >had a very important role to play in political, economic and religious
life

> >of the community. The Ovimbundu society was led by a system of councils
> >(Olosekulu, Voinakulu, Vamuepalanga and Olosoma) convened to serve
specific
> >purposes in the community. Women's councils dealt with issues of women's
> >concerns. Each council dealt with issues of its concern.
> >
> >3: - Who does own land?
> >
> >In the religion of the Ovimbundu people everything that the human senses
> >can sense and ascertain belongs to God (Suku), the Almighty Being, and is
a
> >product of his creation.. In this religion Suku is the Supreme being, the
> >Creator and Sustainer of all life and who cannot be reached or contacted
by
> >humans. Suku is not God's name but a description of God's being. For the
> >Ovimbundu the presence and power of Suku is expressed in the great
> >mountains, sea, rivers, lakes, rocks, landscape, trees, thunders, clouds,

> >rain, wind, sun, moon, stars and all the natural wonders. So, the earth
and
> >all that are on it is His, Ps.24:1. Therefore the issue of land is
somehow
> >related to this theological/religious background - the whole universe
> >belongs to Suku. Land in this sense is a gift freely given and requires
> >fulfillment of strict obligations.
> >
> >According to the Angolan Constitution, (Law of Land Ownership No.
21-C/92)
> >states that: "the state recognizes and guarantees the right of land
> >ownership to every single or collective person ". Every one (regardless
> >gender, sex, race, status, creed or political affiliation) can own land
in
> >Angola as long as that person is Angolan. However at the grass root
level
> >the issue of land amongst the Ovimbundu women of Angola is a very crucial
> >one. According to the Umbundu word and their cosmogony, land is
associated
> >with women by the fact that women (females) and land are the only human
> >creatures of God with the capabilities for (re) production. In fact in
the
> >rural areas of Angola, women were responsible for farming. More than 80%
of
> >food crops came from female farming. In the traditional society among the
> >Ovimbundu women, unlike in Hebrew culture, the land was a property of
the
> >family where the woman was expected to plant crops for domestic
consumption
> >while her husband's crops were used for other purposes.
> >There were three ways in which Women possessed land of their own: as
> >inheritance from their parents; as a personal property through purchase;
> >and in the case of her husband's death if she has children with her. Also
> >the daughters of the chiefs (olosekulu) and kings (Olosoma) were allowed
to
> >possess a vast area of land. Agarwal (1996:3) says that land ownership
> >defines economic status, social status and political power in addition to
> >structuring relationships within and outside the household. In the
> >Ovimbundu tradition women perform three roles: as reproducers, this is
not

> > simply in the biological sense, they are responsible for the smooth running
> > of the household; as producers, they contribute to the food crops as well
> > as labor to the male cash-cropping sector and producing crops for sale in
> > their own rights; as community managers, they are expected to contribute
> > labor to the community, when they are asked by the village elders
(Barrett,
> > 1995:216).
> >
> > To the writer's understanding colonialism led to silencing and
> > marginalization of the African women, both in the colonial and in the
> > neo-colonial social and economic context. Hinga (1996:180) says that
> > firstly, the colonialists had a decidedly patriarchal understanding of
the
> > family. They assumed that African women were chattels of their husbands,
> > part of the property the men ostensibly owned, including land and
animals.
> > Consequently, when the colonialists 'negotiated' for land, they consulted
> > only the men in the community. This set a very detrimental precedent,
> > particularly when colonial practice eventually became the law of the
land.
> >
> > . Secondly, the colonialists introduced new attitudes and systems of land
> > tenure that were contrary to the traditional ones. They assumed that land
> > could be owned and disposed of by individuals, particularly by male
> > individuals. The colonial system empowered individuals to own and dispose
> > of land without considering the needs of others in the community.
Thirdly,
> > the colonialists introduced the idea that land was a commodity that could
> > be acquired by the use of money. This radical commodification of land led
> > to the restriction of land rights of those who did not have monetary
power
> > in the society. This could not have happened in the traditional societies
> > where even the poorest people had building and cultivation rights in the
> > community. The commodification of land has particularly affected those
> > women who fell victim to unscrupulous spouses or relatives who
unilaterally
> > sold the land leaving the women and their children destitute. As one can
> > see above the colonial government introduced the idea that land can be
> > privately owned, regardless of whether or not the owner was actually
using
> > it. These colonial and neo-colonial practices have directly affected
women
> > by grossly undermining their access to land.
> >
> >
> > 4: - The dangers and challenges of the land issue in Angola.
> >
> > Land has a strategic importance in the life of the African peoples and
this
> > importance is more basic even than other concerns of the states such as
> > education, health or social welfare. The Angolan soil is fertile,
> > well-watered land and rich in minerals.
> > However WAR, both anti-colonial and civil has effectively driven people
> > from the land. The army and the guerilla forces have fought over the
> > loyalty of civilians, and prevented them from supplying food to the
'other
> > side' by removing them from their homelands and villages, and driving

them

> >into the towns and cities or into villages along roadsides where mobile
> >troops can control them. new gardens have to be started and the land may
> >not be fertile but chosen because it meets military needs. In these
> >locations men are often absent fighting with one side or the other, or
> >fearing to be conscripted. So women remain with the responsibility of
food

> >production but few rights and little chance to protect their crops from
> >government troops by day or UNITA guerillas by night.
> >

> >Another grave and omnipresent danger for women is the presence of
> >land-mines. The richness of the Angolan soil, which was once understood as
> >blessing from Suku, has become in places today a nightmare, a curse for
> >the people, a death sentence to them because of the prevalence of
> >land-mines. The victims are mostly women as well as children. Why?

> >The problem started in 1961 when the war for national liberation against
> >Portuguese colonialism began. In the course of time many army expeditions
> >fought skirmishes and battles there and planted land-mines.

> >What makes the situation so difficult is firstly, because of the nature
of

> >the war itself there are no maps available to give the location of the
> >planted land-mines; secondly, there came so many armies into Angola,
> >namely the Portuguese, the South Africans, the Cubans, the Russians, the
> >Americans, the South Western African People's Organization (SWAPO), the
> >African National Congress (ANC) the National Union for the Total
> >Independence of Angola (UNITA), the rebel movement of Angola, the
National

> >Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA) and the present Angolan
> >government's army. Each army planted land-mines. There are more
land-mines

> >than there are people in Angola. Military estimates of land-mines planted
> >across the country range from 13 million to 20 million plus many more
held

> >in government and UNITA stockpiles. The exact number of land-mines
planted

> >is not known.

> >

> >Lastly, because the land-mines are planted on the fertile soil, its
victims

> >are likely to be the farming women whose husbands are found in the
armies.

> >Isaac (1996:5) says that there are about 4 million displaced people
inside

> >Angola. The majority of them are rural people who were forced by the war
to

> >flee their villages and communities. Today their farming fields are full
of

> >anti-personnel mines. Therefore it is urgent that the governments of the
> >world understand that development, peace, democracy and social well-being
> >of the people of Angola, especially women, are connected to the safety of
> >land and environment in which they live and engage their social and
> >economic activities. Isaac (1996:6) states that there is need to change
the

> >present humanitarian food and relief assistance to a more comprehensive
and

> >sustainable projects assistance, which will enable the people to produce
> >their own food. This requires, he said, that the present programme of
> >anti-personnel mines clearing becomes more extensive in the rural

> >agricultural areas. There is also need that the process of anti-personnel
> >mines clearing empowers the nationals to be fully involved, by way of
> >training them and by way of education materials on the anti-personnel
mines
> >awareness.
> >
> >Nowadays the Ovimbundu women of Angola are deprived of the use of their
> >land for their own benefit because of their geographical location in the
> >country . The problem of anti-personnel mines in Angola calls and
> >challenges the international community, the NGOs, the civil society, the
> >churches and you (the reader) to take serious and concrete steps to
> >implement the global ban on land mines in order to ban the use of
> >anti-personnel mines and help the Angolans to free themselves from this
> >bondage. The problem of anti-personnel mines is no longer merely a
military
> >or a political issue, it is a moral and ethical issue; it is also a
> >theological and spiritual challenge and dilemma in the sense that the
> >anti-personnel mines cripple and destroy Suku's creation and Suku-given
> >life.
> >
> >The international community's interest lately, has been involved in
> >controlling the so-called "blood diamond" as a clear demonstration of
their
> >financial power and domination over African affairs. The method of the
> >application of UN sanctions against UNITA has so far not yet resolved
the
> >problem of the Angolan conflict, a conflict that the North nurtured and
> >encouraged during the period of Cold War.
> >
> >Now this stand by the International community has done nothing about the
> >people who are the victims of their profitable weapons trade. From what
one
> >can see and remember about the involvement of the international community
> >in Angola since 1975 up to date, one can say undoubtedly that the
> >international community is interested only in the riches of Angola (oil
and
> >precious stones) and not in the well being of its people!
> >
> > When it comes to the issue of selling weapons to Angola there are many
> >friends helping the deal to go through so that they may receive
commission
> >out of it. But one could ask, where are the so-called friends of Angola
in
> >this crucial time of suffering of its people? Or perhaps the question
> >should be, friends of whom? Sometimes the writer wonders if one can find
in
> >the universe uninterested love, which has no hidden agendas! "The war,"
> >says Ducados (2000:11), "is not by any means viewed by Angolan women as
> >being a necessary evil to bring to the fore political ideology. Rather,
it
> >is a war resulting out of the inability of men to find common ground to
end
> >the conflict at the expense of the population."
> >
> >
> >5: - Conclusion
> >
> >It is important to note that the colonial ideology of domination that led
> >to the extreme abuse of the African land also led to the gross abuse and

> >exploitation of women, since colonial ideology and praxis were very sexist.

> >The colonial presence and its ideology in the African continent led to the

> >radical patriarchalization of African societies, with the consequent

> >disempowerment of women in all spheres of life.

> >

> >What can be done?

> >Internationally the United Nations `Decade for Women' 1975-85.

> >It was symbolized by three major conferences (Mexico city, Copenhagen and

> >Nairobi). Each conference was dedicated to one of the major themes of the

> >decade, namely, equality, development and peace. It was at the third

> >conference, held in Nairobi in 1985 that the major policy document called:

> >'Forward Looking Strategies to the Year 2000' was agreed and published.

> >

> >Firstly, this document covered the issue of equality for women. Secondly,

> >the document emphasized the link between women's roles and development.

> >Thirdly, the document dealt with the issue of introducing methods for

> >productive employment and education. The document therefore, demanded that

> >the pivotal role of women in society and in the process of development

> >should be recognized and given its true value. Finally, the issue of peace

> >and particularly women's political role was addressed. Thus the main aims

> >of the decade mirrored the three themes; they were ideological in nature

> >with few measurable targets set. In summary, the decade aimed to eliminate

> >all obstacles in the way of women enjoying equal status with men by the

> >year 2000 (Coote, 1985 quoted in Barrett, 1995:215).

> >

> >Is the concept/ideal of the decade visible in the African continent? Or how

> >much progress has been made since the proclamation of the decade? Barrett

> >(1995:216) points out that since 1975 some progress has clearly been made

> >to integrate women into the development process. However, less has been

> >achieved in the legal and political sphere. A number of important advances

> >have been made in terms of rural African women. In some countries,

> >constitutions have been changed to allow women to own or to inherit land

> >from husbands if they have helped to cultivate and improve it.

> >

> >In Angola, the intensity of the civil war, and the cold war during that

> >period prevented much attention being given by anyone to the rights of

> >women re land. Indeed women lost some of the position and influence they

> >had known as participants in the liberation war and expected to maintain

> >(Ducados).

> >Land distribution power was shifted from traditional chiefs and headmen to

> >locally appointed Marxist leaders, mostly men, and there were state farms

> >created to take over the Portuguese plantations.

> >Small plots for women and families were not a priority.

> >

> >The case of the Ovimbundu women of Angola in regards to land affairs is a

> >crucial one, and in practice not much has changed. For the problem to be

> >resolved regarding women and the land issue in Angola, women should

> >participate more in decision-making fora from local up to the national

> >level. In doing so, their voices, experiences and concerns should be

heard

> >by those in the authority. Women's concerns should be taken and
> addressed
> >in the community as well as the national level. They should be included
> in
> >all peace negotiations in their own right as well as mothers sisters and
> >wives of those fighting in both sides. If the Angola society as well as
> >the international community is willing to cooperate for better life for
> the
> >Angolan women, women's organizations should be empowered at the community
> >level.

> >

> >There is a need for real education for the Angolan women, so that they
> >themselves are able to change some of the traditional culture barriers
> >(outdated by modern perspective) to their progress in order that women
> >could take their leading positions on land ownership in the society at
> >large. These things will not happen if Angolans and the international
> >community fail to ensure the role and position that Angolan women should
> >play in the socio-political and economic systems of Angola.

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