Stereotyping Women in Ancient Roman and African Societies: A Dissimilarity in Culture[*]

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Introduction

One cannot deny that the outcomes of historical research are to some extent a reflection of the researcher's perceptions of historical events. When one deals with a topic such as "the role of women in antiquity," which gained eminence in feminist literature in the 1970s, this is all the more true. Thus, although the sources and the interpretation of sources of ancient history, the position of the researcher and cultural specifics are, as a rule, no longer questioned in conventional research of law in antiquity, these warrant a renewed scrutiny when the position of women comes under investigation.

Customary parameters of ancient history are not only defined with regard to time or period, but are also geographically and culturally defined. In mainstream western scholarship, antiquity is treated within the geographical confines of the Mediterranean Sea and the territories connected to it by historically effective political and cultural relations[1]. However, a perusal of the literature on women in antiquity shows that research is predominantly centred on ancient Rome, Greece, and Egypt[2].

[1] BENGTSON, *Introduction to Ancient History*, Berkeley 1970, 2.
[2] See HALEY, *Black Feminist Thought and Classics: Re-membering, Re-claiming, Re-empowering*, in RABINOWITZ & RICHLIN (eds) *Feminist Theory and the Classics*,

Studies of ancient societies are often centred on patriarchy and the superior role of men in the social, legal and political structures in those societies. This stereotyping of the societal structure inevitably goes hand-in-hand with gender stereotyping. A cross-cultural comparison offers one the opportunity to diverge from this pre-conceived paradigm and introduces new perspectives on, and the means for, a new theoretical basis for research into women in antiquity. It is therefore important to focus not only on geographical variety, but also on cultural variety. In this discussion I wish to make a cross-cultural comparison between the position of Roman women and that of African women. In order to make a constructive comparison, however, it is necessary to de-westernise African history by removing the imposed western stereotypes. Only then will it be possible to draw meaningful conclusions.

Delimiting the time-span

In a comparison of this nature, the first question that comes to mind is what exactly is meant by "antiquity". Perceptions of time and history differ in African and western cultures. In mainstream western scholarship, the lower boundary of ancient history appears to be the line between history and pre-history[3]. Pre-history is considered to be the history of pre-literate societies. It accordingly seems that access to text-based information influences, or even determines the lower parameter of antiquity. Although there are still some uncertainty regarding this lower margin of ancient history in Italy, one thing is certain : pre-history is excluded[4]. This restriction of ancient history to the history of literate societies becomes particularly important in a comparison of two cultures as diverse as those of Africa and Rome.

London 1993, 23-43 ; especially 36-38 for a critique of the narrow delimitation of the geographical boarders of studies in this field.
[3] BENGTSON, *op. cit.,* 3s.
[4] BENGTSON, *op. cit.,* 4 ; CARY, *A History of Rome*, London 1970, 40-45. For a text-based investigation of the position of Roman women in antiquity one would then delineate the lower boundary in terms of what may be learnt from accurate accessible text. This does not mean that the bottom line of ancient history is the third century. One has to bear in mind that the early texts contain recordings of historical events which had previously been handed down through oral traditions and which occurred long before they were recorded. The upper boundary of ancient history is generally taken to be the beginning of the early Middle Ages.

Should the "rules" of mainstream ancient history be applied to ancient African history (and I limit my discussion to South Africa), it would be relegated to the field of pre-history. First, indigenous African people were (and are) characteristically a pre-literate people and oral traditions or communications form the most important source of information on their past[5]. Thus, if the lower boundary of their ancient history were to be determined by the availability of historical texts, whether original narratives or other literary sources, there would be no ancient African history[6]. Secondly, chronology and oral traditions do not always coincide. In contrast, western historians rely rigidly on chronology, which is regarded as the foundation of the science of history. In fact, it has been said, "no chronology, no history[7]". African tradition falls short, not only with regard to relative chronology which determines the temporal relation historical facts bear to each other; it also falls short with regard to absolute chronology, in that it is not always possible to determine the distance of a historical event from the standpoint of the observer (the informant) or the recorder of the oral information[8]. It is therefore necessary to use a radically different paradigm for the calculation of time in ancient African history.

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[5] The pre-literate tradition of the Bantu-speakers who presently occupy the greatest part of Africa South of the Sahara, resulted from their geographical isolation at a critical stage in the development of the written word. Linguistic research has disclosed that the Bantu-speakers originated in North-East Nigeria and the Cameroon, and from there migrated southwards and eastwards over a period of 2000 years. The collective name "Bantu" is derived from their original primeval and ancient language, Ur-Bantu or proto-Bantu.

[6] It is interesting to note that as far as indigenous African history is concerned, oral traditions have not yet been taken over by the written word and are still practised. In some sense contemporary deep rural African communities, which have little contact with western culture, still live an ancient communal life.

[7] IRWIN, *Liptako Speaks. History from Oral Tradition in Africa,* Princeton, New Jersey 1981, 67; see also BENGSTON, *op.cit.,* 23-35.

[8] Until the 1950's the unwritten history in Africa was a much-neglected topic in historical research. This was due mainly to the important place accorded to chronology. Objections against the study and teaching of pre-literate African history have since been overcome by a critical interdisciplinary approach. VANSINA, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, London 1965, 4s. See also DAVIDSON, *African Civilization Revisited*, New Jersey 1991, 10s., on early perceptions of the lack of history in pre-literate Africa. This work is an interesting anthology of written documentation of African history.

The earliest approximate archaeologically recorded date of the occupation of South Africa by Iron Age people is 270 AD[9]. The first documentation of oral traditions In South Africa dates back to the nineteenth century[10]. These dates immediately put antiquity in indigenous South African history in a time-frame completely different to that of Roman antiquity.

Being a literate culture, Roman history is more exact than African history. While oral traditions and other sources, such as archaeological and linguistic materials, ceramics and art, which date back much further than the available texts, have to supplement the earliest literary sources, researchers do not have to rely exclusively on such sources. The rise of Roman literature from the end of the third century before Christ, gives one a fairly accurate account of Roman history[11]. In theory the abundance of literary sources should make the task of the researcher reasonably easy. However, feminist scholars find themselves in a position similar to that of researchers of pre-literate societies because they do not have primary sources readily available on the beliefs, concerns and lives of women and written by women.

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[9] MAYLAM, *A History of the African People of South Africa: From the Early Iron Age to the 1970s.,* London 1995, 2. Literary documentation of oral traditions in Africa south of the Sahara goes back to 150 AD, when a Greco-Egyptian seafarer first documented his encounter with the early inhabitants of what is currently known as Tanzania. DAVIDSON, *op.cit.*, 24ss.

[10] For example, an important documentation of Zulu oral traditions was undertaken by AT Bryant, a missionary and writer who collected his information over a period of fifty years from 1883. Much of what has been written on Nguni and Sotho origins has been based on his work. Other old recordings emanated from the Colonial Office of Great Britain (1886, 1896) or from missionaries such as Moffat (1842) and Livingstone (1857). Also the work of the following 19th century authors provide important information: Burchell (1822-1824); Campbell (1813, 1822); Chapman (1868) and Lemue (1844, 1854). See also the extensive bibliography in Schapera *The Tswana*, London, 1953.

[11] There are almost no documentary sources on the earliest history of Rome. The earliest written source, discovered in 1902, is the "Lapis Niger" which contains fragments of an ancient ritual law. See generally CARY 41-48 on the sources of Roman history. For the purposes of this paper one does not need to go into the highly technical debate of chronology in Roman history: see BENGTSON, *op. cit.,* 23-34, for a detailed discussion in this regard: see also FANTHAM, FOLEY, KAMPEN, POMEROY & SHAPIRO *Women in the Classical World. Image and Text* Oxford 1994, 211.

Sources, researchers and culture

In Roman history text is regarded as the most important source. The reliability of text is normally criticised by feminist scholars as being male prejudiced. The historical texts were mostly written by males and images of women were thus constructed through male eyes[12], creating gender stereotypes which might be untrue to women's reality. Access to an authentic women's narrative remains a problem in this field of research and scholars are burdened with the task of deciphering the images of women in the works by men[13].

In Africa, the historical images of women are likewise constructed through male eyes and, in addition, through "western" eyes. This may be attributed to two facts. First, males were and are regarded as the most important sources and transmitters of history. Secondly, in South Africa, until relatively recently, oral history had been reduced to writing, mostly by scholars and missionaries who were not African themselves. Moreover, colonial powers created a specific European construct of social and political ordering in Africa to serve their quest for indirect rule. This had the effect that the perception of women in ancient African societies is tainted also by the western perspective from which it was written[14].

While it is necessary to ascertain to what extent records of oral traditions are true reflections of the African past and to what extent they contain outsiders' (such as missionaries or colonial powers') perceptions of that past, it is also important not to throw out the baby

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[12] In patriarchal societies, males formed the dominant group, which, in line with their interests and values, created the images and beliefs pertaining to women. Katz criticises this idea as introducing an artificial distinction between text and culture and as relegating women to an entirely passive role, the muted group in patriarchal society. She maintains that there is no "women-way" of seeing the world, or, likewise no "man-way" either. There is only society's way as a whole. See KATZ, *Ideology and `the Status of Women' in Ancient Greece*, in HAWLEY & LEVICK (eds), *Women in Antiquity. New Assessments*, London 1995, 21 especially footnote 27.

[13] RABINOWITZ & RICHLIN (eds), *Feminist Theory and the Classics,* London 1993, 10. See generally FISCHLER, *Social Stereotypes and Historical Analysis: The Case of the Imperial Women in Rome*, in ARCHER, FISCHLER & WYKE (eds), *Women in Ancient Societies. An Illusion of the Night*, London 1994, 115s. ; WALKER (ed), *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, Cape Town 1990, 5-7.

[14] BECKER, *Gender Aspects of Traditional Authorities and Customary Courts in Northern Namibia*, in D'ENGELBRONNER-KOLF, HINZ & SINDANO (eds), *Traditional Authority and Democracy in Southern Africa,* Windhoek 1998, 259; AMADIUME, *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion and Culture*, New York 1988, 2-4.

with the bath water in the search for an authentic African narrative of women in ancient Africa. For example, it is generally accepted that old males were the transmitters of oral traditions. The much-quoted saying goes that every time an old man in Africa dies, it is as if a library has burnt down. I will not question here the premise that in pre-literate societies wisdom comes with age and that only an elderly person has gleaned enough knowledge from listening to the elders to become a significant source of information. But is knowledge also limited to men? Irwin[15] experienced that, amongst the Liptako of the Upper Volta (Burkina Faso), women were also highly regarded as transmitters of history. In fact, the vernacular for "wise old man" is not sex specific and could mean a wise old man or woman.

It should be borne in mind that all material on women in antiquity should not automatically be disregarded as being biased, subjective and illegitimate. Few researchers, if any, approach their work value-free. Although one should be alive to the fact that the outcomes of historical research inevitably reflect the values of the researcher, it would be short-sighted to limit research material to that written by the "subjects of the historical investigation" themselves, or to researchers belonging to the same class, race, gender, sex and age. In this field of investigation one has to move beyond the critique of the work done by "outsiders". There is a need for dialogue[16], which will enrich the current knowledge of women in antiquity. And dialogue presupposes different views. It is therefore necessary, on the one hand, to give recognition to the body of existing material, and, on the other hand, to do primary fieldwork and research where it is possible. Where this is not possible, one has to reassess the existing material critically and continually within the context of historical events of the time.

Rome

In ancient Rome women were excluded from publicly recognised offices which granted them independent action. Although they increasingly obtained social freedom and a considerable measure of independence under private law, their status in public law remained

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[15] IRWIN, *op.cit.*, 23s.
[16] AMADIUME, *op.cit.,* 4.

severely restricted[17]. Nevertheless, indirectly they played an important and often decisive role in the course of Rome's political history[18]. But women who moved beyond their stereotypical gender role caused tension in Roman society[19]. Ancient and modern historiography have been uncomfortable dealing with women who did not fit the dominant pattern of "normal" women and the sources seem to be unanimous that patriarchal Roman society condemned women's incursions into politics.

Two examples will briefly be discussed below. Both are depictions of women who had moved beyond the stereotypical image of the good Roman *matrona*. The premiss is not that the examples referred to are indeed incorrect renditions of the lives of these women. The aim is merely to show that there may be alternative interpretations of their lives. This may open a dialogue about the position of women in ancient Rome, and may be a step in discovering the real women behind the ancient literary descriptions.

During the later Republic women had much freedom, owned considerable estates which they managed at their own discretion, were educated, and could hold their own in social life. They even entered public life by doing business within the strict limits of the family concern[20]. This period was characterised by little regard for traditional family values and in the spirit of emancipation, Roman women could also indulge in extra marital escapades with little harm to their reputations. Yet, the tension caused by women who usurped power, were deflected by casting them in the role of the deviant

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[17] The only public sphere from which they were not rigorously excluded was the religious sphere. They were, for example, admitted to the priesthood as Vestal Virgins. The six Vestals were in some ways treated like men. They attended public banquets and received special seats of honour at games and had the right to make their own wills. They were, however, bound by ritual and taboo which earned them both special privileges and penalties. FANTHAM *et al.*, *op. cit.,* 225, 235-237. The fact that the Vestals were treated like men in serving this public cult on behalf of the state, reminds of the non-gendered offices on behalf of the public in ancient African societies.

[18] BAUMAN, *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome,* London 1992, XII, XIII, 2 ; FISCHLER, *op. cit.,* 116.

[19] BAUMAN, *op. cit.,* 10-12 ; RAWSON, *op. cit.,* 13 ; FISCHLER, *op. cit.,* 116, especially footnote 5; FANTHAM *et al.*, *op. cit.,* 326.

[20] CARY, *op. cit.*, 456s. This was not because the family and family solidarity were highly regarded and women were seen as fulfilling a necessary role, unconnected to gender, in promoting the family's interest.

Roman *matrona*. The only way the male-dominated Roman society could cope with women, who had overstepped the norms of acceptability, was by depicting them as immoral or promiscuous. Writers resorted to personal attacks, often against their immorality and infidelity - and that at a time of extreme moral apathy.

To this attests Sallust's description of Sempronia[21], who, together with some other disillusioned upper-class women, joined the Catilinarian conspiracy to overthrow the government in 63 BC. He depicts her as a wicked, immoral female who uses the attributes of the ideal woman for subversive ends[22]. It remains uncertain how true to reality the description of the character of Sempronia is and the truth will be difficult to ascertain because very little has been written about her[23]. But, even if it were true, in the late republican era adultery and sexual decadence were openly proclaimed in prose and verse. In fact, Ovid claimed that a man who took his wife's unfaithfulness seriously was a fool who does not know enough about the morals of Rome[24]. In contrast, one may also interpret Sempronia's history as yet another manifestation of women's politics of protest.

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[21] *Sed in eis erat Sempronia, quae multa saepe virilis audaciae facinora commiserat. Haec mulier genere atque forma, praeterea viro atque liberis satis fortunata fuit ; litteris Graecis et Latinis docta, psallere et saltare elegantius, quam necesse est probae, multa alia, quae instrumenta luxuriae sunt. Sed ei cariora semper omnia quam decus atque pudicitia fuit ; pecuniae an famae minus paceret, haud facile discerneres; lubido sic accensa, ut saepius peteret viros quam peteretur. Sed ea saepe antehac fidem prodiderat, creditum abiuraverat, caedis conscia fuerat, luxuria atque inopia praeceps abierat. Verum ingenium eius haud absurdum ; posse versus facere, iocum movere, sermone uti vel modesto vel molli vel procaci ; prosus multae facetiae multusque lepos inerat.Sallust, Bellum Catilinae, 25.*

[22] It is interesting, and perhaps expected, that a mainstream, highly regarded, "modern" text book on the history of Rome, such as CARY, *A History of Rome* does not mention the role of Sempronia in this important political event. See Cary's version of the Catilinarian conspiracy on 371-374. Also in his description of Cicero's attempt to enrol the support of Pompey in his political career, there is no mention of the role of Mucia Tertia, Pompey's wife. See CARY, *op. cit.,* 374s. See also BAUMAN, *op. cit.,* 78-81 on the life of Mucia and her role in public affairs.

[23] See BAUMAN, *op. cit.,* 67-69 212 ; see also FANTHAM *et al., op. cit.,* 284-285. BALSDON, *Roman Women. Their History and Habits,* London 1962, 47 comments on the "vulgar self-assertion" of Sempronia and further (on 55), describes her as a rebel "against the staid limitations of conventional society".

[24] This era of openly proclaimed moral decadence came to an end when Augustus banished his daughter Julia to a barren island for her moral indiscretion and sexual liberty and exiled Ovid to a garrison outpost on the Black Sea : see FANTHAM *et al., op. cit.,* 292s., see generally 280-293.

From the earlier years of the republic brave women launched collective and individual protest action against their subjugated status in patriarchal Roman society[25]. It may only be speculated what prompted Sempronia to take part in this particular conspiracy, but Sallust's personal attack on her affirms Roman society's discomfort with women who had moved beyond the prototype.

Tacitus's characterization of Nero's wife Poppaea[26] as the antithesis of the ideal matrona, immoral and without virtue, is so similar to Sallust's description of Sempronia, that some authors are of the opinion that Tacitus borrowed his description from Sallust[27]. However, a more plausible explanation may be that these descriptions are so similar because they fit the prevailing ideological construct of the *matrona* who has deviated from her traditional role.

Although Augustus was bent on restoring morality and family values, his moral reforms merely introduced an era in which there was no longer an open *acknowledgement* of sexual indiscretion. Adultery, make-up and shameless dress and conduct were professed to be scandalous and made the perfect weapon to use against women who made advances into the political arena[28]. Poppaea may have been ambitious in discarding her first husband Crispinus for the young

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[25] Bauman's work on women in politics in ancient Rome revolves around two themes, the politics of protest and the political Roman *matrona*. The history of women's protest starts as early as 331BC with the poisoning trials. In that time mass trials and executions took place of women found guilty of poisoning leading citizens in their struggle for equality (political and civil rights). See BAUMAN, *op. cit.,* 13s.

[26] *Non minus insignis eo anno impudicitia magnorum rei publicae malorum initium fecit. Erat in civitate Sabina Poppaea, T. Ollio patre genita, sed nomen avi materni sumpserat, inlustri memoria Poppaei Sabini consularis et triumphali decore praefulgentis; nam Ollium honoribus nondum functum amicitia Seiani pervertit. Huic mulieri cuncta alia fuere praeter honestum animum. Quippe mater eius, aetatis suae feminas pulchritudine supergressa, gloriam pariter et formam dederat; opes claritudine generis sufficiebant. Sermo comis nec absurdum ingenium. Modestiam praeferre et lascivia uti; rarus in publicum egressus, idque velata parte oris, ne satiaret adspectum, vel quia sic decebat. Famae numquam pepercit, maritos et adulteros non distinguens; neque adfectui suo aut alieno obnoxia, unde utilitas ostenderetur, illuc libidinem transferebat. Igitur agentem eam in matrimonio Rufri Crispi[ni] equitis Romani, ex quo filium genuerat, Otho pellexit iuventa ac luxu et quia flagrantissimus in amicitia Neronis habebatur. Nec mora quin adulterio matrimonium iungeretur.Tacitus, Annales 13.45.*

[27] See eg BALSDON, *op. cit.,* 49.

[28] FANTHAM *et al., op. cit.,* 299-301

senator Otho[29] and then discarding Otho for Nero, displacing the popular Octavia and eventually causing her death. But there is no evidence that she was promiscuous. Although multiple marriages were common at the time[30], imperial women were seen in a different light, because they posed an actual threat of usurping real power. This was especially true of someone like the beautiful Poppaea with whom Nero remained infatuated until her death and who had a strong emotional hold on him[31]. In the case of imperial women the line between household business and state business became blurred. Influence on the family head became influence on the head of state. Thus, although generally the participation of women in public life and their influence on the family head through their involvement in family business were tolerated, this did not apply to imperial women. Literary sources reflect the hostility amongst the governing classes, against imperial women, who overstepped the accepted boundaries of female activity and depicted them as the symbols of state disorder[32].

Africa

The fact that there had been women in power in traditional societies is mostly neglected in mainstream historical appraisals of the position of women in Africa. The sources generally characterise traditional systems of government as undemocratic. However, although normally administration and decision making were in the hands of men, there are ample examples of women in power. These were not only female rulers, but women of royal lineage, female maternal relatives, or sisters of the chief.

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[29] He became emperor for a brief period in AD 69 after the death of Nero. Poppaea married Nero in AD 62 and died in AD 65, when Nero kicked her, causing the miscarriage of their second child.

[30] Marriage and divorce were regarded as methods of acquiring wealth and advantageous political connections. Sulla and Pompey had five wives, Caesar four and Octavian three.

[31] It was she who prompted him to shed the yoke of his powerful mother Agrippina, who was known for her arrogance and greed. It is of course only through a thorough re-assessment of the literature on Agrippina that it would be possible to establish whether her character had been portrayed accurately. Whether Poppaea actually meant for Nero to have Agrippina murdered, is doubtful.

[32] FISCHLER, *op. cit.,* 119-122, 124s. ; see also BAUMAN, *op. cit.,* 199-208 and BALSDON, *op. cit.,* 125-129 on the life of Poppaea.

The traditional power of African women, which was economically and ideologically derived from the importance accorded to motherhood, disintegrated through imposed colonial legislation and a system of western values[33]. In spite of the fact that many African societies were patriarchal, women were honoured and had an important role to play in societal structures. Patriarchy should be interpreted differently in western and African traditions. In fact, it was the imposition of western patriarchal colonial systems in Africa, which undermined the traditional socio-cultural structures that empowered women in traditional African societies. It seems that the strict rules of patrilineal descent and patriarchy, which might not have been all that inflexible in the past[34], were often invented to serve the interest of dominant groups. Colonial powers sought to rule indirectly through chiefs and headmen and they experienced women in power as disruptive. It thus suited them to interpret patriarchy and patrilineality rigidly in the western tradition, thus inventing and recording rules to serve their own political ends[35].

In African culture patriarchy and patrilineality do not necessarily spell inferiority for women. The kin on the mother's side played a most important role in the lives of their descendants[36]. For example, amongst the Sotho-Venda of South Africa, the mother's brother was called "male mother" by his sister's children and had a very special

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[33] AMADIUME, *op. cit.,* 111s. The importance of motherhood should be seen in the context of the preservation and continuance of the group.

[34] There is evidence that amongst the Venda, Sotho and Tsonga of South Africa descent was not exclusively patrilineal; see HAMMOND-TOOKE, *The Roots of Black South Africa,* Johannesburg 1993, 101-103; KUPER, *How Peculiar are the Venda?*, in *L'Homme* (1979), 50-52. See also the examples provided by BECKER, *op. cit.,* 262, of patriarchal societies where females became rulers because their brothers were found to be unsuitable.

[35] BECKER, *op. cit.,* 263s. These rules often became internalised by the community and are today accepted as a true reflection of the traditional position. See also RANGER, *The Invention of Tradition In Colonial Africa*, in HOBSBAWN & RANGER, *The Invention of Tradition*, London 1983, 211-262.

[36] It must be borne in mind that kinship does not rest on blood relationship. Maternal kin did not belong to the same descent line and there was no prohibition or taboo on marriages between, in western terms, cousins on the mother's side. As a matter of fact marriages between such cousins were preferred in some tribes: see HAMMOND-TOOKE, *op. cit.,* 103 ; KUPER, *op. cit.,* 50. There is no cross-cousin marriage among the Zulus. See KRIGE, *The Social System of the Zulus*, Pietermaritzburg 1981, 156.

relationship with them[37]. The father's sister, on the other hand, was called "female father" and was accorded extreme respect. She was the most revered member of the family council as well as the family priest who formed the link with the ancestors. Also in the house of the ruler, the chief's sister had an important role in government. The Venda chief was not an absolute monarch and was expected to follow his sister's judgement[38]. All important matters of state had to be referred to her[39].

Similarly amongst the Swazi, a patrilineal, patriarchal society, one woman stands out for the political power she wielded. She was the Queen Mother, the She-elephant, *Indlovukati*[40], She ruled in tandem with her son, and they were the most important figures at the national ritual. Together they presided over the highest courts, controlled age regiments and allocated land. There was a delicate balance of legal, political, economic and ritual power between the Queen Mother[41] and her son. They assisted and advised one another in all activities and were both regarded as a chief. Conflict between these two rulers threatened the whole nation.

Another most interesting example of female political power could be found in the Lovedu. What makes this such an interesting example is the fact that the Lovedu was, and still is, a matriarchal society in which descent was determined through the male line (patrilineally). The Lovedu was ruled by the mysterious Rain Queen, Mujaji[42], who

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[37] Amongst the Nguni, the relations with the maternal kin was not as strong. KRIGE, *op cit.*, 23ss. ; HAMMOND-TOOKE, *op. cit.,* 102, 126.

[38] The chief's brother similarly had an important role in Venda government. The appointment of a new chief was in the hands of the chief's brother and sister.

[39] See also KRIGE, *Descent and Descent Groups in Lovedu Social Structure*, in *African Studies* (1985) 8-9.

[40] Also in various Ovambo communities in Northern Namibia the mother of the ruler played an important role in government. It seems that the colonial administrators in these territories were opposed to the powerful mothers who "manipulated succession to kingship". See in this regard BECKER, *op. cit.,* 260s., 263.

[41] She was custodian of the nation's sacred objects.

[42] "Mujaji" is the dynastic title of the regentess of the Lovedu. The Mujaji were renowned as rainmakers and represent the most advanced example of divine kingship. See generally KRIGE, *The Realm of the Rain-Queen*, London 1947 ; ADLER, *Avunculat et Mariage Matrilatéral en Afrique Noire*, in *L'Homme* (1976) 7ss. ; REUTER, *Mojadje, a Native Queen in Northern Transvaal: An Ethnological Study,* Report of the South African Association for the Advancement of Science, Kimberley 1906; HAMMOND-TOOKE, *op. cit.,* 75ss., 105. See BECKER, *op. cit.,* 260s., for some examples of female rulers in Namibia.

was the political and religious head of that society[43]. Amongst the Lovedu, and other southern Sotho tribes, woman-to-woman marriages prevailed. Women married wives and used close male kinsmen to impregnate them. The woman, who paid the bridewealth in this marriage, was called "father" by their children. Every Lovedu chief sent a daughter to be married to the Queen. Women were therefore integrated into the political system through bridewealth. "Mothers" of districts were intermediaries between the district heads and the Queen. These "mothers" could be either male or female[44].

Also the spiritual dimension of traditional African social structuring points to the significance of women amidst the overwhelming patrilineal emphasis. In these societies coherence of the group, the dead ancestors, and other superhuman beings was of great importance and indigenous normative systems were aimed at the maintenance of a harmony which went beyond the harmony between the living[45]. In the ancestor cult[46], amongst some tribes, it was women who acted as mediator between the ancestors and the group[47]. Although worship of the clan ancestors (all the clan dead) amongst the Nguni had a strongly patrilineal emphasis, on a more personal level, worship of specific ancestors had a bilateral character. Thus, grandparents on the side of both mother and father were worshipped. It seems that it was often a deceased mother who played an important role as ancestor. The Sotho-Venda, Venda and Tsonga worshipped ancestors on both mother and father's side[48].

The examples of women in power, and the concepts of female "husbands" ; female "fathers" and male or female "mothers" of districts, all point to the fact that in African culture gender should be

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[43] There were also female chiefs amongst other Sotho-Venda tribes, such as the Kgaga, Mmamaila, Letswalo and Makgoba. However, it was only amongst the Lovedu, that the position of the regentess became institutionalised. See generally HAMMOND-TOOKE, *op.cit.,* 75-78.

[44] GREENE, *The Institution of Woman-Marriage in Africa: A Cross-Cultural Analysis*, in *Ethnology* (1998) 395, 398.

[45] See generally DARBOE, *The Interaction of Western and African Traditional Systems of Justice: The Problem of Integration (A Case Study of the Gambia),* Michigan 1982*,* 105s.

[46] That is the aggregate of ancestor beliefs and ritual, which involved the worship of the dead ancestors.

[47] AYITTEY, *Indigenous African Institutions*, New York 1991, 177, 173-181.

[48] HAMMOND-TOOKE, *op.cit.,* 19, 151-152.

ideologically determined and that, sex (male/female) does not necessarily correspond to ideological gender, which consists of male, female and a non-gendered class[49]. This is evidently quite unfamiliar to the western construct of gender, which allows for female and male and, in line with their patriarchal heritage, for rigidly stereotyped male and female roles in all facets of society. It also highlights the fact that the generally accepted sex-role theory is not universally applicable as a model for understanding social reality.

Conclusion

Feminist literature has shown that gender stereotyping existed not only in ancient Roman societies but also in mainstream literature on those societies. In Africa it was merely the literature that cast women in stereotypical roles, which were foreign to their ancient tradition. Accordingly in Africa, women in power did not cause the tension that the women in such positions caused in Roman society. The different perceptions of women and their role in a patriarchal society seem to lie in the world views of these different cultures.

In Roman society the concept of women in power was not supported by a belief system. Within a strict patriarchal society, sex and gender roles were rigidly demarcated[50] and women who stepped beyond these boundaries caused discomfort, which was deflected by personal attacks on their morality.

In contrast, in African society, the role of women was supported by a belief system, which focused on the idea that the collectivity should be peacefully maintained and continued. Harmony and solidarity were regarded to be the key virtues to which all should aspire. The African world view included the world as an integrated whole of nature, life on earth and the after-life. People on earth should live in harmony with each other, with nature, and with the gods and the ancestors. To maintain this harmonious state of affairs, the interests of all individuals, as components of the collectivity, were looked after. The respect enjoyed by both male and female was connected to the security and continued existence of the group. Thus,

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[49] AMADIUME, *op. cit.,* 112-114; see also GREENE, *op.cit.*, 399.
[50] Sex refers to the biological distinction between male and female, whilst gender refers to patterns of behaviour.

positions of power were accorded in the interest of the collectivity and women in power roles did not cause any tension or disharmony.