



Cultural Beliefs, Gender Roles, and Patriarchal Narratives of the Ibibio/Annang, Fulani and the Zulus

Abstract

Patriarchy and gender roles have long shaped social life in many African societies through cultural beliefs, religious traditions, and historical narratives. These belief systems often define expectations for men and women, influencing authority, family structure, inheritance, and social participation. Despite social change, many patriarchal narratives remain deeply embedded in traditional worldviews. The problem this study addressed is the limited comparative understanding of how different African cultures construct and sustain patriarchal gender roles through shared and distinct cultural narratives. Existing studies often focus on single societies, leaving gaps in cross-cultural analysis. The aim of this study was to examine and compare how cultural beliefs shape gender roles and patriarchal narratives among the Ibibio/Annang of South-South Nigeria, the Fulani of Sudan, and the Zulu of South Africa. The objectives were to identify dominant gender norms, analyse cultural and religious narratives that support patriarchy, and highlight similarities and differences across the three societies. The study adopted a qualitative, comparative, and historical ethnographic approach, relying on secondary sources such as ethnographic records, oral traditions, proverbs, and historical texts. The findings are expected to reveal both shared patriarchal patterns and culturally specific expressions shaped by history, religion, and social organization. This study is significant as it contributed to African cultural, historical, and religious scholarship by offering a balanced comparative perspective on gender and tradition, while promoting deeper understanding of continuity and change in African societies.

Keywords: Cultural beliefs, Gender roles, Patriarchy, African traditions, Ibibio/Annang, Fulani, Zulu.

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Résumé : Le patriarcat et les rôles de genre ont longtemps structuré la vie sociale dans de nombreuses sociétés africaines à travers les croyances culturelles, les traditions religieuses et les récits historiques. Ces systèmes de croyances définissent souvent les attentes envers les hommes et les femmes, influençant l'autorité, la famille,

l'héritage et la participation sociale. Malgré les transformations sociales, de nombreux récits patriarcaux demeurent profondément enracinés dans les traditions. Le problème abordé par cette étude est le manque d'analyses comparatives montrant comment différentes cultures africaines construisent et maintiennent les rôles de

genre patriarcaux à travers leurs récits culturels. La majorité des études existantes se limitent à une seule société, ce qui laisse des lacunes importantes. L'objectif de cette recherche est d'examiner et de comparer l'influence des croyances culturelles sur les rôles de genre et les récits patriarcaux chez les Ibibio/Annang du Sud-Sud du Nigeria, les Peuls (Fulani) du Soudan et les Zoulous d'Afrique du Sud. Elle vise à identifier les normes de genre dominantes, à analyser les récits culturels et religieux qui soutiennent le patriarcat, et à mettre en évidence les similitudes et les différences entre ces sociétés. L'étude adopte une approche qualitative, comparative et historico-ethnographique, fondée sur des sources secondaires telles que les traditions orales, les proverbes et les textes historiques. Elle contribue à une meilleure compréhension des traditions africaines et des dynamiques de continuité et de changement.

Mots-clés : Croyances culturelles, Rôles de genre, Patriarcat, Traditions africaines, Ibibio/Annang, Peuls (Fulani), Zoulous.

Introduction

Patriarchy has been a defining feature of many African societies, shaping social structures, governance, and family life. Across the continent, cultural beliefs, traditions, and oral narratives have historically dictated the roles and responsibilities of men and women. These systems often establish hierarchical patterns of authority, where men are associated with leadership, decision-making, and public life, while women are linked to domesticity, caregiving, and moral guidance. Beyond

structuring social organization, belief systems, including indigenous cosmologies, Islam, Christianity, and ancestral traditions, serve as powerful legitimizing frameworks for gender roles. Through stories, proverbs, rituals, and rites of passage, cultural expectations are symbolically encoded and transmitted across generations, thereby sustaining and naturalizing socially constructed norms of masculinity and femininity (Geertz, 1973; Mbiti, 1969).

Mbiti (1969) observes that, Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it, indicating how deeply belief systems shape moral expectations and social conduct. At the same time, African feminist scholarship urges caution against treating these systems as timeless or universally oppressive. Oyěwùmí (1997) argues that what is often described as "gender hierarchy" in Africa has frequently been interpreted through Western categories that obscure indigenous organizing principles, noting that "the social categories that exist in the West are not universal and cannot be uncritically applied to African societies (p. xiii). In this way, gender differentiation is both culturally embedded and historically interpreted, requiring context-sensitive analysis that attends to indigenous epistemologies as well as religious transformation. This interweaving of culture, religion, and tradition ensures that gendered patterns are not only maintained but also internalized by members of the community as part of their worldview.

Despite increasing social change, including education, urbanization, and global influences, patriarchal narratives remain deeply embedded in many African societies. These narratives often continue to influence access to resources, political participation, and social recognition. Most existing studies focus on single societies, with limited attention to comparative analysis across different African cultures. This lack of cross-cultural perspective restricts a fuller understanding of how patriarchy is constructed, maintained, and adapted in diverse African contexts. The analysis sought to examine how cultural beliefs shape gender roles among the Ibibio/Annang, Fulani, and Zulu peoples; to explore the patriarchal narratives embedded within their traditions and practices; and to compare similarities and differences in gender constructions across the three societies.

Accordingly, the inquiry was guided by the following questions: How did cultural belief systems define gender roles in each society? What patriarchal narratives were embedded in customary traditions, rituals, and social practices? In what ways did these narratives converge or diverge across the selected cultural contexts? By adopting a comparative framework, the research contributed to African cultural and historical scholarship through a nuanced examination of patriarchy and gender roles across diverse regions. It enriched ongoing gender discourse by illuminating the ways religious traditions, ecological settings, and social norms shaped authority structures and social organization. A clearer understanding of these dynamics offered valuable insight for

policymakers, educators, and cultural practitioners seeking to engage issues of social transformation and gender equity in culturally grounded ways.

The scope of the analysis focused on the Ibibio/Annang of South-South Nigeria, Fulani pastoral communities in Sudan and the wider Sahel, and the Zulu of South Africa. Emphasis was placed on traditional belief systems, narratives, and ritual practices rather than contemporary political or economic developments. This focus enabled a concentrated exploration of the cultural and historical foundations of gender and patriarchy within distinct African contexts.

Literature Review and Conceptual Clarifications

Culture has long been understood in anthropology as the symbolic framework through which societies interpret existence and organize collective life. Rather than being limited to customs or rituals, culture encompasses systems of meaning that structure social relationships and power arrangements. Clifford Geertz (1973) famously defined culture as “Webs of significance that humans themselves have spun, within which social action becomes intelligible (p. 5).

This interpretive understanding situates culture not merely as behavior but as a system of symbols that gives meaning to authority, kinship, religion, and gender differentiation. Similarly, Mbiti (1969) emphasizes that African societies interpret life communally, grounding social organization in shared cosmologies and ancestral continuity. Thus, gender expectations must be read

within the broader symbolic universe that sustains them.

Culture is therefore not static but historically dynamic. As Hall (1997) argues, cultural systems continuously reproduce meaning through representation, discourse, and institutional practices. Within this process, gender roles become normalized and legitimized through repetition and ritualization.

Gender, unlike biological sex, is a socially constructed category embedded within cultural frameworks. Feminist anthropology has challenged earlier universalist assumptions about women's subordination by demonstrating that gender systems vary significantly across societies (Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974). Oyěwùmí (1997), in her critique of Western gender epistemologies, argues that colonial scholarship often imposed binary gender hierarchies on African societies that were previously structured along seniority and lineage rather than sex differentiation. She writes that, "Gender was not an organizing principle in many African societies prior to colonialism; rather, social categories were based on seniority and relationality" (Oyěwùmí, 1997, p. 31). This insight compels scholars to approach African gender systems contextually rather than assuming universal patriarchy.

Connell (1995) further conceptualizes gender as a structure of social relations centred on the reproductive arena but extending into labour, power, and symbolic representation. Gender roles thus shape access to authority, property, ritual participation, and public voice. Gender roles refer to culturally

prescribed expectations assigned to individuals based on perceived sex. These expectations regulate labour division, moral conduct, and participation in decision-making structures. Ortner (1974) proposed that many societies symbolically associate women with nature and men with culture, a distinction that often legitimizes male precedence in political and ritual authority. However, later scholarship critiques such universal claims and emphasizes variability (Nzegwu, 2006).

In African contexts, gender roles are often embedded in kinship systems, marriage arrangements, and initiation rites. Amadiume (1987) ethnography of the Igbo reveals that women could assume socially recognized male roles under certain conditions, demonstrating the flexibility of gender categories. She notes: Gender was not rigidly tied to biological sex; social status and economic power could redefine one's position within the gendered hierarchy (Amadiume, 1987, p. 15). Thus, while structured differentiation exists, it is historically negotiated rather than biologically fixed. Patriarchy is commonly defined as a system of social organization in which men hold primary authority in political leadership, moral governance, and property inheritance. Walby (1990) conceptualizes patriarchy as: a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women (p. 20).

However, African feminist scholars caution against reducing African gender systems to monolithic oppression. Nnaemeka (2004) introduces the concept

of nego-feminism a feminism of negotiation emphasizing relational strategies rather than confrontation. Similarly, Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) argues that African women navigate patriarchal systems through agency, spirituality, and communal networks rather than passive subordination.

Patriarchy in African contexts must therefore be understood as historically layered shaped by indigenous traditions, Islamic jurisprudence, Christian missionary influence, colonial administration, and postcolonial state formation (Mama, 1997). It is neither entirely imported nor entirely indigenous but emerges from intersecting forces.

Narratives function as cultural vehicles that transmit norms and legitimize authority. Through myths, folktales, praise poetry, and proverbs, societies encode moral expectations and gender hierarchies. Ricoeur (1984) argues that narrative structures shape collective memory and identity by organizing events into meaningful patterns. In many African societies, oral traditions articulate ideals of masculinity courage, lineage continuity, authority and femininity motherhood, nurturing, moral integrity. These stories are not merely entertainment but pedagogical tools that shape social consciousness. Vansina (1985) observes: Oral traditions are historical sources because they preserve and transmit the values and structures of society across generations (p. 12). Thus, patriarchal narratives endure not only through institutions but through storytelling itself.

Tradition refers to inherited patterns of belief and practice transmitted across

generations. It provides continuity and social cohesion while also legitimizing authority structures. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) caution, however, that traditions may be invented or reshaped to serve political ends. They argue: Traditions which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented (p. 1). This insight is crucial when analysing gender hierarchies. What is described as traditional may represent historical adaptation rather than timeless custom. In African religious systems, tradition encompasses ancestral reverence, ritual performance, and communal obligations (Mbiti, 1969). These frameworks embed gendered responsibilities within sacred cosmologies, thereby strengthening their legitimacy. Religion plays a central role in reinforcing or negotiating gender structures. Indigenous cosmologies often associate men with ritual authority and lineage continuity, while women are linked with fertility, mediation, and spiritual power. In Islamic and Christian contexts, scriptural interpretations have historically influenced inheritance laws, marriage norms, and leadership roles (Oduyoye, 2001). Yet religion also provides space for reinterpretation. African women theologians argue that sacred texts can be re-read in ways that affirm equality and partnership rather than hierarchy. As Oduyoye (2001) writes that the task is not to discard tradition but to interrogate it, to uncover within it the life-affirming resources for women and men alike (p. 45).

This dynamic tension between preservation and reinterpretation forms a critical component of contemporary gender discourse. The literature demonstrates that patriarchy in African

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societies is neither uniform nor static. It is culturally mediated, religiously interpreted, and historically negotiated. While numerous single-society studies exist, comparative analyses across regions particularly linking West Africa, the Sahel, and Southern Africa remain limited. This study therefore contributed by: Integrating feminist anthropology and cultural hermeneutics, conducting cross-regional comparison, examining narratives, religion, and social organization together highlighting both continuity and change. This study drew from a blended theoretical framework comprising feminist anthropology, cultural hermeneutics, and structural functionalism.

Feminist anthropology critiqued traditional anthropology for its male-centric biases and emphasized understanding how gendered power structures are embedded in cultural practices. Pioneering works such as *Woman, Culture, and Society* challenged earlier interpretations that obscured women's roles and highlighted the need to centre women's experiences in ethnographic research. Cultural hermeneutics provides tools for interpreting cultural symbols, beliefs, and narratives from within their own context rather than imposing external judgments. Scholars such as Baloyi argue for the value of African hermeneutical frameworks to understand indigenous practices, criticizing external models that might misrepresent African gender relations and advocating for interpretive approaches rooted in local meanings. Structural functionalism contributes insight into how gender roles and

patriarchal norms maintain social cohesion and order within societies. Although typically critiqued by feminist scholars for overlooking power inequalities, when combined with feminist perspectives, it helps explain why certain roles and practices persist as mechanisms for social stability.

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative and comparative research design. The qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to understand meanings, beliefs, and narratives embedded in cultural practices rather than to measure variables statistically. A comparative framework allows for systematic examination of similarities and differences in gender roles and patriarchal narratives across the Ibibio/Annang of South-South Nigeria, the Fulani of Sudan, and the Zulu of South Africa. This design makes it possible to identify shared cultural patterns as well as context-specific expressions shaped by history, religion, and social organization. Primarily, the study relied on secondary data drawn from reputable academic and historical sources. These include documented oral traditions, myths, proverbs, rituals, and customary practices that convey gender expectations within the selected societies. In addition, historical texts and ethnographic studies produced by anthropologists, historians, and African scholars are consulted to provide contextual depth. Peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and edited volumes form the core of the secondary academic literature used to support analysis and interpretation.

Method of Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic and narrative analysis. Thematic analysis is employed to identify recurring ideas, symbols, and patterns related to gender roles and patriarchy across the cultural materials. Narrative analysis was used to examine how stories, myths, and traditions construct and legitimize gender hierarchies. A comparative interpretive method was then applied to highlight convergences and divergences among the three societies, allowing for a nuanced understanding of both common and distinctive patriarchal narratives.

Ethical Considerations

The study was guided by strong ethical principles. Cultural sensitivity was maintained by interpreting beliefs and practices within their historical and social contexts, rather than through external or judgmental lenses. Care was taken to avoid stereotyping or cultural misrepresentation, recognizing the internal diversity and dynamic nature of African societies. The study sought to respect the dignity of all cultural groups while offering critical scholarly analysis. Understanding patriarchal narratives and gender roles requires careful attention to the cultural contexts in which they are produced and sustained. This section examined the social organization, belief systems, and gender expectations of the Ibibio/Annang of South-South Nigeria, the Fulani of Sudan, and the Zulu of South Africa, highlighting how culture, religion, and history shape gender relations in each society.

The Ibibio/Annang of South-South Nigeria

Social Organization

The Ibibio and Annang peoples are closely related ethnic groups located in South-South Nigeria. Their traditional society is largely patrilineal, with descent, inheritance, and family identity traced through the male line. Authority is typically vested in male elders, lineage heads, and community councils, who oversee land ownership, conflict resolution, and communal rituals. Age and gender jointly structure social hierarchy, with older men occupying dominant public positions.

Religious Beliefs

Traditional Ibibio/Annang religion centres on belief in a supreme deity, alongside a network of spirits, deities, and ancestral forces believed to influence daily life. Ancestors are highly revered and seen as custodians of moral order and social stability. Religious rituals and festivals reinforce communal values and legitimize authority structures, including gender roles. Although Christianity has become widespread, traditional beliefs continue to shape cultural practices and moral expectations.

Gender Expectations

Gender roles among the Ibibio/Annang are clearly defined. Men are traditionally associated with leadership, land ownership, and public decision-making, while women are linked to domestic responsibilities, child-rearing, and moral instruction within the family. Women also play significant economic roles through farming and trading, yet

their contributions are often framed as supportive rather than authoritative. Cultural narratives, proverbs, and customs reinforce male authority while emphasizing female obedience, respectability, and nurturing roles.

The Fulani of Sudan

Pastoral Life and Islamic Influence

The Fulani of Sudan are predominantly pastoralists whose social organization is closely tied to cattle herding and mobility. Livelihood patterns influence social relations, with wealth and status often measured in livestock ownership, traditionally controlled by men. Islam plays a central role in Fulani identity, shaping moral values, legal norms, and family structures. Religious teachings are deeply intertwined with customary practices, reinforcing social order and authority.

Gender Norms and Authority

Fulani gender relations are structured around clearly differentiated roles. Men are typically responsible for herding, long-distance movement, and public engagement, while women manage household affairs, dairy production, and child care. Islamic norms concerning modesty, marriage, and inheritance further reinforce male authority within the family. Female virtue is often associated with restraint, obedience, and honour, while male authority is seen as both religiously sanctioned and culturally appropriate. Despite these norms, Fulani women exercise informal influence within households and kinship networks, though such influence rarely translates into formal leadership.

The Zulu of South Africa

Historical Formation of Patriarchy

Zulu society developed strong centralized political structures, particularly during the rise of the Zulu kingdom in the nineteenth century. Military organization, kingship, and age-based regiments reinforced hierarchical authority and male dominance. Political power was historically concentrated in male leadership, with the king and male elders occupying the highest positions of authority.

Ancestral Beliefs and Gendered Roles

Zulu cosmology places great emphasis on ancestors (amadlozi), who are believed to guide and protect the living. Ancestral rituals are typically conducted by male heads of households, reinforcing patriarchal authority within both religious and domestic spheres. Gender roles are clearly distinguished: men are associated with leadership, warfare, and cattle ownership, while women are linked to domestic labour, agriculture, and reproduction. Marriage practices and bridewealth (lobola) further institutionalize gender hierarchy, symbolizing alliances between families while reinforcing male control over lineage continuity. Across the three societies, patriarchy is not a uniform system but a culturally embedded structure shaped by religion, livelihood, and historical experience. While male authority is consistently emphasized, the forms it takes and the spaces available for female agency vary significantly. These contextual differences provide a foundation for the comparative analysis of patriarchal

narratives and gender roles in subsequent sections.

Patriarchal Narratives and Gender Roles

Patriarchal narratives in African societies are sustained not only through formal structures but also through lived experiences expressed in rituals, proverbs, religious practices, and everyday social expectations. These narratives define masculinity and femininity in culturally specific ways while reinforcing gender hierarchies across generations.

Construction of Masculinity

Leadership, Authority, and Inheritance

Across the Ibibio/Annang, Fulani, and Zulu societies, masculinity is strongly linked to leadership, authority, and control over lineage resources. Men are culturally recognized as household heads, custodians of land or cattle, and intermediaries between the living and ancestral realms. Among the Ibibio/Annang, inheritance traditionally follows the male line, with family land and titles passing from father to son. This practice reinforces the idea that men are the rightful bearers of family continuity and authority. Similarly, in Zulu society, cattle ownership and lineage leadership are central to masculine identity, with men expected to represent the household in communal and ancestral matters.

For the Fulani of Sudan, masculinity is closely associated with cattle ownership and pastoral responsibility. A man's social standing is often measured by the size of his herd, symbolizing wealth, maturity, and leadership capacity. These

examples illustrate how economic control and lineage authority function as key markers of masculine identity across cultures.

Construction of Femininity

Domesticity, Motherhood, and Moral Expectations

Femininity in the selected societies is largely constructed around domestic responsibility, reproductive roles, and moral discipline. Women are culturally positioned as caregivers, nurturers, and transmitters of social values. Among the Ibibio/Annang, womanhood is strongly associated with motherhood and home management, and women gain social respect through successful child-rearing and marital stability. In Zulu culture, women are expected to maintain household harmony and uphold family honour, while marriage rituals and bridewealth practices symbolically reinforce their domestic role. Among the Fulani, ideals of female modesty and restraint are emphasized, influenced by both Islamic teachings and pastoral customs. Women manage dairy production and household affairs, yet their authority is exercised largely within private spaces. These examples show how femininity is idealized in ways that value care and sacrifice while limiting public authority.

Rituals, Proverbs, and Oral Traditions

Narratives that Reinforce Gender Hierarchy

Rituals and oral traditions play a crucial role in reinforcing gender hierarchies by presenting them as ancestral wisdom. Proverbs often portray men as decision-makers and women as supporters, thereby normalizing unequal power relations. For instance, Ibibio and

Annang proverbs frequently celebrate male bravery, endurance, and leadership within the context of cattle herding and communal protection, while ideal womanhood is often portrayed through modesty, loyalty, and dedication to family life. Such narratives function as moral and pedagogical frameworks, instructing younger generations on culturally valued expressions of masculinity and femininity within Fulani society.

Religion and Patriarchal Legitimization

Sacred Justifications of Gender Roles

Religion plays a significant role in legitimizing patriarchal narratives by framing gender roles as divinely or ancestrally ordained. In indigenous belief systems, male ancestors are often regarded as custodians of spiritual authority, reinforcing male dominance in ritual leadership.

Among the Zulu, ancestral rituals are typically led by male heads of households, symbolizing their spiritual authority over family and lineage. For the Fulani, Islamic teachings, interpreted through local cultural lenses, often reinforce male authority in marriage and inheritance, aligning religious doctrine with pre-existing patriarchal norms and social expectations. In Ibibio/Annang traditional religion, priesthood and ritual leadership have historically been male-dominated, although women may serve as priestesses in specific cults. These religious structures lend sacred legitimacy to gender hierarchies, making them appear natural, moral, and resistant to challenge.

Integrative Reflection

The illustrative examples above demonstrate that patriarchal narratives are not abstract ideologies but lived realities embedded in cultural practices, religious beliefs, and everyday social interactions. While these narratives share common themes of male authority and female domesticity, they are shaped by distinct historical experiences, livelihoods, and belief systems. Recognizing these nuances allows for a more balanced and culturally grounded understanding of patriarchy in African societies.

Comparative Analysis

This section compares patriarchal narratives and gender roles across the Ibibio/Annang of South-South Nigeria, the Fulani of Sudan, and the Zulu of South Africa. While these societies differ in history, religion, and livelihood, they share common patterns of male dominance shaped by distinct cultural contexts.

Shared Patriarchal Patterns

Authority Structures and Male Dominance

Across the three societies, patriarchy is expressed through male-centered authority structures that regulate leadership, inheritance, and social decision-making. Men are culturally positioned as household heads, lineage representatives, and custodians of communal and spiritual authority. These roles are reinforced through patrilineal inheritance systems among the Ibibio/Annang and Zulu, and through cattle-based wealth and lineage authority among the Fulani. In all three societies, patriarchal dominance is normalized through traditions and belief systems that portray male

leadership as both natural and essential for maintaining social order. Ritual and spiritual leadership is predominantly male, reinforcing the perception that authority, both social and sacred, reside primarily with men. While women make significant contributions to economic and social life, their authority is often informal and largely confined to domestic or private spaces.

Cultural Variations and Contextual Differences

Influence of Ecology, Religion, and History

Although shared patriarchal patterns are evident across the three societies, significant variations emerge as a result of ecological conditions, religious influences, and historical trajectories. Patriarchy in these contexts is not uniform but shaped by material environments and sociopolitical developments. The pastoral ecology of Fulani communities, particularly in Sudan and the wider Sahelian belt. Prioritizes mobility, livestock ownership, and cattle-centered subsistence. Within this setting, herding responsibilities and control over cattle, which symbolize wealth and lineage continuity, are predominantly associated with men. This ecological foundation contributes to gender expectations that emphasize male guardianship, economic authority, and public decision-making. By contrast, the agrarian contexts of the Ibibio/Annang and the Zulu, grounded in farming and relatively settled communities, structure gender roles around land tenure, lineage systems, and household-based production. While male authority remains prominent, the distribution of labour and social

organization differs according to the economic base.

Religious systems further introduce variation in the construction and legitimation of gender roles. Among Fulani communities, Islamic teachings which are interpreted through local cultural frameworks, intersect with customary norms to structure expectations concerning modesty, inheritance, marital authority, and family governance. In contrast, Ibibio/Annang and Zulu gender systems are historically rooted in indigenous cosmologies centred on ancestral veneration, ritual mediation, and lineage continuity. Although Christianity has significantly reshaped these societies, particularly in the colonial and postcolonial periods, indigenous religious frameworks continue to inform symbolic understandings of authority, fertility, and social obligation.

Historical developments also account for important differences. The centralized political formation of the Zulu kingdom, particularly during the nineteenth century, reinforced militarized models of masculinity and hierarchical governance structures. Leadership, warfare, and royal authority contributed to a public ideal of male strength and command. By contrast, Ibibio/Annang societies traditionally emphasized lineage-based governance and councils of elders, where authority was distributed within kinship networks rather than concentrated in a centralized monarchy. These distinctions demonstrate that patriarchal systems are historically constituted and institutionally mediated

rather than culturally identical across regions. Taken together, these ecological, religious, and historical factors underscore that patriarchy in African societies is not monolithic. Rather, it is contextually configured and socially reproduced within specific material and symbolic environments.

Continuity and Change

Impact of Modernity, Education, and Religion

Across all three societies, patriarchal narratives exhibit both continuity and adaptation in response to modern transformations. Processes such as formal education, urbanization, economic restructuring, and religious reform have contributed to shifts in gender expectations and opportunities. Increased access to literacy, wage labour, and political participation has expanded women's visibility within public spheres, thereby challenging certain traditional limitations. Religious traditions, while historically associated with reinforcing gender differentiation, have also become sites of reinterpretation and negotiation. Within both Christian and Islamic contexts, women movements, theological reinterpretations, and advocacy initiatives have sought to re-examine scriptural and customary assumptions concerning leadership, inheritance, and authority. These developments demonstrate that religious institutions are not static mechanisms of control but dynamic arenas in which gender norms are debated and reshaped.

Nevertheless, longstanding cultural narratives remain resilient. Inheritance customs, marriage rites, kinship

obligations, and expectations surrounding male guardianship continue to influence social relations, even within urban and formally educated settings. Rather than disappearing under modern pressures, patriarchal structures frequently adapt by integrating contemporary discourses such as legal reform or economic participation into existing frameworks of authority. This adaptive capacity highlights the durability of gendered systems while also revealing their susceptibility to gradual transformation. The coexistence of continuity and change illustrates the complexity of gender negotiation in African societies. Transformation is neither linear nor uniform; it unfolds unevenly across generations, regions, and institutional contexts.

Comparative Insight

The comparative analysis suggests that patriarchy in African societies is best understood as a flexible and historically embedded cultural system rather than a rigid or static structure. Although shared patterns of male precedence in leadership, inheritance, and ritual authority are observable, their specific manifestations vary according to ecological organization, religious traditions, and political history. Recognizing both convergences and divergences allows for a more nuanced interpretation of gender relations across the continent. Such an approach avoids homogenizing African societies while acknowledging structural similarities in authority patterns. Ultimately, patriarchy emerges as a dynamic system culturally encoded, institutionally reinforced, yet continually reshaped

through social change and historical experience.

Discussion

This section interpreted the findings of the study in relation to the theoretical frameworks adopted and situated them within broader cultural and historical contexts. The discussion highlights how patriarchal narratives and gender roles are not isolated phenomena but are deeply embedded in African belief systems, social organization, and historical experience.

Interpretation of Findings in Relation to Theory

The findings strongly support the relevance of a blended theoretical framework combining feminist anthropology, cultural hermeneutics, and structural functionalism. From a feminist anthropological perspective, the study revealed how gendered power relations are culturally produced and sustained through everyday practices, rituals, and narratives. Male authority is normalized not simply through coercion but through symbolic systems that present patriarchy as tradition, morality, and order. Cultural hermeneutics allows for an interpretive reading of these practices from within their cultural contexts. Rather than viewing patriarchy solely as oppression, the study shows how gender roles are understood by community members as meaningful, purposeful, and socially stabilizing. This approach helps explain why patriarchal narratives remain resilient even in the face of social change. Structural functionalism, though limited in addressing power inequalities, helps explain the persistence of gender roles by highlighting their perceived role in

maintaining social cohesion. When integrated with feminist critique, it becomes clear that while these structures promote stability, they also reproduce unequal access to power and authority.

Cultural Meanings and Historical Continuity

The study demonstrates that patriarchal narratives derive much of their strength from historical continuity and cultural meaning. Practices such as patrilineal inheritance, male ritual leadership, and gendered division of labour are not random but are rooted in long-standing belief systems that connect the present to ancestral authority. Among the Ibibio/Annang and Zulu, ancestral veneration reinforces the authority of male lineage heads, while among the Fulani, pastoral history and Islamic influence shape gendered expectations. These historical experiences have produced culturally specific expressions of patriarchy, yet they converge around shared ideals of male leadership and female domestic responsibility. Importantly, continuity does not imply rigidity. The findings revealed that patriarchal systems adapt to changing conditions, integrating elements of modernity, formal education, and global religions. This adaptability explains why traditional gender narratives persist even as social contexts evolve.

Implications for Understanding African Traditions

The study has important implications for how African traditions are understood and represented. First, it challenges simplistic or monolithic portrayals of African patriarchy by highlighting internal diversity and

contextual variation. Patriarchy emerges not as a single African system but as a range of culturally grounded practices shaped by ecology, religion, and history. Second, the findings emphasized the importance of interpreting African traditions through indigenous meanings and historical experiences, rather than imposing external analytical categories. Such an approach fosters a more respectful and accurate understanding of African cultures.

Finally, the study has contributed to ongoing debates on gender and social transformation in Africa. By showing how patriarchal narratives are culturally embedded yet dynamic, it opens space for dialogue on reform and reinterpretation that respects tradition while addressing gender inequality. Understanding these dynamics is essential for scholars, religious leaders, and policymakers seeking culturally informed approaches to social change. Overall, the discussion underscored that patriarchal narratives in African societies function as complex cultural systems that both sustain social order and reproduce gendered inequalities. Recognizing this dual role is key to advancing scholarship on African culture, history, and gender relations.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine cultural beliefs, gender roles, and patriarchal narratives through a comparative analysis of the Ibibio/Annang of South-South Nigeria, the Fulani of Sudan, and the Zulu of South Africa. By situating gender relations within their cultural, religious, and historical contexts, the study provides a nuanced understanding of patriarchy as a lived

and meaning-laden social system rather than a static or uniform structure. The findings indicate that patriarchy continues to function as a central organizing principle across the Ibibio/Annang, Fulani, and Zulu societies, albeit in contextually distinct forms. In each case, gender relations are structured around male-centered authority systems, patrilineal inheritance patterns, and differentiated divisions of labor. Masculinity is consistently associated with leadership, control over economic and symbolic resources, and ritual or ancestral authority. Femininity, by contrast, is predominantly constructed through domestic responsibility, motherhood, moral stewardship, and the maintenance of household cohesion. These gendered expectations are not merely social conventions but are embedded within broader cultural and cosmological frameworks.

At the same time, the study underscored significant contextual variations shaped by ecology, religion, and historical development. Among Fulani pastoral communities, mobility, livestock ownership, and Islamic jurisprudential influence contribute to specific configurations of marital authority, inheritance norms, and public leadership. In contrast, Ibibio/Annang and Zulu patriarchal systems are historically rooted in indigenous cosmologies centered on ancestral veneration and lineage continuity, further shaped by differing political formations, decentralized lineage governance in the former and centralized state structures in the latter. These variations demonstrate that while patriarchal structures share broad

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similarities, their institutional expressions are historically and culturally mediated.

Across all three societies, patriarchal narratives are sustained through rituals, oral traditions, proverbs, and religious interpretations that frame gender hierarchy as culturally legitimate and morally sanctioned. Such symbolic systems contribute to the normalization of male precedence in both public and spiritual domains. Finally, the study revealed that patriarchy exhibits both continuity and adaptive transformation. Processes associated with modernity including formal education, urbanization, legal reform, and religious reinterpretation have expanded opportunities for women's participation in economic, religious, and civic spheres. Nevertheless, traditional gender narratives remain resilient, often adjusting to contemporary realities rather than disappearing altogether. Patriarchal systems therefore persist not as static remnants of the past but as evolving cultural formations that negotiate continuity and change within shifting social contexts.

This study made several significant contributions to scholarship. First, it enriches African cultural and historical studies by offering a multi-regional comparative analysis that moves beyond single-case approaches. Second, it contributes to gender and religious studies by demonstrating how belief systems and narratives serve as powerful tools for sustaining social order and gender hierarchies. The integration of feminist anthropology, cultural hermeneutics, and structural functionalism provided a balanced

analytical framework that respects indigenous meanings while critically examining power relations. By foregrounding cultural context and historical continuity, the study challenges reductionist interpretations of African patriarchy and promotes a more nuanced and respectful understanding of African traditions. In conclusion, patriarchy in African societies emerges as a complex and dynamic cultural system deeply rooted in history and belief, yet responsive to change. Understanding this complexity is essential for meaningful dialogue on gender, tradition, and social transformation in Africa.

Recommendations

Future research should expand comparative studies across additional African societies to further explore regional variations and shared patterns of patriarchy, including the voices and lived experiences of women and younger generations. Cultural custodians, religious leaders, and educators are encouraged to engage critically with traditional narratives, identifying spaces within indigenous and religious traditions that allow for more inclusive interpretations of gender roles. Policymakers and development practitioners should adopt culturally informed approaches to gender equality that respect tradition while promoting social justice, rather than imposing external models that may provoke resistance.

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