Feminist Literature and Ethnic Groups in Sierra Leone

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ABSTRACT

This article reports the ethnicity aspect of a quasi-experimental research which tested the use of feminist literature to change the of attitudes people. It was discovered that feminist literature might not cause change of attitudes in ethnic groups of Sierra Leone which are influenced by entrenched male chauvinism rooted in secret societies. A group comprising members from various ethnic groups that are not overtly under the influence of secret societies showed change of attitude on account of their exposure to the feminist literature. Such a receptive collection could also been receptive not so much by their ethnicity but by their process of urbanization which tended to render them more liberal respecting the feminist arguments of the treatment novel. Thus, the male chauvinistic secret societies of Sierra Leone are forces of great resistance to feminist efforts, especially efforts through feminist literature.

1.0 Introduction

The various ethnic groups in multiethnic societies often disagree on certain issues but agree on certain others. For example, ethnic groups may be antagonistic with respect to politics yet agreeing on religious matters. Therefore, when controversial matters such as the attitude to women are under consideration, it would be necessary to investigate through research as to whether otherwise antagonistic ethnic groups may go synergistic on this one or not. On this basis, the research reported here set out to discover whether ethnic groups (synonymous here with tribes) established to be antagonistic or discordant on account of political rivalry would also be discordant about the socio-political issue of gender as argued in feminist literature, or not. This tribalism aspect formed part of Samuel Munda Benya Senesie (January and February, 2015) and is reported here. The background country, Sierra Leone, is the focus of the following discussion.

1.1 Background

Key issues in the psycho-social context of Sierra Leone include (i) the place of religion in the feminist-ethnicity debate, since religion is an identified cause of discrimination against women (ii) the socio-political situation, since rival political parties pivot on ethnic groups and women are getting into the political contest (iii) overall attitude to women on the basis of the ongoing practices of male chauvinism.

1.1.1 Religion and the ethnic groups of Sierra Leone

Religion, which seems to be a key influence on the attitudes of society to women, is shared rather harmoniously by the various ethnic groups of Sierra Leone. According to Agatha Clark, between 60% and 70% of all Sierra Leoneans practice Islam while about 30% practice Christianity. Yet the population generally practises African Traditional Religion (ATR). Irrespective of their ethnic groups, the people also practise what Clark refers to as “interfaith fusion”, so that Christian Muslims and ATR worshipers share one another’s religion.

This synergy in religious practice could have been influenced by a number of factors: the growth of Christianity-based on Western education; the participation in school management practices by Islamic missions and the tendency of Sierra Leoneans and Africans elsewhere to hold on to and defend their cultures and traditions among other peoples of the world.

From the standpoint of religion, therefore, it seems that members of all ethnic groups in Sierra Leone would be similarly responsive to the defence of women presented in feminist literature. However,
there is at least one context in which the ethnic groups of the country find themselves in antagonism – politics.

1.1.2 Politics, ethnic groups and the feminist issue
While religious considerations may suggest similarity in the responses by the various ethnic groups to feminist literature, the same ethnic groups are antagonistic in politics. They live with persistent political rivalry into which competition women have also stepped forward.

The two main political parties – the A.P.C. (All Peoples Congress) and the S. L. P. P. (Sierra Leone Peoples Party) are intertwined respectively with the ethnic groups of the North, led by the Temne Tribe, and with the ethnic groups of the South and the East, led by the Mende Tribe. This tribe-based politics has generated a condition of standing prejudice, discrimination, and violence among the tribes and has caused at least one civil war which lasted eleven years. The following paragraphs provide few examples out of many, from the country’s history and current affairs.

Joe A. D. Alie (1990:237) and (2006) explains that following Independence (1961), Sierra Leonean heads of state in a row - the first Prime Minister of Sierra Leone (Dr. Milton A. S. Margai), the second Prime minister, Sir Albert Margai, the Military Head of State Lieutenant-Colonel A. T. Juxon-Smith, as well as the first President (Dr. Siaka Stevens) - all made fervent efforts to eradicate tribalism from the politics of the country but did not succeed. Ironically, their political successes sprang from the tribal affiliations they enjoyed. Sir Albert Margai of the SLPP, for example, was accused of “Mendenising” the Public Service and the Army of Sierra Leone, dominating those institutions with persons of the Mende ethnic group. Joe A. D. Alie (2006:71 – 73) also states, “Armed with the report of the ‘Dove-Edwin Commission of Enquiry’”, Dr. Siaka Stevens found the reason to excuse himself, thus purging both the army and the civil service of members of the opponent ethnic and political groups, replacing them with members of his own groups.

Down to more recent times, According to Amara Conteh (2007), the APC Government was accused of removing from major positions in the civil service and ‘parastatals’, persons who were from the Southern and Eastern Provinces, and replacing them with persons from the Northern Province. Concerning such situations, Frank Salter (2010) recalls M. G. Smith’s projection about social pluralism in which these conditions occur, showing that its distribution of power, prestige and wealth according to the groups to which members belonged, would lead to collective violence.

1.1.3 The perceived discriminatory treatment of women

1.1.3.1 Women’s competition on the socio-political front
While the 50/50 Group - which advocates for a 50% share of all public opportunities for women - leads the effort, several other women’s groups, pursuing similar targets, are active in the country.

Yasmin Jusu Sheriff (2000) mentions examples of these other groups to include the following: Sierra Leone Association on Women’s Welfare (SLAWW); Women’s Association for National Development (WAND); Sierra Leone Association of University Women (SLAUW); Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE); Grassroots Gender Empowerment Movement (GGEM). Logically, while the opportunities and value commodities are generally in the possession of men so far, women can only get these values by their dispossessing the men of some or all of these. Hence, a women-versus-men competition for value commodities and opportunities, which according to the realistic conflict theory should lead to the negative attitudes of prejudice, hatred, etc.

1.1.3.2 Women’s competition on the domestic front
On the domestic front and forced on by traditional laws, Sierra Leone women face problems mentioned by Davis, Pamela O., among others: husband’s right to polygamous marriage; husband’s adulterous practices; control of husband’s household by his own family members.

However, Africa for Women’s Rights states promising international documents ratified by the government of Sierra Leone to remove certain forms of discrimination against women: domestic violence, refund of dowries to divorced husbands, unequal distribution of inherited property between sons and daughters.
2.0 Ethnicity/tribalism and its impacts
2.1 What tribalism and ethnicity mean
While ethnicity and tribalism are used synonymously in this report, a distinction between the two should be pointed out. Matlin, Margaret W. (1999:342) uses “ethnicity to describe groups that share the same nationality, culture or language”. That is, an idea of identification that may go without the strong emotional attachments which define tribalism. An on-line dictionary defines tribalism as “loyalty to a tribe or other social group especially when combined with strong negative feelings for people outside the group.”

Considering that in the political rivalry described in the background section politics is integrated with ethnic groupings, “tribalism” would be a better selection than “ethnicity” where negative outcomes of their relationships are discussed.

2.2 Relevant Ideas from social psychology on the tribe-bound political competition
The “realistic conflict theory” stated in Baron (2001:618) holds that prejudice is the outcome when social groups compete over ‘value commodities and opportunities’. The prejudice in turn results in mutual negative attitudes between the groups, and may generate enmity between them, making them assign labels of superiority to members of their in-groups, and labels of inferiority to out-group members. Hence, their inter-group competitions lead to attitudinal implications that grow into “full-scale prejudice, hatred and anger” (Baron 2001:636 – 7). The perceivable symptoms of this peace-threatening relationships pointed out in the theory are, mutual distrust; mutual hostility; mutual anger and hatred; mutual perception as enemies; lack of mutual co-operation. In like manner, Conrad Philip Kottak’s (2004:378-9) idea that discrimination is another context in which prejudice grows is reflected in this background condition.

2.3 Likeness of tribal secret societies, different tribal attitudes to women in local politics
Among the tribes of Sierra Leone there are certain social practices which may generate no mutual prejudices and these including their communal attitudes to women. For example, Fanthorpe, Richard (2007) explains that politics in Sierra Leone is still influenced by secret societies such as the Poro (for initiating boys into manhood, practiced by the Mende, Temne and other ethnic groups); Bondo/Sande (for initiating girls into womanhool through female genital mutilation and practiced among all ethnic groups except the Creole); Wonde (for military defence and administrative discipline of the Kpaa Mende People); the Soko Bana (for men, practised by the Temne People); the Batorma (for men, practised among the Limba People), the Yaa (of the Kono People) and the Ojeh (for men and few picked women, practised by urban settlers). Each of these secret societies fundamentally serves to empower men and negotiate the submissiveness of women to men.

By contrast, attitudes to women respecting the specific issue of local governance, varies from tribe to tribe. Among the Konos of Eastern Sierra Leone, it was prohibited for women to contest the post of paramount chief. The derogatory slang about this prohibition is “Hens do not crow here!” The farthest level, to which women have advanced in this, and under the influence of international pressure, is the declaring of intention to contest, by a woman called Madam Elizabeth Torto of Nimiyama Chiefdom (Fofana, Mohamed 2009). She did not succeed in the contest and the secret societies are the most likely cause of her failure.

Similarly, in Northern Sierra Leone, among the Limbas and the Temnes, according to Conteh, Regan M. (2015), there has been only an appeal (by Madam Rugiuatu Neneh Turay) to men of the Northern chieftdoms to permit women to contest the position of paramount chief.

On the contrary, among the Mendes of Southern and Eastern Sierra Leone, several chieftdoms have enjoyed regimes of women as paramount chiefs from as long ago as the reign of Madam Yoko (1849 to 1906) in Senehun, Moyamba District, while - according to Awoko News, May 23, 2014 - Madm Ella Koblo Gulama (1921 - 2006) became Paramount Chief of the Kayamba Chiefdom after her father’s death in 1953. Many more woman paramount chiefs have been crowned among the Mendes, including P. C. Mariama Jaward Tamia III, who was crowned in 2014.

The above apparently peace-bound similarities and differences notwithstanding, Juma, Calestous (2012) sees tribalism as having a stunning effect on African democracy. He points out the genocide which resulted from the post-election violence of Kenya in 2007 to 2008 as an example of destructive
outcomes of tribalism in politics. He implies strongly that politics wound around tribalism can swiftly lead to civil war. Therefore, recalling the tribe-influenced civil war of Sierra Leone (1992 to 2002), an application of any effective instrument for changing negative attitudes to positive ones – such as the literary instrument in this research - should be carefully thought out before application.

3.0 Research procedure and results

The procedure in this research, as detailed in Senesie, Samuel Munda Benya (April, 2015) used a test-retest quasi experimental design with various ethnic groups, and an untreated control group. There were three main ethnic groups – the Mende, Temne and Creole groups along with all other ethnic groups involved (termed as “others”) grouped as one: Limba, Kono, Sherbro Kissi, Kuranko, Fullah, Soso, Yalunka and others. The Mende and Temne ethnic groups are the two largest groups but the creole is the most influential of all the ethnic groups in the country. The ethnic groups classed together as “Others” range from the third largest to those that can be classed as the smallest. Considering that the population was that of undergraduate students of literature, members of the minority groups, if taken separately, could have been too few or altogether absent.

3.1 Procedure

3.1.1 Objectives of the research

The objectives of the research were as follows:

A. to find out whether, exposing persons in various ethnic groups to feminist literature, would lead to changing the of any of the ethnic groups.

B. to find out whether any change of attitude realised from Objective A would differentiate one or more of the ethnic groups from other ethnic groups.

3.1.2 Null Hypothesis

H₀₁: Exposing people in various different tribes in Sierra Leone to feminist literature will not lead to change of attitudes on the parts of any of the groups so that they adopt attitudes projected in the feminist text.

H₀₂: In case exposing people of various tribes to feminist literature leads to change of attitudes on their parts, the change of attitudes will not differentiate between the different ethnic groups.

3.2. Results

The results are displayed here in the following figure (descriptive statistics) and table (inferential statistics). Taking cue from the explanations of J. C. F. de Winter (2013), the t-test was used in the analysis since it is suitable for the small samples sizes in the experiment, unlike, for example, the z-test, which would demand large sample sizes. Results depicted in the pyramids need to be verified against the t-test results.

![Figure: average pretest, posttest and delayed post-test scores of ethnic groups](image-url)
3.2.1 Objective A and Null Hypothesis Hₐ₁
3.2.1.1 Objective A was set to find out whether or not any of the ethnic groups would change their attitudes on account of their exposure to the feminist literature.

The Mende ethnic group: pyramids 1 (pre-test) and 2 (post-test) shows an apparent improvement of attitudes on the part of the Mende ethnic group but pyramid 3 (delayed post-test) shows an apparent deterioration in the attitudes of the same tribe: subject to t-test verification.

The Temne ethnic group: pyramids 4, 5 and 6 Show similar results for the Temne tribe.

The Creole ethnic group: pyramids 7(pre-test), 8 (post-test) and 9 (delayed post-test) showed apparent improvement in the attitudes of the creole ethnic group and that improved attitude showed to be apparently stable: subject to t-test.

The “Others” group: pyramids 10 (pre-test), 11 (post-test) and 12 (delayed post-test) depict improvement in the attitude of the other ethnic groups (put together) and the attitude tends to improve further at the delayed post-test: subject to t-test.

Table: paired t-test comparison of pretest, posttest and delayed posttest scores of ethnic groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic group</th>
<th>test</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>mean</th>
<th>S. D.</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Null Hypothesis</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mende</td>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>123.31</td>
<td>11.457</td>
<td>-1.768</td>
<td>.084</td>
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<td>Post-test</td>
<td>45</td>
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<td>12.963</td>
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<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>120.35</td>
<td>11.903</td>
<td>-.833</td>
<td>.414</td>
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<td>Delayed post-test</td>
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<td>122.17</td>
<td>12.986</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Post-test</td>
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<td>11.842</td>
<td>1.600</td>
<td>.124</td>
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<td>122.17</td>
<td>12.985</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>121.38</td>
<td>8.016</td>
<td>-.913</td>
<td>.376</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>124.44</td>
<td>16.346</td>
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<td>Pre-test</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>120.22</td>
<td>7.965</td>
<td>-.102</td>
<td>.922</td>
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<td>120.78</td>
<td>19.942</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Post-test</td>
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<td>123.11</td>
<td>14.553</td>
<td>.452</td>
<td>.664</td>
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<tr>
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<td>19.942</td>
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<td>Creole</td>
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<td>122.57</td>
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<td>-1.012</td>
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<td>Pre-test</td>
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<td>9.497</td>
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<td>Post-test</td>
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<td>15.110</td>
<td>.157</td>
<td>.883</td>
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<td>9.497</td>
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<td>119.56</td>
<td>12.311</td>
<td>-4.353</td>
<td>.000*</td>
<td>*</td>
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<td>Post-test</td>
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<td>131.41</td>
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<td>Pre-test</td>
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<td>.000*</td>
<td>*</td>
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<td>Post-test</td>
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<td>17.297</td>
<td>-1.175</td>
<td>.045*</td>
<td>*</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Delayed post-test</td>
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<td>133.18</td>
<td>15.481</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

(1) * = p <.05  (2) sn = not significant
Note: 1. Only the answers of respondents who answered the posttest were used to compute the delayed posttest.

3.2.1.2 Null Hypothesis H₀₁: Exposing ethnic groups to feminist literature will not cause change of attitude on the parts of any of the groups so that they adopt attitudes projected in the feminist text.

T-test results
The Mende group:
The p value between pretest and post-test is 0.084 (no significant change); p value between pretest and delayed post-test is 0.414 (no significant change); p value between posttest and delayed post-test is 0.124 (no significant change)

The Temne group:
The p value between pretest and post-test is 0.376 (no significant change); p value between pretest and delayed post-test is 0.922 (no significant change); p value between post-test and post-test is 0.664 (no significant change)

The Creole group:
The p value between pretest and post-test is 0.351 (no significant change); p value between pretest and delayed post-test is 0.054 (no significant change); p value between posttest and delayed post-test is 0.883 (no significant change)

The others (group):
The p value between pretest and delayed post-test is 0.000 (shows significant change); p value between pretest and delayed post-test is 0.000 (shows significant change); p value between pretest and delayed post-test is 0.045 (shows significant change)

That is, one of the ethnic groups (others) showed significant change of attitude on account of their exposure to the feminist literature text. Therefore, Null Hypothesis H01 is rejected and the alternative hypothesis H1 is accepted.

3.2.2 Objective B and Null Hypothesis H02:

3.2.2.1 Objective B: Whether any change of attitudes shown by a number of ethnic groups on account of exposing them to feminist literature, would differentiate between the ethnic groups.

From the findings in 3.2.1.2 above, one of the ethnic groups – “Others” – showed significant change of attitude on account of the feminist novel while the Mende, Temne and Creole groups did not. That is, change of attitude on account of the feminist literature differentiated between the ethnic groups.

3.2.2.2 Null Hypothesis H02: In case a number of ethnic groups exposed to feminist literature showed change of attitudes on account of the exposure, the change of attitudes will not differentiate between the ethnic groups. That is, all of the remaining ethnic groups would also show change of attitudes on the same account.

Because the “Others” group showed change of attitude while the Mende, Temne and Creole groups did not, the change of attitude differentiated between the ethnic groups.

Therefore, Null Hypothesis H02 was rejected and the alternative Hypothesis H2 was accepted.

The similarity in the failure to show change of attitude on the parts of Mende and Temne Ethnic groups after their exposure to the feminist literature can be an indication that the two cultures are strongly entrenched in male chauvinism. This may be attributed to the influences of the male secret societies which guide socio-political affairs in those cultures. Although the Mendes have had more than a century with the inclusion of women in paramount chieftaincy, both the Mende and the Temne have a strong influence of the poro (pronounced as porraw) on their socio-political arrangements and administration. On the other hand, the Sande (for Mende women) and Bondo (for Temne women) function in practice to prepare girls for marriage and may ultimately get them submissive to their husbands, thus confirming the male chauvinism. Apparently, the chauvinism may be too far entrenched to be readily nullified by feminist literature.

Accordingly, the overt political rivalry between the two largest ethnic groups does not relate to their apparent likeness in their adherence to male chauvinism against women, by which they resist the influence of feminist literature. The groups combined into the “Others” category on the other hand, showed significant change of attitude in favour of the feminist novel. Most of these could be foreign nationals and other city dwellers, uninfluenced by the male secret societies. They seem to have depicted the theory of modern urbanization expressed by Zang Xiaowei (2004), which could be true both for attitudes to marriage as to attitudes to women. The theory states,

It can be referred from modernization theory that there should be no difference in family and marital behaviour among ethnic groups if they experience common urbanization processes.
3.3 Conclusions:

- The grip of ethnic and traditional influences such as those of secret societies may render feminist literature ineffective for changing the attitudes of certain ethnic groups in favour of women.
- Ethnic groups that seem not to have the influence of male-promoting secret societies may be more likely to change their attitudes under the influence of feminist literature than ethnic groups that have this kind of traditional influence.
- A common process of urbanization may be more influential in people’s positive responses to feminist literature than their ethnicity.

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