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17. SUSTAINING COLLECTIVE TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Informal Learning and Revisions

INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I attempt to present a coherent meaning of collective transformative learning and examine how and why collective transformative learning (CTL) occurred from African religious beliefs to Christian beliefs among the people in the south of Nigeria, and what supported the process. I am particularly interested in the changes in meaning schemes and meaning perspectives that occurred in the marriage institution in the south of Nigeria, from a polygamous marriage system to a system that was overtly supportive of monogamy; a result of collective transformation from traditional African religious beliefs to Christian beliefs. I am also interested in a recent tendency that is tolerant of polygamy, but blames wives for men's polygamous choices. I am of the opinion that an examination of these processes and tendencies holds the possibility of compelling adult education theorists, researchers and practitioners, especially those who work from the transformative learning framework, to focus on the key features of collective transformative learning and their implications for sustaining collective transformative learning.

COLLECTIVE TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING (CTL)

In a recent work, Kroth and Cranton (2014) indicated that every day, individual lives are transformed in a variety of ways, and over time, and the cumulative effect of these transformations alters the larger world. To my mind, this is a reference to both individual and collective transformative learning experiences. Collective transformative learning occurs when groups of persons who share the attributes of collectives (shared/similar experiences, shared interests, shared values, and identities) engage in transformative learning (Cranton, 1994; Mezirow, 2000, 2003). A person examines, questions, validates and revises problematic frames of reference (sets of fixed assumptions and expectations such as habits of mind, meaning perspectives and mind sets) which leads to frames of reference that are

> more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (Mezirow, 2000, p. 7)

The shared experiences of group members may be a primary experience for some and secondary experience for others (Jarvis, 1995). When it is a primary experience, the individual would have had direct and subjective experience of an issue, a problem or challenge. However, when an experience is a secondary experience, it is mediated. The individual may have heard about someone else's experience (an experience that may or may not be similar to his or her own) in conversations, dialogues, through the media or from a book. In addition, the meaning that individuals within the group make of such experiences may not be the same all or most of the time. While some shared interests of members of a group, especially the identifiable common economic or social advantages a group wishes to protect, or disadvantages a group wishes to overcome (Marshall, 1998, p. 323), may assist some members to meet or negotiate some immediate personal and social need(s), other shared interests might be strategic in helping some group members to reach their potential and life goals. In regard to the shared values of group members, some members may hold up some values as true and immutable, while others may consider the same values as negotiable, depending on the circumstances. These experiences, interests and values, and some other characteristics, give different groups of people their collective identities; which some individuals within the group may favor, make strategic claims to, or prefer to deconstruct.

In collective transformative learning, the experience of individuals and the shared experience of members of the group, their interests, values, and the identity (politics) of group members are linked. They are linked, not necessarily in stages or in a continuum, but have to be present in addition to the other key elements in the transformative learning process; such as critical self-reflection, group dialogue, emergence of the self and/or social action, for collective transformative learning to be deemed to have occurred. To support this claim I offer several examples of transformation that occurred at the collective or social level as a result of non-formal and informal pedagogical activities (Mejuni, 2012). Participants in the Oficina Juridica Para la Mujer (Women's Legal Office, OJM) legal promoter's program in Bolivia (Hansman & Wright, 2009), and women who worked in Durban's clothing factories in South Africa (Govender, 2007) have had deep personal experiences and similar/shared experiences of domestic violence, apartheid and strip searching. They had shared interests, that is, the identifiable common economic and social disadvantages that they wanted to overcome. The educational interventions then opened up the politics of identity, which are concerned with "seeking recognition, legitimacy, autonomy and power, and is also about resistance" (Mejiuni, 2005, p. 297). Although they had always known that domestic violence, apartheid and strip searching dehumanized them and was wrong, the non-formal and informal learning activities they were part of, provoked critical reflection and led to an examination of their frames of reference and meaning perspectives, and as a result propelled them into social action.

Social action is therefore an important outcome of collective transformative learning, and a series of social actions can and do result in social change. Moore,

as cited by Lauer, defined social change as the "significant alteration of social structures" (Lauer, 1977, p. 4) and thought of social structures, as "patterns of social action and interaction" (Lauer, 1977, p. 4); and expression of social structures as norms, values, and cultural phenomenon. Lauer (1977) makes the point that social change is normal and continual, it occurs in various directions, at various rates and at multiple levels of social life. At the level of the individual, there could be changes in attitudes, and such changes could be studied by assessing the individual's belief about various matters and individual aspirations. There could be change at the levels of interaction of persons, and also change in organizations and institutions. Examples of institutional change include in the economy, politics, religion, marriage and family, and education. Other levels at which change could occur are at the community and societal levels, the level of culture, civilization and at the global level. Significantly, Marshall observed that although nineteenth-century theorists "saw change as a total, homogenous process, where every aspect of society would change together" (Marshall, 1998, p. 66), others such as Daniel Bell (1976) suggest a model of change, which is often uneven and partial. The suggestion is that when social/collective change occurs, not all members of the group and aspects of life of the group, communities, organizations, and institutions, are affected by the change, and not all are affected equally, if affected at all.

To institutionalize social change, norms and mores, rules, regulations, policies, and laws are formulated and enforced by groups, collectives, communities and states, through societal institutions, and state structures. However, even after "institutionalization", revisions are again possible, and are to be expected (Lauer, 1977). The potential for and the possibilities of (continuous) change, or more appropriately, transformation of the meaning scheme and meaning perspective is a central plank of transformative learning theory. Again, Marshall (1998) made the point that the nineteenth-century equation of change with progress is no longer widely accepted, as change may be regressive, destructive or confused. In the scholarship on transformative learning theory, the issue of whether transformation, or transformative learning is always good or positive has been raised (Taylor & Cranton, 2013), and the question is relevant to collective transformative learning as well.

The thoughts in the preceding paragraphs on collective transformative learning guide the examination of the transformation in the context of the marriage institution in Nigeria, from pre-Christian and pre-colonial to the colonial and post-colonial eras; the resistance to some of the changes in the marriage institution; the exploration of key issues in the dynamics of collective transformative learning in the Nigerian setting; and the implications of those key issues for sustaining collective transformative learning.

THE MARRIAGE INSTITUTION IN NIGERIA

Although different forms of marriage were practiced in Nigeria and around the African continent before the advent of Christianity, Islam, and colonialism (Zeitzen, 2008),

most marriages were polygamous in nature. Polygamy is a marriage—a conjugal and emotional relationship—in which a person may have more than one spouse at the same time; and polygyny is the marriage of a man to more than one wife (Bowker, 1997). Polyandry is the marriage of a woman to more than one husband; however, polygamy and polygyny are often used as one and the same, apparently because polyandry is rare. In Nigeria, polyandry is rare, whereas serial monogamy is not uncommon among women.

The institution of marriage—mainly polygamous marriage—in the south of Nigeria in the pre-colonial era was built on emotional and community ties, and was fueled by economic reasoning, such that polygamy was part of the economic equation. The economy was agrarian, and men's wealth was determined by their farmlands and produce. Hence, the more wives they had, the more the children they could have, resulting in their having more people to work on the land. When Christian missionaries came to Nigeria with a religious (read modernizing) and trade agenda (Taiwo, 2010), first in the 15th Century and then in the 19th Century, and formal colonialism followed with an exploitative agenda, Nigerians were made to believe that polygamy does no good, and conversion to Christianity (which did not tolerate polygamy) from the traditional religions was the will of God. Agrarian communities that were sustained mainly through polygamy were faced with change concerning the institution of marriage. In order to become good Christians, this group of Nigerians had to undertake a fundamental shift in their beliefs about marriage. Monogamous marriage was most preferred, and involves a man, his wife (one wife) and their children. This marriage did not just exclude other men and women from being romantically linked with the husband and wife in the marriage, it also excluded extended family members, who would ordinarily, live with the couple, and would be recognized as a part of their household. Moreover monogamous marriage was backed by the English Law (Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 1990).

Christian women who married under the law had a right to monogamy. This ensured them and their children exclusive claims to their husbands' resources and they were supposed to be free from emotional and sexual competition from other wives (Pereira, 2005). These were the grounds upon which arguments in favor of monogamy were carried on. The arguments in favor of polygamous homesteads, especially for women, were either not advanced or could not be advanced because of the power of the colonial government, the Church and the exhibition of the benefits of monogamy. In polygamous homesteads, women who were unable to conceive would usually never be regarded as childless, because they would often be surrounded by children of their mates and their own siblings, and would care for them like their own. There were usually no worries about who would take care of children when women went to work on the farm. Since relatives lived together in homesteads, usually, much older women, who had retired from farming, took care of the children. The thought that women were stubborn and should be managed through violence was not rampant.

The law, the Church, and the cultural and public spaces, government residential quarters, public official outings and official documents, forbade polygamy; and the prohibition was more effective in the urban centers than in the rural areas. For some time, school textbooks also defined monogamous marriage (marriage between a man and a woman) as marriage, thereby failing to acknowledge the reality of polygamous marriages before Christian beliefs took over the religious space and before the colonialists introduced the Marriage Act, and the other marriage laws before it. For men who would rather be romantically linked to more than one woman and women who did not mind being romantically linked to a married man, they had to make their relationship clandestine, or at best, informal.

Just before independence and post-independence, whereas some of the marriages and informal liaisons were fuelled by economic considerations, men in the urban centers no longer needed wives to participate in farming; tilling the land and harvesting farm produce as was the case in the pre-colonial and colonial era. At this time, within these communities, it was somewhat difficult to explain being romantically linked with another man or woman, on the basis of emotions or lust when you were in a monogamous marriage. So men and women who were involved in informal liaisons had to adduce other reasons for their actions.

Even though many Christian women believe that monogamy, a key pillar of Christianity, is liberating, some scholars have pointed out that like other institutionalized religions, some Christian beliefs and practices, such as the belief that women should be submissive to the will of men, are oppressive (Bowker, 1997; Brown, 1994; Mejiuni, 2012). Unfortunately, as the marriage institution went through transformation from polygamy to monogamy, the belief that women are of a lower status than men, and are to be subject to the will of men in the private and the public spheres gained ascendency. This is because the ethos of the religion (Christianity) practiced by many people in the south of the country now informs beliefs and practices in the social, economic, political and cultural spheres (Mejiuni, 2012). Within this context, women are blamed for many of the problems in their communities and for the abuse they suffer at the hands of their spouses, other relatives and strangers. Women are also held responsible and blamed for: children who behave badly in the public sphere and those who do not perform well in school; husbands who cannot keep marriage vows; and corruption in the public sphere. It is against this background that persons who want to justify informal liaisons (informal polygamy) believe themselves to be on good grounds. In public discourses in the media, Churches and other religious meetings, and in films, the message that comes across is that the husband of a woman who is: bad, stubborn, too busy to care for her husband and children and who is unable to bear children, and so on, deserves to take another wife or engage in informal liaisons. This position, which is canvassed through discourses in public spheres and cultural institutions, is almost becoming sacrosanct, such that polygamy, even if it is informal polygamy, is justified, excused and tolerated, so long as women can be scapegoated.

Today, scapegoating women in the discourse of polygamy in Nigeria is uncalled for, and is sexism. Although the introduction of Christianity in the 19th century resulted in collective transformation of many communities in the south from African religions to Christianity, some Christian converts refused to move away from the practice of polygamy. Polygamous practices were therefore always there for all to see and perhaps imbibe, in spite of its prohibition by the English law and the Church; and, at any rate, Islam, which also already had adherents in the south did not forbid polygamy, as long as the man could love all the wives equally.

The point that is made here is that the impression should not be created that once collective transformative learning occurred from the African religions to Christianity; that, all Nigerian Christians turned their backs on polygamy. There was actually a struggle around the issue of polygamy in the Church, a struggle that was unabashedly also around the politics of identity.

In the next section of this essay, I explore what fostered collective transformative learning from traditional religious beliefs to Christian beliefs among the Yoruba in the south of Nigeria and why polygamy became the locus of struggle in the Church, especially in the Anglican Communion.

WHAT FOSTERED COLLECTIVE TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING AMONG THE YORUBA IN THE SOUTH OF NIGERIA?

Collective transformative learning related to religious beliefs occurred among the Yorubas of the south of Nigeria as a result of many interconnected factors. At the time of the arrival of Christian missionaries; in the area now known as Nigeria, in 1843 under the Church Missionary Society (CMS), the Oyo Kingdom (made up of Yorubas) was experiencing a lot of upheaval. The Oyo kingdom, which had hitherto engaged in the slave trade of people from other lands, faced an overturn as internal wars began as a result of the ban on the transatlantic slave trade in Britain (Johnson, 2001; Metz, 1991). These wars served as a foundation for the warm reception of the missionaries, who were "part of the evangelical revival and the humanitarian movement, especially its abolitionist wing" (Taiwo, 2010, p. 7). The upheavals must have ignited feelings of uncertainty in the inhabitants of the area. The Yorubas must have engaged in critical reflections and asked critical questions about the dreadful acts of slavery and internecine wars and the effects this must have had on individuals, families, and communities. Such questions must have inevitably focused on the religious beliefs of communities where socio-cultural and political life was intricately interwoven with religious beliefs and practices.

Another factor that fostered collective transformative learning from traditional religious beliefs to Christian religious beliefs was the Bible, portions of which had been translated into the Yoruba language in 1848 by Bishop Ajayi Crowther. Johnson (2001) made the point that the Bible was the most potent factor in the spread of the religion. The increased collective conversion in southern Nigerian communities

might have been supported by the fact that Bishop Crowther was a Yoruba man, and one of several freed slaves (Taiwo, 2010).

While Christianity witnessed phenomenal growth in Yoruba land, and it was the black missionaries who were in charge of mission stations and managed the affairs in their stations, the internecine wars did not stop until late in the 19th Century. The wars provided the British with the reason to intervene more and more in the affairs of communities in the southern part of present day Nigeria, mainly because the wars were getting in the way of legitimate trade and access to resources. Consequently full formal colonialism began in 1892.

Unfortunately, the new leadership of the CMS, which took power in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, about the time that full formal colonialism began in Nigeria, believed, just like the colonial administrators, that Africans, who were heathens, could not manage their affairs, whether religious, political or economic. Bishop Ajayi Crowther who was in charge of most of the missions in the Yoruba, the Niger, Ibo and Ibibio areas was disgraced out of office on the unrevealed and unsubstantiated charges levied against African agents in the missions that he oversaw. Africans thought the charges were mere excuses to get White missionaries into the leadership of the missions that had been occupied and successfully managed by African agents/missionaries.

Meanwhile, even though many Yorubas converted to Christianity, some converts wanted to continue to practice polygamy. The Anglican Communion did not admit polygamists to Baptism (Lambeth Conference, 1888), and so converts who already had issues with the strict position of the Church on polygamy, which they believed to be a position that is directed at annihilating one of their customs, had additional reasons to call for the Africanization of the Church. As some of the new converts realized the power that the colonialists and the white missionaries who were taking over the mission stations wielded over them, they collectively sought to resist racialism and the strict enforcement of the position of the Church on polygamy (Webster, 1964). These were persons who had changed their beliefs about how best to worship and connect with God when they became Christians; hence they moved to worship God in organizations that were devoid of racialism and were respectful of their customs. The schism that led to the emergence of African Churches then followed. So when groups broke away from the protestant mission societies to form the African Churches, they were engaging in social action. They resisted overt and covert racialism, the obvious and continuous attempts by persons in the hierarchy in the Church to have white men in Nigeria controlling the Church and the prohibition of polygamy, which was seen as part of the attempt to wipe out a custom, an entire social system. In addition to being a form of resistance, the schism was about seeking recognition, legitimacy, autonomy and power.

If these struggles took place in the Church more than a century and a half ago over polygamy (and racialism), why are women (especially wives) being blamed in Nigeria today for the choices being made by men (and some women) to engage in formal and informal polygamy? The answer lies, I believe, in the nature of collective

transformative learning and how CTL is usually sustained. These are the issues that I explore in the concluding part of this essay.

UNSETTLING AND UNSETTLED DIALOGUES, DISCOURSE, POWER AND INFORMAL LEARNING

The scapegoating of women in discourses of polygamy is unsettling. However, the explanation for this could be found in the nature of collective transformative learning (how it happens, why it happens, what pushes and supports it and the outcome) and how it is sustained. The task of understanding the discourse that blame women, especially wives, for their husbands' polygamous choices from the perspective of collective transformative learning is the concern of the concluding part of this essay.

First, the CTL that took place around the religious beliefs of Yorubas (and most communities in the southern part of Nigeria) and the marriage institution confirms the point that has already been made in the literature that social change, which is the outcome of collective transformative learning, occurs at multiple levels of social life. It is not a homogenous process where every aspect of social life changes together, and it is often uneven and partial (Lauer, 1977; Marshall, 1998). So while many of the communities changed their religious beliefs (or transformed their meaning schemes, which are specific beliefs, attitudes and emotional reactions) from traditional religions to Christianity, accepting monogamy or rejecting monogamy, because they found the practice untenable and at odds with their socio-cultural contexts, others revised their meaning perspectives (which are the lens through which each person filters, engages and interprets the world), embracing Christianity, its beliefs and practices, including monogamy. I therefore speculate that today, those who blame wives for their husband's polygamous choices (and these include religious leaders in the protestant Churches) are those who hold Christian beliefs at the level of meaning schemes, especially belief in how best to connect with the Almighty. I am therefore not saying that holding Christian beliefs at the level of meaning schemes and not at the level of meaning perspective is either good or bad. However, I am convinced that blaming wives for the polygamous choices of their husbands is blatantly unfair.

Second, as we had indicated, collective transformative learning involves groups of persons with shared/similar experiences, shared interests, shared values, and identities. The early Christian converts who were opposed to the prohibition of polygamy had inherent and shared interests that they needed to protect. As we have indicated, the economy of the south of Nigeria was agrarian, the Christian converts were mainly farmers, and so men needed many wives and children to work on the land. This was even more so because holding slaves (who were usually farm hands for wealthy households) had become untenable with the prohibition of transatlantic slavery, and because of its incongruence with Christian teachings. Therefore, an insistence on the prohibition of polygamy was like asking them to commit economic and social suicide, because they were being asked to relinquish the fuel for their livelihoods, power and prestige. The men who were insisting on polygamy were also

convinced that the Anglican Communion in particular wanted to disempower them with the 1888 Lambeth resolution on polygamy. That Lambeth Conference forbade persons (apparently only men were regarded as persons in late 19th C England) living in polygamy from being admitted to baptism, but resolved that the wives of polygamists, may, in some cases, be admitted to baptism. This probably irked the converts who were patriarchal to become even more so; the Church was going to admit their wives to baptism and not them? There was also the human and emotional hardship that Colenso, the Bishop of Natal and other missionaries had raised about separating polygamous husbands from all their wives except one, and I am of the view that the point was valid.

It is for this reason that I would take the position that if there are rational and emotional reasons men want to be married to more than one wife, the men should go ahead and do so without the society, led by religious leaders, blaming the wives of such men for their husbands' actions. Such men should be allowed to go ahead if they can find women who are willing (the word is used with caution) to participate in such arrangements. Zeitzen (2008) explored a number of reasons women participate in husband sharing or polygamy all around the world and it makes interesting reading. Really, all that is required is that communities (including Christian groups) around the world (in the global and economic north and south) should drop the hypocrisy around polygamy. For me, concubinage and informal liaisons are polygamous relationships, albeit informal polygamy, and this phenomenon is to be found among the poor, the wealthy, and not so wealthy, in private homes and in state houses and palaces; in developed, developing and emerging economies.

Finally, today, persons who blame women for the formal and informal polygamous choices of their husbands are stifling the process of collective transformative learning related to religious beliefs that began in Nigeria over one and a half centuries ago. Lauer (1977) made the point that social change is normal and continual. In this case, once the change in beliefs to Christianity occurred, other changes could not be stopped and that included changes in women's roles and their status. The role of a woman has changed from that of caregiver and co-breadwinner who worked in the same space, the farm, with her husband in the pre-Christian and pre-colonial era, to that of a caregiver who was made to stay at home but could earn income by working from home, during the colonial era, to that of a caregiver and co-breadwinner who ought to work and support her family either in the informal or formal economy, the public sphere or polity, in the post-colonial era.

The longing for formal and informal polygamy by some men is occurring in the context of continuing unsettling and unsettled dialogues about the roles and status of women in the family, community and the Nigerian nation state. These are dialogues which take place in the context of religiosity and the pervasiveness of the norms and values of two new major religions (Christianity and Islam) in Nigeria. They are dialogues that throw up the contradictions that are inherent and unsettled in: (1) romanticizing and longing for traditional marriage norms and values while holding on to Christian beliefs and ethos; and (2) signing up to international conventions and

instruments that guarantee women their rights as human beings, while sticking with patriarchal views of what a Christian marriage should look like and the roles of a Christian wife in the public sphere (Mejiuni, 2013).

These contradictions are still with us because the collective learning that took place during the movement from African religion to Christian religion, and from the prevalence of the practice of polygamy to the acceptance of monogamy among many Christians was brought about by: (a) appeals to two authorities, God and the authority of the white man during colonialism; and (b) by subtle coercion. In this context also "relying on as broad a consensus possible of those who are informed, rational and objective" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 76) in discourse meant reliance on the Christian missionaries and the colonialists because they shaped the discourse.

Here, one is reckoning the impact of the power that the colonial administrators and the Church wielded on discourse and collective learning, and the effect of these on the process and depth of transformative learning. After the departure of the colonialists, these discourses are being anchored by religious leaders who are now the authorities. Given the power that religious leaders wield among their followers, the discourses that they lead on the status of women, or lend their voices to in different cultural institutions/institutions of informal learning, have remained hegemonic; thereby exposing women to further blame when something goes wrong in their marriages.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this essay, I attempted to present a coherent meaning of collective transformative learning, and opined that CTL would be deemed to have occurred when groups of persons who share the attributes of collectives (shared/similar experiences, shared interests, shared values, and identities) engage in transformative learning as defined by Cranton (1994) and Mezirow (2000, 2003). In using the meaning of CTL to understand why transformation occurred from belief in African Religions to Christianity in the south of Nigeria, how it occurred and what supported the process, I sought out historical material in existing literature, a number of them containing material from participant observers in some of the processes that I explored. I combined these with anecdotal evidence and my own experience of being a Nigerian woman, living and working in the area that this essay focuses on. I teased out the centrality and impact of the features of collectives on the changes that occurred, and on resistance to aspects of the changes (polygamy and women's roles).

The implications of my explorations for the work of adult education and development theorists, researchers and practitioners, and also social-political and cultural theorists and commentators, are threefold:

1. that although the African culture is a collectivist culture, there are groups that exhibit features of collectives all over the world. In saying this, one is mindful of the fact that the socio-historical circumstances of nations differ markedly, but

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we are also aware that they are often linked, the case of the transatlantic slave trade being a good example. So the features of collectives that impacted the CTL processes described in this essay (shared interests; undergoing changes, even if they are uneven and partial, in the light of some experiences; and resisting hegemonic discourses and offering alternative discourses), will also impact CTL at group levels in other climes;

2. persons who wish to foster collective transformative learning must also be ready to revise the beliefs they hold about persons they wish to support to engage in CTL, especially if such are negative; and

3. we need to support our groups and communities when the need arises, for the continuous revision of insights, and beliefs reached as a result of a transformed meaning scheme or meaning perspectives, so long as they hold the possibility of enhancing the humanity/humaneness of individuals and groups.

This is the way to sustain collective transformative learning.

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