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Between Autonomy and Solidarity: An African Woman's Autoethnography

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Abstract: As an infant, my grandmother chewed my food for me because I was not capable of chewing on my own. As an adult, most African men still want to chew my food for me. So, how do African women consent to research when culturally they must surrender their autonomy? We join in solidarity and create our own collective autonomy. We know the rules of our patriarchal society and outwardly adhere to them. As an ethicist, I (Caroline Kithinji) have developed a sense of responsibility and solidarity with female research subjects; we collaborate in the full understanding of our lack of autonomy.

Keywords: autoethnography, autonomy, place holding, solidarity

1. Introduction

This is a story about my mother, my four siblings, and me. We call ourselves the “Five Nations.” You will hear their voices interspersed in the story. We woke up one morning to the news that our mother had at most three months to live after a diagnosis of stage four cancer (although she lived for eleven months after the diagnosis). You see, before that day, there was no need to think or worry about words like “autonomy” or “solidarity.” Our mother was always our cover and a defense against the negative patriarchal narrative about the value of girls and women propagated by our community. It was a culture where we, as women, were more often than not expected to intrinsically surrender some amount of autonomy to male figures. In many African cultures, this is very much in order, and in many cases, women are at the forefront perpetuating such cultures. This is not to say that we were not aware of our context, just that our mother had been extremely successful at shielding us from the sharpest barbs. I am the first born of five siblings—all girls—and from an early age, I could discern hints of the culture that disturbed me.

Before she passed, we believed that we were autonomous agents in the spirit of the *Belmont Report* and, as such, worthy of respect ([National Commission 1979](#)). This was the first document that articulated respect for persons as an

ethical principle in research. However, in the context of *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* by Thomas Beauchamp and James Childress (1979), where they postulate that “it is not persons, but autonomy that is to be respected” (59) and “the world of respect is to be restricted to those with autonomy” (Beauchamp and Childress 1983, 64), it became clear very quickly what our mother had been up against. In the former, to paraphrase Therese Lysaught’s (2004) words, the authors of the *Belmont Report* distinguished between people with autonomy and those without, but they presumed that the notion of “persons” applies to both. They didn’t define who may be a person and who is not; they didn’t distinguish between “persons” and “nonpersons.” Autonomy in the *Belmont Report* is not equated with personhood. Respect doesn’t apply to some but to not others. In Lysaught’s view, the change in nomenclature suggests that it’s not persons intrinsically but autonomy that’s to be respected. Thus, persons with diminished autonomy have their fortunes determined by the principles of nonmaleficence/beneficence, and their protections don’t carry the moral security of respect (674–76).

Indeed, Lysaught’s analysis correlates with many of our African cultures because it is clear that, as women, we never sit at the table where decisions are made. Rather, we are informed about the choices made on our behalf that will be of benefit to us. Therefore, the principle of beneficence has been fully applied to the woman as she is perceived to have diminished autonomy, while the principle for respect for persons has been downplayed because the woman is at the bottom rung of the social order.

2. Autonomy through my mother’s eyes

So, let me begin with my experience. I was born when my mother was in her first year in university, and I lived with my grandparents in the first two years of my life. When I was an infant, my grandmother would chew my food for me so that I could eat it easily. She did this to protect me from choking. She made my food choices for me because I was not capable of making them on my own. In this regard, I had no autonomy over my food preferences.

Today, I am a university-educated, professional woman with three daughters, and I am proud to say that I have all my teeth and can chew quite well for myself. I have worked at a government research organization for fifteen years, have been taught, and have also taught bioethics. I have spoken with absolute certainty about autonomy and respect for autonomy. Compared to other women who are enrolled every day in the research studies I approve, I stand out as an educated woman. Nonetheless, I find that, metaphorically speaking, most African men that I meet still want to chew my food for me. They expect to choose for me and override my decisions at will, despite the fact that I have been chewing for myself for over half a century. From birth to marriage to death; there is always a man who can be designated to chew for an African woman.

This became vividly clear to me when I was just eight years old. At the time, my thirteen-year-old cousin had moved in to live with us. Whenever he was present, my opinions, which had always been valued before, were largely

ignored. Even though he was also a child, there was clearly a big difference between us. He was a boy, and from an African patriarchal perspective, he had a superior stature. The apex of this status structure is occupied by married men, followed by unmarried men, the boy child, and then married women. The status of unmarried women, regardless of their age or capabilities, is just above that of the girl-child. No matter how accomplished they may be, they are often denied the power to make decisions in their communities simply because they are women. In short, they lack social recognition of their autonomy. Indeed, the application of the principle of respect for autonomy has two distinct interpretations in the African context. For one group (male), respect for autonomy is interpreted as self-rule, while for the “other” group (women), its interpretation is subject to the males’ perspective.

This was the structure that my mother was born into toward the end of WWII: a social social structure whose power dynamics were rooted in social status and designed to separate people instead of bringing them together for their greater good. My grandfather was a clergyman, and as they say, as poor as a church mouse. This notwithstanding, through goodwill scholarships, my mother completed her education and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts and later trained to be a teacher. All through her childhood, she fit into the role prescribed for her and was obedient to her father in all things. But this changed in university where she met and married my father against the wishes of her father (my maternal grandfather). If not for the intervention of her grandmother (my maternal great grandmother), the marriage would not have taken place. I was born whilst she was in the university, and I spent the first two years with my grandmother who, as I have described, chewed food for me as an infant.

My mother was a “working” as opposed to a stay-at-home mum. She served the Government of Kenya for several years before retiring. Being an educationist, and disappointed by the direction of education in the country, she decided to found a school that espoused the principles she held dearly. As children, we were all allowed to climb trees, change car tires, and tinker with vehicle engines. We learned how to drive early in our lives because our mother did not restrain us in any way. It never crossed her mind that we were girls and should be prohibited from doing some things. This is reiterated by my last-born sister, Julie, who says, “I don’t approach this world as a woman; I approach it as a human with XX chromosomes.” We were never in doubt that our mum would support any academic or professional endeavor we attempted, and thus, we all successfully completed university educations.

Being a teacher, and extremely good at mathematics, our mother often included life principles when she helped us with our homework. My sister Ann fondly remembers the lessons she learned at my mother’s knee:

Mum taught me about first principles. At the time, I thought she was just helping me with math, which we both loved. As I reflect on the countless joyful and meaningful hours we spent solving math problems in my preteen years, I realize

that mum was teaching me what was to become a fundamental tenet of my life. A first principle is a foundational proposition or assumption that stands alone. One that continues to stand, even when challenged. An irreducible minimum.

As a mother of five daughters, in a world that valued men infinitely more than it valued women, mum's first subversive feminist act in my life was to teach me to think for myself. The first principle approach is what caused me to question and discard the concepts that men are more capable and valuable than women; that Caucasians are superior in intelligence and ability to other "races"; and that Christianity is the one true path while all other religious and spiritual beliefs are false. None of these concepts can stand alone. All are supported by systems that deliberately and systematically disenfranchise one group of people in order to privilege another. She taught us to find value in ourselves, deliberately pouring herself into us, building our internal value.

3. Solidarity through my mother's eyes

This article shall use [Barbara Prainsack and Alena Buyx's \(2011\)](#) definition of solidarity to signify "shared practices reflecting a collective commitment to carry 'costs' (financial, social, emotional or otherwise) to assist others" (13). They further define "costs" as a wide range of contributions that groups or individuals make to help others. The definition consists of three tiers, starting with the first tier, which is a conceptualization of how individuals come to engage in practicing solidarity. The second and third tiers stand in a hierarchy of institutionalization, ranging from the group practices to contractual and legal manifestations (47–49).

At the interpersonal level (the first tier of solidarity), we watched our mother support the girl-child, starting with her own children. She rebelled against the cultural voices that insisted that it was not necessary to educate girls because they were destined for marriage and to become subservient to their husbands. Paradoxically, it was more important for her that we were educated than that we were married, even though it would mean that we would be at lowest rung of the social order. I clearly remember my aunts warning my mother to brace herself for unplanned pregnancies. "With these many girls, be ready for all or at least some of your girls to get pregnant; you better marry them off before they start dropping children left, right, and center," they would constantly advise her.

When she attended the Fourth World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development and Peace that was held in Beijing in 1995, she was in a position of influence and leveraged that opportunity to speak out against pregnant girls being sent away from school. Because of their collective commitment to see schoolgirls through school, female headmistresses took her cue and quietly allowed girls to finish their education after delivery. Thus, they reached tier one of the solidarity hierarchy, which "comprises manifestations of the willingness to carry costs to assist others with whom a person recognizes sameness or similarity in at least one relevant respect" ([Prainsack and Buyx 2011](#), 48). The second tier entails normalizing a particular solidarity practice at the interpersonal level so that it becomes seen as good "conduct" in a given situation and can solidify into forms of institutionalization.

The term “girl-child,” coined at the 1995 conference, became the norm and was taken up in all sectors of government. Other examples of second tier solidarity are female bank directors emphasizing the importance of confidentiality with regard to account activity disclosure of married women to their partners; and female researchers protecting the choices of female research participants to withhold information of their participation in family planning, microbicide, and preexposure prophylaxis studies. When the norms established in tier two become contractual and legal manifestations, then we have an instance of tier three solidarity, the “hardest” and most fixed form of solidarity. Not expelling young pregnant school-going girls from school eventually became a government policy and remains so to date.

One of the last conversations my mother had with us before she passed on was about whether she had inculcated anything of value in us. By this time, she had worked as a civil servant for over thirty years and had run her school for eight years. Now at twelve years since she passed, we can answer that question because we have had to live without her. She was a quiet rebel, subversive to the cultural constraints, and a true feminist. Her death exposed us to what she had shielded us from. We suddenly understood what she had to bear in silence: as long as we toed the line and lived within our roles as mothers, wives, and sisters, we could be as autonomous as we liked. But we were never to step out of those roles.

During her funeral preparations, we repeatedly heard how “all this land and property that your father has amassed will be distributed to any sons he has [he has two from other women] and then possibly his nephews.” It then became clear to us that if we were to survive the onslaught of our culture, we would have to stick together in order to attain group autonomy. Solidarity. We had to become willing to bear each other’s burdens, for we recognized that we were all in the same boat, irrespective of our age differences. There is a twelve-year gap between me and our lastborn sister.

Ironically, the first person to benefit from our solidarity was our father. At my mother’s funeral, I remember standing with my sisters supporting our father as he struggled through his tribute, and he declared that as the Five Nations, we would walk with him in the days to follow. Five years ago, my father developed a chronic illness that required several hospitalizations and surgery, which we supported using resources from his investments—sometimes with his knowledge, sometimes without. Unbeknownst to us, we were at the first tier of solidarity where “solidarity comprises manifestations of the willingness to carry costs to assist others with whom a person recognizes sameness or similarity in at least one relevant respect” (Prainsack and Buyx 2011, 47).

4. Lessons learned

My mother bestowed on us two significant and lasting things. Firstly, she passed on to us her values and skills that would enable us stand up against our culture; and secondly, she held a place for us. She left a door open for us to pass through.

One of the values she taught us was to be stoic. To be still in the midst of chaos. To be deliberate and intentional in the face of adversity. She displayed the same strength and determination, no matter the circumstances. My second born sister, Hellen, recalls the time that our mum became ill and, despite being a mother, having extended family responsibilities, and working full time, she took over the management of the school. Regardless of her expanded responsibilities, Hellen recalls how she drew strength from our mum's life lessons. She knew she had to be solid, deliberate, focused, and intentional about her new responsibilities without being distracted. Certainly, our mother felt things deeply, but she was not one to put her emotions on display. She was the definition of "even keel," the epitome of calmness in a storm.

Another value she bestowed on us was consistency. My sister Julie remembers that from the time she was born to the time she graduated from high school, our mother woke up at about 6 am daily and was out of the house before 7 am, literally like clockwork. She would leave early and return late, but she rarely complained. She understood the value of hard work, the importance of putting in the time to get desired results. She grasped the value of excellence. She was consistent in every aspect of her life, like going to church every Sunday. She had a bath every day without fail (sounds obvious, but that kind of discipline is not as common as one might think). She did her hair and nails every weekend. She made her bed in the same way every morning. And she loved us with the same energy every single day of her life.

The two qualities of stoicism and consistency have been invaluable for me as a woman in a man's world. Like my younger sister Julie said, "We don't approach this world as women, but as humans with XX chromosomes. Our mother trained us to focus on the job at hand and not be distracted by prevailing circumstances. She taught us to do good work, regardless of what was going on around us. She impressed upon us the need to dispassionately look at every opposition and obstacle. Most importantly, she taught us to keep at it, to hold on until we achieved our desired goals." This is how I learned to exercise my autonomy in a world that is not designed for women to be in the driver's seat.

Another very important lesson we learned from our mum is to pay it forward. To be of good service to anyone who needed it without expecting anything in return. Over the years, we have shared our knowledge, expertise, and networks with several women. For them, we have been a stepping-stone, a launching pad of sorts. And together with the women on whose shoulders we all stand (my mother included), we have built a female fort. That is what solidarity looks like for me.

The African woman's version of autonomy through solidarity should be appraised as a way of restoring the woman's voice in decision making. This is a more acceptable form of claiming autonomy, which maintains the African existential philosophy of communalism and at the same time gives the African women a collective voice for self-determination.

Our mother understood this clearly, as she was not only deeply intelligent but infinitely wise. She understood that nothing could be served by taking on a system with centuries of accumulated power head on. In this regard, she used Sun Tzu's (1991) principle well: "Be extremely subtle, even to the point of formlessness. Be extremely mysterious, even to the point of soundlessness. Thereby you can be the director of the opponent's fate" (xix). By teaching us how to think for ourselves using first principles, she ensured that we internalized an important defense against a world that puts black, and especially African, women at the bottom rung of the social order.

Throughout her life, she carried herself as an ideal African wife and mother, even when she rose to the highest echelons of civil service in the country. When she died, a thousand people attended her funeral. The funeral of a good wife, mother, and educator. As a married woman, she understood that she had to submit to her husband, and she did exactly that. She submitted to my father, but she never lost sight of the value and power within her. What many did not realize was that she had carried out her quest to uplift the girl-child so well, that today, paradoxically, there is a movement that is dedicated to helping the boy-child who is now perceived to be lagging behind. The irony!

Thanks to our mum, whenever we face sexism, racism, or religious prejudice, we recognize it for what it is, a means to disenfranchise us and people like us, to prevent us from taking our rightful seat at the table. One of my sisters is a single woman in banking. She has made sure she models excellence, dependability, and quiet assertiveness to her younger female colleagues, even as she raises her teenage son as a single parent and cares for our elderly father.

5. Conclusion

Solidarity does not mean that our collective autonomy as African women denies our individuality. Solidarity allows African women to chew for themselves. It allows them to exercise their agency. Nor is solidarity an exclusive club. Our father, his nurse, and his driver (all men) have benefited from our solidarity. Because of our collective autonomy, we have been able to sustain their livelihoods by contributing to their salaries.

But what does it mean that our mother held the door open for us to pass through to wherever we willed? There have always been women who have gone ahead. Women who have been the firsts in their fields, sectors, and industries. Women who have been bold enough to go against the grain and occupy male-dominated spaces. Women who have dared to be their authentic selves despite the roles prescribed by society. Some of these women have thrived in these new freedoms on their own. But others have breached the "boys' club" perimeter, taken a seat in the clubhouse, and reserved seats for the women who will come after them. They have been deliberate about creating and holding space for their sisters. By entering the room and then intentionally reserving seats for other women, these positive enablers are placeholding.

They are keeping the door open for other women to pass through, establish their presence, and prosper.

Each one of us has thrived, albeit in different ways. The school our mother founded is a going concern today, mostly due to the committed contribution of one of our sisters. It is still based on the principles that she held true when she was alive. Another of my sisters resides in our family home, one that, culturally, could easily have been lost to my father's sons from other women, or his present-day wife, after my mother died. When my father remarried, my sister did not challenge him, but just quietly continued living her life in this home. Without saying a word, she made it known that there was no vacancy to be filled, that the invisible sign at the gate read "not for sale." Our father's autobiography was edited and published by yet another of the Five Nations, as we call ourselves. From that experience, she has already founded a publishing company. We are also so blessed to have a sister who is a Reverend, praying for us daily and giving us advice whenever we are in need of it.

Today, the Five Nations have a plan to build homes adjacent to our family home. These are homes we will live in and pass on to our children. That's the irony of life—to think that, according to African tradition, mum had no "children" ... because she had no sons.

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