



THE POLITICS OF RESPECTABILITY AND CULTURE

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Abstract:

Studying a phenomenon that has been used to defend social and economic injustices, this abstract looks at the politics of respectability and culture. In order to uphold dominant ideas and silence marginalized voices, respectability politics asserts that some attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyles are morally better to others. This abstract examines respectability via a critical lens, showing how it creates shame and guilt, suppresses disadvantaged voices, and upholds societal structures. The abstract posits that the politics of respectability serve as a social control mechanism to uphold power imbalances and enforce prevailing norms, drawing on feminist, critical race, and queer theories. Our goal should be to create a society that is more equal and inclusive by opposing and subverting respectability politics.

Keywords: social control, shame, guilt, marginalization, culture, social hierarchy, critical race theory, and feminism for politics of respectability

1. Introduction

I wrote this article primarily to honor my late parents, Papa Francis Joseph Charley and Mama Sattu Charley, nee Rogers. They worked hard with me during my early and adolescent years, but they were unable to receive the benefits that parents typically receive from their children, especially from their first genetic son. According to African traditional beliefs, the first son in a family bears or is expected to bear the heavy burdens of the immediate and even extended families, which the father carried with him until his death. Being the first son, I was certainly expected to take over from my late father. This became an incumbent responsibility that fell upon me and any other first-born son following the father's retirement or death. The position that my late father left with me and my impoverished, illiterate mother before he passed away from this life a few decades ago, shortly after I passed the General Certificate of Education (GCE) O level examination, states that the first son is obligated to inherit the baton from the aged or

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deceased father. It felt as though the entire world had closed in on me. I found myself in a similar circumstance to that which Awoonor Renner depicted in his African Verse poem "Songs of Sorrow." Life was depressing on both sides; I was burned by fire when I turned in one direction and beat by the rain on the other.

In our interactions, though, my parents encouraged me to stand up for myself and, when necessary, for other people. They gave me the confidence to confront injustice and adversity head-on. Additionally, they taught me that public service is the greatest job there is to be done on Earth. In their lives, serving humanity was crucial and essential, and they showed this to nearly everyone they came into contact with. That turned into a real-life illustration and testament for all people, especially for myself.

They also taught me to resist temptation and stay strong in the face of hardship, no matter how big the temptation. I was told to say what I mean and mean what I say once more, and they scourged me for it. To this day, this has sustained me.

I am trying to present some of the implications of this topic, which is highly fascinating and comprehensive, in my article "The Politics of Responsibility" by using Sierra Leone as a case study to reflect on the socio-economic, theological, and cultural aspects of our day.

What exactly is political respectability? According to Lavin, Chad (20 May 2018), in his explanation of the notion of political responsibility, *"Being a responsible politician means recognizing that democratic representation is inherently paradoxical. It means being equal to all other citizens while at the same time being part of a small power-holding elite."*

Among other things, his duties include his obligation with respect to his moral duty among his fellow citizens and to obey the statutory laws of the State. He further said that political obligation gives the citizens additional reason(s) for acting accordingly. He emphasized the fact that even though one could be in a vantage position in terms of status over the others, but he must note that he is basically "equal" to his compatriots. He should move on side by side with his people much as he is their leader.

2. Family and History

Today's society uses the word "culture" more frequently than ever before. Misunderstandings, misconceptions, and even outright fabrications seem to be prevalent when the word "culture" is used. In many different cultural contexts, culture has grown increasingly complex. The complexity of culture, as depicted by Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917), is widely seen as the founding figure of anthropology in the United Kingdom.

Regarding the different cultures present in Sierra Leone, this article does not aim to establish a black-and-white division. Instead, it makes an effort to highlight how different several tribes or groups are from one another, even though they all have unique cultures, particularly when considering Sierra Leone.

There is considerable latitude in the appointment and election of women to high-ranking posts in the southern and eastern regions of Sierra Leone, including tribal leaders, section chiefs, and paramount chiefs, to mention a few. This customary or

cultural behavior is accepted in the Southeast but not in the north of the nation, where it is not even followed. Basically, then, there is never a constant political climate in these two regions. There is a lot more room for women to participate in the political and cultural life of Sierra Leone in the south-east, but the north has more rigid cultural practices that limit their opportunities.

The story of women's role is maintained dominantly in the North, where women are found doing a greater percentage of domestic work. This aspect of women's role is more or less similar among women in cultures across the country. Women are often found in farms and kitchens, where they are subjected to producing as many children as possible without much care from their husbands/fathers. He gives an extensive analysis of Mende culture, emphasizing the importance of culture in social life, citing the text "Aspects of Mende Life & Culture" (pages 1 & 2) authored by the Rev. Fr. Dr. Joseph Tamba Kamanda of the Department of Sociology and Social Work at Fourah Bay College-University of Sierra Leone. Throughout the book's several chapters, he mostly discusses two fundamental ideas. Drawing attention to cultural activities and beliefs, he emphasizes in his first study that culture is rational. Within the context of "Culture is rational," Rev. Fr. Dr. Kamanda highlights that, like with any logical culture, the reasons for the customs and beliefs that underpin Mende culture are compelling and fundamental to daily life.

"Culture is a system" is his second main point or key point. The admirable relationships that exist between and/or among different cultures/cultural groupings are essentially implied by this. He also talks about how the Mende proverbs are closely related to the surroundings in which each community lives and pursues its daily goals.

Right now, there is a greater inclination among women and girls in the South-East to engage in vocational training or attend school. Traders and merchants still employ a large number of girls and women in the North. Education is neglected in favor of small-time business.

In order to avoid being out of place among one's people in terms of their cultural practices and beliefs, one should examine politics and/or cultural practices within the parameters of our context with an extreme degree of caution.

Rev. Fr. Dr. Kamanda further states, according to anthropologists, that "*cultures act violently because they facilitate and legitimize individuals, groups, and institutions to demean and subjugate people*" (Arbuckle 2004: xi).

Since many of our people have deeply ingrained cultural beliefs, particularly in their traditional families, they are resistant to change. In order to preserve their relationship with their parents or other seniors, children and younger people are indoctrinated into the politics or culture of respectability. Due to their disregard for cultural propriety, there were reports throughout those years of youngsters and younger people being exiled from their families and homes. These kids or young people lost their whole relationship with their parents and siblings in these circumstances, sometimes permanently. Therefore, these children or young people never received anything that was left as a legacy or inheritance. For many years, there was this kind of cultural practice and belief.

In our day and age, however, shattering cultural taboos is causing a lot of controversy among our people, particularly in our traditional, conservative settings. As a result, certain of our cultural values inside our indigenous traditional communities are being undermined by Western influence.

Our seniors and the younger members of society are wandering around with a mentality influenced by Western civilization, however somewhat financially and economically. Instead of our culture and traditions, money is being exchanged, which causes the center to no longer hold. With this backdrop, things have started to break apart, and the substance and meaning of culture are being lost.

3. Religion

Africans were, and are still are, renowned for their religiosity, according to African Traditional Religion. Even before the White Man's arrival with his religion and religious customs in Africa, he (African) was aware of the concept of God and showed a great deal of respect for God.

Our people have a strong belief system in God, who rules over all aspects of their existence. They still hold the highest regard for those who led them in prayer.

It is important to note that God is reverently positioned in both the Bible and the Quran, which depict his religion and ways and is therefore held in higher regard than anything or anything else in the universe. The concept of God/Yahweh as Omnipotent, Omnipresent, and Omniscient is found in both religious texts and theology. This essentially makes it clear that no one is equal to God. Since He is an independent God, He doesn't require assistance from anybody or anything to fulfill His duties. I get questions and comments from a wide range of people who are very curious about certain aspects of religion politics. I don't claim to be an expert in religion or leadership, so I answer them politely and advise them to read more books and articles about faith and religion in order for them to learn some fundamental principles of religion and leadership that they can use in their families, at work, or even in their communities.

Here is where it should be made clear that being a Reverend, Pastor, Sheik, Imam, or reverend does not automatically translate into being a Christian or a Muslim. Belief in Jesus Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, for instance, is what truly defines a person as a Christian. Simply said, being a Christian is defined by one's faith in Christ. Religious politics have faced many difficulties in the modern era, as well as numerous misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and even fights. The most crucial thing is to have confidence and belief in the Divinity, even in the face of these mistakes, misinterpretations, and misunderstandings. The argument and evidence that Jesus was crucified because he opposed the status quo came from the perspective of certain Christian Theological experts, who appear to be very liberal in their ideas and explanations. Among the instances they highlighted were:

Jesus cautiously interacted with prostitutes, tax collectors, and sinners in general. The second main taboo in Bible times in Palestine was that Jesus "disregarded" laws, such as healing people on the Sabbath and was regarded as breaking the Sabbath.

Realizing that the sanctuary, intended for worship, was being used improperly, Jesus appeared and angrily overturned the tables.

A whore or prostitute poured oil on Jesus' feet and used her hair to wipe the feet of Jesus. The leaders were horrified when they saw the lady fall at Jesus' feet, washed them with her hair, which symbolically portrayed anointing "*If Jesus had known the kind of woman she was, he would not have allowed her to touch him,*" they said to one other. Despite knowing the woman's character, Jesus yet attempted to defy the establishment. Like in the case of the woman caught in adultery, Jesus contested people's judgments of those who were obviously and vehemently violating either God's law or the Judaic tradition. Amazingly, even though devout Christians today are familiar with the Bible, they fail to recognize how the core principles of Jesus' ministry apply to today's society. It appears that they are enmeshed in customs and conventions. As the Pharisees and Sadducee did to Jesus, I implore you to delay passing judgment. Respecting and maintaining the political legitimacy of culture, religion, and tradition is our duty, as it is yours and mine.

4. Respectability in Society and Economy

The global economy is experiencing significant disruption due to socioeconomic factors, which are highly unsettling. In many, if not all, of the world's economies, the current financial crisis has had a nearly catastrophic impact. Global warming's explosion is having a severe impact on the socioeconomic structures of communities and societies worldwide and is poised to translate into a global boiling point in some parts of the world. The burden of combating the consequences of this ailment ultimately rests with individuals, corporations, financial institutions, and governments. Each of these parties must take the initiative to stop the environmental threat and societal deterioration.

5. People and Culture

In most of our modern societies, respectability has quickly faded, and it is hard to distinguish between social classes based just on age. This no longer holds true for age, which, among other things, determined respectability. Sociologically speaking, age was highly valued in communities, and many young people looked forward to growing older or aspired to age in order to achieve this respectability in their particular societies. In Nigeria's Yoruba territory, for instance, younger people typically bow down to their elders and to distinguished individuals. The custom of respectability was practiced for many decades, if not centuries, and was highly valued by everyone in that particular society. However, in the modern era, this custom has been severely diminished and severely undermined. Within our traditional houses, the majority of the people in Sierra Leone, for example, genuinely embraced this cultural practice. To notify their husbands that food was ready on the table, for instance, women would kneel down to them. The same custom was followed when the water was ready for a bath. When it was time for a bath, the wife would come to kindly inform and summon the husband to the water.

After the husband returned, the wife would return and stand by the bucket of water until he arrived, at which point she would go to the kitchen or another location to finish off her household tasks. Oddly enough, the woman would return after taking a bath to retrieve the bucket and carry it inside to the kitchen or living room. For many years, if not centuries, this practice and respectability within the culture persisted. But those days are over since spouses and other women no longer follow that particular ethical culture due to the infiltration of other influences. That is no longer a reality. Sadly, a larger portion of our once-desired and admirable culture has been absorbed by Western culture and influence, therefore diminishing that component of our heritage. Our cultures' community lifestyle has been negatively impacted by this disintegration in certain ways. Furthermore, the respectability that is evinced by individuals who extend an open hand in greeting conveys a clear picture of "great love and human fellowship with one another" in both Mende and Sierra Leonean cultures. Regrettably, things have changed from that.

Unfortunately, a greater percentage of our once-admired and desired culture has been assimilated by Western influence and culture, thereby diminishing that aspect of our history. This breakdown has had some detrimental effects on the communal lifestyle of our cultures. Moreover, the dignity displayed by those who greet one another with an open hand paints a vivid picture of "*great love and human fellowship with one another*" in both the Mende and Sierra Leonean populations. Sadly, since then, things have evolved.

6. The Politics of Respectability and Culture

Respectability is the idea that some behaviors, attitudes, and lifestyles are morally superior to others. It has been criticized for maintaining social hierarchies, supporting dominant ideologies, and silencing marginalized voices. The Politics of Respectability and Culture: The concept of respectability has been a cornerstone of social and cultural norms for decades.

7. The Authority Politics

It was in the late 19th century, especially in the US, when the politics of respectability first appeared. The growing power of evangelical Christianity and the development of the middle class served as its main drivers. The idea of respectability politics holds that people and groups who uphold moral traditions like monogamy, diligence, and hygiene are morally better to those who do not. Along with stigmatizing and marginalizing particular communities, this ideology has been used to defend social and economic injustices.

8. The Connection to Cultural

Respectability politics and culture are intricately entwined. Respectability, which is the prevailing ideology, is frequently defended by cultural norms and values. For example,

the idea that a particular hobby, style of clothing, or musical genre is "respectable" or "respectable" upholds social hierarchies and stereotypes.

9. Appropriateness Politics Critiques

A number of detractors have contested the idea of respectability politics, claiming that it:

- 1) **Reinforces social hierarchies:** By implying that some groups are morally superior to others, respectability politics reinforces social and economic inequities.
- 2) **Silences marginalized voices:** These ideologies stifle marginalized voices and obscure the experiences of marginalized populations by placing a strong emphasis on respectability.
- 3) **Fosters guilt and shame:** In order to compel conformity, respectability politics frequently rely on guilt and shame, which can be detrimental to physical and mental health.

10. Respectability Politics in Action: A Few Examples

- 1) **Radicalized policing:** The disproportionate attention that law enforcement pays to African Americans and other communities of color is a classic illustration of how respectability politics may be utilized to defend discriminatory actions.
- 2) **Gender norms and expectations:** From the assumption that men should provide for their families to the pressure on women to meet conventional beauty standards, respectability politics is the foundation of many gendered norms and expectations.
- 3) **Sex morality:** A couple that is not heterosexual faces shame, and same-sex partnerships are illegal. These instances illustrate how respectability politics can be utilized to impose heteronormative norms

11. Review Related Literature

11.1 Frameworks Theoretical

Studying the politics of respectability and culture has been done using a number of theoretical approaches. Here are a few of the major theories:

- 1) **The Theory of Femininity:** Researchers who identify as feminists, such as Judith Butler (1990) and Simone de Beauvoir (1949), have maintained that heteronormative and patriarchal power systems are maintained through the social constructions of gender and sexuality. According to their claims, women's bodies and sexuality are governed and controlled by these conceptions.
- 2) **Critical Race Theory:** Poststructuralist scholars like Michel Foucault (1977) and Jacques Derrida (1978) have argued that language and culture are the means through which power is exercised. They contend that dominant discourses and power structures are used to regulate and control individuals and groups.

Race and racism are social constructs that are used to maintain white supremacy and dominance. They argue that these constructs are used to regulate and control the bodies and experiences of people of color. The politics of respectability and culture have been studied through the application of several major themes. A few of the essential ideas are:

- **Respectability:** Social and cultural norms that serve as a means of controlling and regulating both individuals and communities are referred to as respectability. It is frequently applied to marginalized populations, including women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ persons, in order to regulate and control them.
- **Heteronormativity:** The term "heteronormativity" describes the social and cultural standards that govern and manage gender and sexuality. It is frequently applied to control and govern the experiences and bodies of LGBTQ+ people. (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people who are not heterosexual).
- **Whiteness:** Whiteness is the term used to describe the social and cultural norms that govern and control white supremacy and domination. People of color's bodies and experiences are frequently controlled and regulated by it.

The politics of respectability and culture have intricately and multidimensionally interacted with racial, gender, and sexuality issues. The following are some significant intersections between them:

- **Race:** Historically, racist and discriminatory acts towards people of color have been justified by the politics of respectability. For instance, the marginalization and oppression of Black people have been justified by the "respectable" behavior of White people. In order to establish and uphold racial hierarchies, the idea of respectability has been exploited, with white people being viewed as more respectable than people of color. Racial stereotypes have been strengthened and racist attitudes and actions have been justified through the politics of respectability.
- **Gender:** Women's agency and autonomy have been curtailed by the politics of respectability, which has been utilized to impose conventional gender norms. Women are supposed to adhere to conventional gender standards and expectations, and the idea of respectability has been used to police women's bodies and behavior. Women have also had their access to jobs, education, and other possibilities restricted by the politics of respectability.
- **Sexuality:** Heteronormative and homophobic views and actions have been legitimized through the politics of respectability. Aiming to criminalize and stigmatize LGBTQ+ people, the concept of respectability has also been used to deny them access to jobs, education, and other perks. The concept of respectability politics has also been employed to uphold conventional gender norms and prohibit people from expressing their gender identity or sexual orientation in ways deemed "unrespectable."

- **Intersectionality:** A complicated and nuanced relationship exists between the politics of respectability and issues of race, gender, and sexuality. Issues of race, gender, and sexuality are frequently entwined, and the concept of intersectionality implies that many oppressions are related to one another. Issues of race, gender, and sexuality are often overlooked or invisibly intersected by the politics of respectability. Examples of this include the marginalization and mistreatment of Black people being justified by the "respectable" actions of White people. Women's "respectable" behavior has been used to impose gender norms and limit their freedom and agency. LGBTQ+ people have been criminalized and stigmatized because of their "respectable" behavior.

12. Implications for issues of race, gender, and sexuality are profoundly affected by the politics of respectability

It has served as an excuse for discrimination and injustice, as well as for limiting access to opportunities like work and education.

It has additionally been employed to uphold conventional gender norms and prohibit people from displaying their sexual orientation or gender identity in ways deemed "unrespectable." Respectability politics forces people and communities to reconsider their beliefs and actions as well as the intricate and nuanced ways that issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation interact.

13. Summary

The politics of respectability, in summary, has intricate and varied relationships with problems of race, gender, and sexuality. It's been used as an excuse for marginalization and injustice, as well as for limiting access to opportunities like work and education. In order to build a more just and equal society, it is critical to acknowledge the intricate and interwoven ways that issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation intersect, as well as to confront and undermine the politics of respectability. There are complex and varied relationships between the politics of respectability and issues of race, gender, and sexuality. The politics of respectability have been used as a justification for discrimination and marginalization, as well as for denying people access to opportunities such as employment and education. It is imperative to address and subvert the politics of respectability in order to create a society that is more just and equal.

14. Conceptual view on Politics of Respectability and Culture

Yes, certainly! Europe's early modern era is when the idea of respectability first emerged. Its history is lengthy and intricate. Social class and rank were major factors in the concept of respectability at this period, with the upper classes being viewed as having greater respect than the lower classes. Within the framework of social reform movements in the 19th and 20th centuries, the idea of respectability gained new relevance. Jane Addams

and Ellen Gates Starr were two progressive reformers who aimed to change social conventions that supported poverty and inequality as well as the working class's living conditions. Instead of the working class being "degenerate" or "disrespectable," they contended that institutional injustices and inequities were to blame for their circumstances. As the civil rights and black power movements gained traction in the 1960s and 1970s, the idea of respectability acquired new significance. Black activists like Angela Davis and Martin Luther King Jr. contested the notion that black people were innately "disrespectable" or "criminal," contending that systematic racism and inequality were the primary drivers of social issues in black communities.

The idea of respectability has been present in many discussions and debates in the past few years, ranging from those centered on gender and sexuality to those involving immigration and national identity. Respectability, meanwhile, is still a contentious and nuanced term, with many people and organizations having differing interpretations of it.

Regarding respectability, some of the main concerns and discussions are as follows:

- 1) The link between social class and respectability: Can one acquire respectability through other channels, such as education or cultural capital, or is it only dictated by their social status?
- 2) The contribution of respectability to systemic inequality: Does the emphasis on respectability impede social mobility and contribute to systemic inequality, or can it be used as a weapon to subvert these structures and advance social justice?

Politics has made much of the idea of respectability, especially when it comes to underprivileged groups. In terms of societal norms and ideals, it refers to the notion that some individuals or groups are worthy of respect and acknowledgement. But respectability politics may be complicated and multifaceted, sometimes serving to both impede the voices of the underprivileged and reinforce structural inequalities. The politics of respectability is often criticized for its potential to police the conduct of marginalized groups, especially when applied to social justice movements. This is one of the greatest criticisms of the concept. By emphasizing individual behavior above structural change, for instance, some opponents contend that the emphasis on respectability can serve to maintain the status quo and restrict the possibility of significant social and political change.

To further ostracize minority views from the mainstream political discourse, the politics of respectability might be employed. Because of their cultural customs, language, or social status, certain minority communities, for example, might be viewed as "unrespectable" or "unworthy" of acknowledgment. Their capacity to stand up for their rights and interests and take part in politics may be hampered as a result.

To gain further insight into the politics of respectability and culture, you might look to a number of sources. Listed below are a few:

- 1) Melissa Harris-Perry's "The Politics of Respectability: Race, Identity, and Leadership". In order to limit the opportunities for minority voices to be heard and

to control political discourse, this book examines the ways in which respectability has been applied.

- 2) Katherine Franke's book, "The Respectability Politics of Racial Justice". The use of respectability to regulate the conduct of underprivileged communities within the framework of racial justice movements is examined in this essay.
- 3) Judith Butler's "The Trouble with Respectability". Using the argument that it can be used to uphold structural inequalities and restrict the opportunities for disadvantaged voices to be heard, this article criticizes the politics of respectability.
- 4) Inderpal Grewal, "The Cultural Politics of Respectability". In order to limit the opportunities for minority voices to be heard and to impact cultural norms, this article examines the ways in which respectability has been employed.

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