# Homeric Traditions in the Contexts of Ancient Greece and Modern Africa

While Ancient Greek culture appears in many corners of the world, due to both the nature of expansion of ancient territories and domains, as well as the adoption of ancient ideas and ideals into modern society, the similarities between ancient Greek customs and African traditional customs are ones not commonly explored except for Lambert (1990), Kirby-Hirst (2005), and Mackenzie (2010). That being said, the characteristics, in particular between the impressions of girlhood and womanhood within systems of patriarchy that are reliant on women, marriage, and funerary rites and customs, are strikingly similar. For the purposes of this paper, analyses will be made based on observations made from textual and literary references in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. The *Hymn* will be discussed using the translation into English by Helene P. Foley.

The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* is considered one of the most significant pieces of literature to survive from antiquity. Its centredness on female characters and experiences of women in the ancient world is uncommon for the time. Yet its main theme, loss and grief, likely would have resonated deeply with the people of ancient Greece, in particular with Mothers and Daughters. The theme of grief and loss present in the *Hymn* is so profound that it still evokes a deep sense of emotion in readers of the *Hymn* in modern times.

An important aspect that is present, albeit implicitly, in the narrative of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, is the idea of women and the oikos, as players within and out of the familial household. As the principle of the oikos was a key principle of Attic Greek socio-economic society, it would be fair to assume this principle, along with other patriarchal standards or the time, would be applied to the gods.

The concept of the oikos has evolved to take on different meanings within the development of aspects of the household. In William Johnson Everett's OIKOS: Convergence in Business Ethics, Everett describes the ancient Greek oikos as a convergence of economics, family, and religion, particularly from the perspective of an agricultural unit, which is an apt description of the traditionally agrarian society of archaic Greece. Everett goes further to clarify that the oikos in ancient Greece "embraced not only a house, but also a lineage, a heart, ancestral claims, and the land of the fathers" (Everett, 1986: 318).

While Ancient Greek society heavily favoured men, being a patriarchal society, women still played an important role in keeping the balance in society. While the main male figure of the house, the husband and/or father, was the symbolic head of the household by providing financially for his family, it was the female members of said household who actually ran the house. Women were responsible for fetching water, ensuring the upkeep of the inner house, preparing food, and ensuring the place remained habitable for the family. While the male head of the household was responsible for financial prosperity of the family, the mother of the household would be responsible for the symbolic prosperity of the family, ensuring that she kept her household well. Additionally, the woman

would be responsible for bearing children for her husband, particularly male children, who could inherit their father's oikos or estate as his sons and heirs.

In *The Oikos in Athenian Law*, Douglas MacDowell explains that in the context of Athenian laws, "oikos means 'property' or 'house'. However, prior the fifth century before common era, in an Attic context, oikos could also mean family or the items belonging to the household. Due to the transactional nature of the oikos as an object or having object value, there were rights and duties of relative in the out of the oikos in terms of inheritance. MacDowell states: "When a man died, his property normally passed to his children of grandchildren, or to an adopted son. If none of these existed, the nearest relatives could claim."

An important omission from this explanation is the absolute right of any women relatives to inherit. However, members of the oikos had a much better chance at successfully inheriting the deceased's estate than members of the family that were outside the oikos. MacDowell further explains an exception to this rule, stating: "A few exceptions are conceivable: for example, the deceased's daughter's son, who would be in a different oikos, would take precedence over the deceased's unmarried sister, who would be in the same oikos."

The system of inheritance of the oikos seemed to be aimed at preserving the family legacy, financially and otherwise, down the patriarchal line as much as possible. The burden, not only of the inheritance of the physical object of the oikos, but also of the symbolic undertaking of the head of the oikos left behind by the deceased was not considered a female one, as limitations of female participation in society would have severely limited a woman's ability to head an oikos without any man present (MacDowell, 1989).

How does all of this apply to the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*?

When Persephone is taken to the Underworld by Hades, an irreversible shift takes place. Persephone transitions from the oikos of her parents to the oikos of her husband, thus shifting from child to woman, thrust into the position of maintaining her own oikos on her husband's behalf. Similarly, but in a physical manner, Persephone transitions to womanhood with the loss of her virginity, no longer a child or maiden, but now the property of the one responsible for her deflowering. Although the Hymn does not explicitly describe the event, in lines 342-344 which states: τέτμε δὲ τόν γε ἄνακτα δόμων ἔντοσθεν ἐόντα, / ἥμενον ἐν λεχέεσσι σὺν αἰδοίῃ παρακοίτι / πόλλ᾽ ἀεκαζομένῃ μητρὸς πόθῳ, her loss of virginity is very heavily implied (considering she is depicted as in a bed, with Hades beside her - ἐν λεχέεσσι σὺν αἰδοίῃ). Along with this loss of virginity comes a shift in Persephone's agency. While Bruce Lincoln, in *The Rape of Persephone: A Greek Scenario of Women's Initiation*, is of the opinion that "it thus appears that prior to her stay with Hades, Persephone had no proper name, being known only as her status: Kore, 'the maiden'" (Lincoln, 1979: 230), she is no longer her own person but rather belonging to her husband. This point is further emphasized as the above-mentioned lines describe her being in bed with Hades against her will - πόλλ᾽ ἀεκαζομένῃ. This is despite the fact that "a proper name is only bestowed when she [Persephone] has been initiated, become an adult, and lost her maiden status" (Lincoln, 1979: 230).

Although the Greek gods and goddess were not subject to precisely the same standards imposed upon mortals, such as monogamous marriage, Demeter's union with Zeus in which Persephone was produced presents a sort of oikos in a sense. Father, mother, and child all reside in one place, Mount Olympus, and though Zeus is an absent father at best, Demeter is no doubt a very present mother. If the principle of the oikos is applied to the family unit of Zeus, Demeter, and Persephone, it stands to reason that other principles that centre the oikos then also apply.

Subsequently, once Persephone comes of age, she should not remain in her father's oikos but rather, should be married to another man in order to establish their own oikos together under her husband's name and control.

As the father of Persephone, in an ancient context, Zeus had a right to pick out a suitor for his daughter to wed (Rehm, 1994: 11). He did not need permission from Demeter of Persephone to do so. As a maiden, it would be necessary for Persephone to be married and to leave the oikos of her parents. From the perspective of Zeus, pairing Persephone with Hades as her suitor serves him in a multitude of ways. Hades hold honour and respect as being one of the six original Olympian gods and so is a suitable candidate for Persephone as the daughter of the king of the gods. Hades also has dominion over his own domain and while it is isolated from the rest of the world, it is still a very important domain as part of the life and death cycle in Greek culture. A third reason for this pairing links to the issue of inheritance of the oikos. Hades and Zeus are already linked to each other as brothers. Therefore, by uniting Persephone and Hades in marriage, Zeus ensures that his inheritor is someone worthy to continue the legacy of his oikos as Hades will now also be linked to him as his son-in-law.

Once Persephone completes her union with Hades by marrying him, she will move from being a member of her father Zeus' oikos to maintaining the oikos of her husband. This role change is symbolic of the growing up or coming-of-age of young girls in ancient Greek society: once they are old enough to be married (once they have started menstruating and are therefore able to bear children), they cannot continue residing in the oikos of their fathers but must contribute to society by contributing to the establishment of the oikos of their husbands. Male children, who would be the heirs of their fathers, remain in the oikos of their fathers as inheritors and successors to the family line, while female children are used as a commodity to enhance the oikos of their fathers.

The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, in particular, serves as a stark reminder of the place of women in ancient Greek society. The narrative presents a sort of double-edged sword situation in that the oikos requires the presence of women to function, but also that they would be treated as incidentals of the household due to significant roles of leadership in the household being occupied by men. Each significant stage in a woman's life in ancient Greece revolves around the oikos: birth, marriage, and death. Yet at each of these stages, the oikos, and the agency of the woman, is never her own.

In Rush Rehm's *Marriage to Death: The Conflation of Wedding and Funeral Rituals in Greek Tragedy*, Rehm describes fifth century Attic Marriage by the acts of ἐγγύη (pledge), ἔκδοσις (dowry-exchanging), and γάμος

(wedding). For a traditional Attic marriage to take place, all three of these conditions needed to be met. The ἐγγύη was a betrothal between the two parties organised by the legal guardians of the couple. Because the bride was not considered to have legal agency, her participation in the betrothal was unnecessary and the agreement for betrothal would usually take place between the couple's fathers. However, in the case where the groom was of the age of majority, as he had legal agency, he would be able to represent himself in his own marriage negotiations (Rehm, 1994: 11). The ἔκδοσις, in essence, was the transferring of the bride from her father's house to her new marriage house where it was her responsibility to maintain the oikos (household) and bear children, specifically a male heir. An important aspect of the transferring of the bride from her father's house to the groom's house would be the when, after the wedding banquet, the groom would lead the bride to her new home, led by a procession of torch bearers, most specifically including the bride's mother, who would play music and sing songs (Rehm, 1994: 14). This particular act suggests that despite that marriage itself more often than not being transactional, it was still a celebrated act in which the bride's family's involvement intimates a tacit agreement to or approval of the marriage. In addition to this, the groom's parents were also involved in the transfer of the wedding couple into their new home. The groom's parents would meet the newlyweds at the threshold to their home, but it was the role of the groom's mother to welcome the couple into the home itself, by bearing the wedding torch and leading them inside and to the hearth to take part in further marriage customs. An important aspect of the incorporation of the bride into the marriage home was the eating of fruit by the bride, a quince or an apple, symbolising "a sympathetic guarantee of fertility, a demonstration that the bride's livelihood now comes from her husband, a way or marking her initiation into the new oikos, an indication of the impending loss of her virginity, and (for the non-symbolists) a practical means of sexual arousal" (Rehm, 1994: 17). This was followed by the physical consummation of the marriage. While there were some variations due to social, political, and economic contexts, the aforementioned proceedings were important aspects of a Greek marriage and were largely standardised in the Athenian marriage context.

Rehm, in providing reason for marriage unions, states, "The primary purpose of marriage, then, was to recreate the oikos under control of the husband, to guarantee the continuity of family property (land, house, and retainers) by providing heirs, and to secure the continued religious observances owed to its dead members" (Rehm, 1994: 12). This suggests that traditional Attic marriage in the fifth century was almost exclusively transactional, with the transaction being between the two fathers, or the father and the groom. The bride's role in this transaction was not as a negotiating party, but rather as an object being negotiated over. The implication then is that the bride would likely not be able to object to the marriage or to reject the groom but would have had to proceed with the marriage in order to satisfy the terms of the marriage contract.

In order for the marriage contract to be completed, consummation of the marriage was required, that is the physical unification of the bride and groom through sexual intercourse. Rehm describes the act as being "unpleasant for the

virgin wife" (Rehm, 1994: 17) but notes that "intercourse marked the τέλος (*telos*, 'end' or 'goal') in the transferral of the bride to her husband, and the consummated marriage was referred to as a γάμος, 'a pairing'" (Rehm, 1994: 17). In preparation for the consummation, Rehm explains that the bride would remove her veil "in the ἀνακαλυπτήρια", if she had not already done so, to present herself to her husband. Rehm draws similarities of the bride's unveiling to the revelations associated with the Eleusinian Mysteries in which knowledge was revealed to the initiates through the rites performed and that this revelation, the ἐποπτεία, was the moment of climax in the initiation, but could also be viewed as the climactic moment of the newly married couple's wedding night. Interestingly, Rehm points out that "unveiling may have been the single act in the wedding that the bride performed herself, signifying her formal consent (if nothing more) to the marriage" (Rehm, 1994: 17). Although the permission, at this stage, may be nothing more than symbolic, the imagery conjured up by the woman unveiling herself as permission to her groom is poignant as it suggests that, even if just for that moment, the woman has an ounce of power in completing the unveiling herself, and that a forced unveiling (the husband removing the wife's veil himself) would not carry the same weight in the marriage ritual.

While the consummation of the marriage by the bride and groom was a private part of the marriage ceremony to bring the marriage to its end goal, this did not mean that those who were already in attendance would leave but rather participated in their own rituals during this time. The wedding party, those who had accompanied the marriage procession both on the sides of the groom and bride, would participate in ritual chanting and singing: the singing of epithalamia, which was the singing of songs outside the bed chamber (the thalamus or marriage chamber) of the married couple who were in the process of consummating their marriage. Rehm describes the practice thusly: "The men and women took the side of their respective friend within the house, celebrating with mockery, ribaldry, and possibly dancing as well" (Rehm, 1994: 17). The epithalamia continued to the next morning, in which it was used to wake the newlywed couple, and another ceremony called the ἐπαυλία, in which the newly married couple received friends and guests who brought gifts to the marriage house. This is followed by a final wedding banquet hosted by the family of the groom. From this description, it is clear that both the Athenian wedding and the marriage itself is a social and familial affair, involving members of the family and community in rituals and ceremonies to ensure that the marriage rites are correctly followed and adhered to, likely to ensure the validity and legitimacy of the marriage. Even the practice of consummation, a private affair in modern society, is subject to an audience and these practices set the norm for a wedding being a communal celebration and not a private affair.

Rehm observes that once this final banquet has taken place, "the couple lived together in marriage, συνοίκειν" and that "the relationship involved keeping and sharing an oikos" (Rehm, 1994: 18). Rehm emphasises the object of Athenian marriage by quoting Cynthia B. Patterson who states that the aim of an Athenian marriage was "a relationship between a man and a woman which

had the primary goal of producing children and maintaining the identity of the oikos unit (the household) within the social and political community" (Rehm, 1994: 18).

Nevertheless, the object of Attic marriage in the fifth century vastly differs from the modern idea of nuptials: the ancient objective was to ensure the continuation of the oikos where the women's role was to provide male heirs through childbirth and to run the household according to her husband's specifications as opposed to modern marriage conventions which allows for a more equal footing of the husband and wife and which the roles of the men and women are based on socio-political context instead of more archaic values. Furthermore, the definition of household in a modern context differs from the ancient Greek tradition as, while it is becoming more acceptable for either men or women to head a household, it is not uncommon for the man or husband to still be considered the head of the household, describing him as the breadwinner of the family rather than the person in charge of looking after the house.

Similarly, in African Customary Marriages, that is marriages entered into through customary law but provisioned for by civil law, marriage negotiations are primarily a family activity, with the main familial patriarchs acting as chief negotiators. In IP Maithufi and JC Bekker's *The Recognition of the Customary Marriages Act of 1998 and its Impact on Family Law in South Africa*, it is explained that ilobolo, defined as "Property or cash in kind,... which a husband or head of his family undertakes to give to the head of the prospective wife's family in consideration of a customary marriage" (The Recognition of Customary Marriages Act of 1998), is not a mandatory requirement for the celebration of a customary marriage. However, it would be up to both parties to negotiate this requirement in accordance with the requirements pf their application of customary law (Maithufi and Bekker, 2002: 186).

It is clear then, that in a similar vein to ancient Greek marriages, African customary marriages, hold a sense of economy and monetary gain, particular for the family of the woman who would be the ones receiving the gift or dowry for the marriage.

A notable likeness between ancient Greek traditions and African customary traditions comes after the marriage, with the establishment of the household and particularly, the responsibilities of the women within that household to their community and society as a whole.

Due to the nature of Colonial and Apartheid era laws in South Africa, African Customary Marriages were not recognised prior to democracy in South Africa. Subsequently, so-called "alternate" provisions were made. The Black Administration Act of 1927 state that a customary marriage creates a "house" and defines a "house" as "…the family, property, rights, and status, which commence with, attach to, and arise out of the customary marriage of each Black Woman".

The "house" in this case, is comparable to the ancient Greek oikos. In the case of polygamous marriage, a man who had multiple wives created a "house" representing a household with each of his wives. While he was the head of each household, it would be left to the wife to run that household satisfactorily. This

mirrors the idea of the oikos which was headed by the man but managed by the women of the household. Similarly, in traditional African custom, other women, such as daughters, within the "house" would contribute to its administering in the form of household chores.

Additionally, and similarly to principles of the oikos during Solon's Reforms, in African custom: the man who had more than one wife and subsequently "houses", while having great administrative freedom over them, could not use one house to either the benefit or detriment to another house. Simply put, "one house was not supposed to be enriched at the expense of another" (Maithufi and Bekker, 2002: 188).

Another key similarity between an Ancient Greek cultural practice and African customary practices, is the practice of ritual abduction for marriage. While it is not explicitly mentioned as a custom or rite in the more conventional Ancient Greek tradition as described by Rehm, literary evidence such as the abduction of Persephone by Hades in the *Homeric Hymn* imply, at the very least, the existence of such a practice.

In Nyasha Karimakwenda's *Deconstructing Characterizations of Rape, Marriage, and Custom in South Africa*, Karimakwenda explains that "in the Nguni languages of isiXhosa and isiZulu, the literal meaning of 'ukuthwala' is to carry away. But it also refers to the customary practice of abducting or carrying off a girl or woman for purposes of precipitating a marriage. Variations of abduction marriage are found across South Africa amongst tshiVenda, siSwati, xiTsonga, sePedi and isiNdebele speaking groups, among others, each cultural grouping having its own terms and characteristics" (Karimakwenda, 2020: 765). From this, it is clear that there is no singular definition for ritual abduction in a South African context, and that the cultural situations surrounding the practice itself will inform how the abduction will take place.

What should be noted, is that the practice of "ukuthwala" has many instances in which it has been used as a tool to perpetrate gender-based violence, with Karimakwenda noting that "There were disturbing accounts from rural areas of young girls (many of them impoverished and vulnerable orphans) in the provinces Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal who were forced into customary marriages with older men through the acts of kidnapping, assault, and rape. The sources put forward that these acts were being done under the guise of the almost extinct but now revived customary practice of ukuthwala, although in a distorted form" (Karimakwenda, 2020: 764).

One of the most significant reasons for a man and woman to marry in ancient Athenian society, as mentioned above, was to ensure the continuation of the oikos, not only for a male heir to create his own branch of household, but also to continue his family line and oikos. Naturally, when considering linage and inheritance in terms of the oikos, the matter of testament on the case of death arises. By getting married, and subsequently having children, a man ensured that within the oikos, upon his death, religious funerary rites and rituals would be practiced and observed for any deceased members of the oikos. For the ancient Greeks, funerary rites would be as important, if not more so, than marriages rites. The marriages rites could almost be seen as a means to an end, to ensure the

correct observances in death, so that the deceased received the proper honours in the afterlife.

Much like the marriage rituals, Attic funerals were not a solitary affair but again rather a communal event. Rehm explains that "the connection between wedding and funeral rites was encoded in the term κῆδος, a word-group that refers both to a 'κήδεια' (κηδεστής were 'in-laws') and to the 'funeral ritual' (Rehm, 1994: 22). Rehm goes further to explain that it is possible this connection exists as a relative by marriage would then be obligated to the deceased in performing familial funerary rites, κήδεια, as a member of the new oikos. Additionally, Rehm makes it clear that the women of the household were again at the forefront of the funerary preparations and rites, as they were when it came to the marriage rites. Rehm describes their involvement and preparation, as well as the funerary process itself, as follows:

> "As they did at weddings, women played the most significant roles in mourning rituals, including washing, anointing, dressing, crowning, and covering the body after adorning it with flowers. Prepared in this manner, the corpse was 'laid out' at the πρόσθεσις) on a 'bed' or 'couch', κλῖνη, probably in the inner courtyard of the house. There it remained on view for two days, long enough – in an age of rudimentary medicine – to ensure that the person was really dead" (Rehm, 1994: 22).

From these details provided by Rehm, it is clear that women did not only play a significant role in mourning rituals, but an indispensable one. It is implied that without the group of women mourners, certain rites and rituals would not be able to be competed, and, subsequently, the deceased would not be able to have a proper funeral. In following testamentary laws for inheritance at that time, the family that would inherit was the one who had possession of the body. This is due to the belief that only closest family members would tend to a deceased's corpse in, what Rehm describes as, "such an intimate way" (Rehm, 1994: 22). The implication from this, is that the women of the oikos who would end up being the principal mourners and main attendants to the deceased were not just an integral part of the oikos, as they served roles both in life and death that were integral parts of Attic society, but that they also played important roles in the lives of the members of the oikos themselves.

Much like the epithalamia for the wedding, funerary rites came with their own selection of singing and chants performed by the mourners. Rehm describes the proceedings, stating that "mourners dress in black and cut their hair short when they paid their respects to the dead. During these visits, the women of the family sang and wailed dirges" (Rehm, 1994: 22).

There is also an indication, from scenes on vases and funerary plaques, that the women mourners would "stand over the corpse at the top end of the couch, where they beat their head or breasts, lacerate their cheeks, or tear their hair" (Rehm, 1994:22). All these activities were the conventional and expected behaviour of the female mourners, particularly and especially of those women who were part of the same oikos as the deceased.

In Hundzukani P. Khosa-Nkatini's *Patriarchal Nature of Mourning from an African Persepective*, Khosa-Nkatini explains that mourning in African

traditions differ substantially from Western traditions, particularly in the status of the widow of the deceased. Khosa-Nkatini explains: "Vows in the western culture state 'until death do us part', but this is not the case in the African traditions. A widow is still considered married even after the death of her husband…It is important to note that most African traditions surrounding death are stricter for women than for men" (Khosa-Nkatini, 2022: 1).

Similarly to the funerary traditions found in archaic Greece, "In the African culture, a widow's hair is frequently shaved off as a sign of her grieving. Several people claim that this is done to make the widow appear unappealing to men. However, others contend that a widow's decision to shave her hair is an indication of how deeply she is mourning her late spouse…The oldest ladies in the community wash and dry the deceased three times. This demonstrates how tightly connected all rites are in African civilisation after death with the women (Khosa-Nkatini, 2022: 3).

Once again, it is clear that traditions found in ancient Greek funerary practices very closely resemble those found in African traditions and in fact, the relationship and similarity between the ancient Greek traditions and the African traditions is far stronger than that of ancient Greek customs and Western traditions, despite ancient Greek culture being considered a fundamental aspect influence on Western society.

Another point on which ancient Greek society and African society seem to concur is that of old women and their place in society.

Both Jan Bremmer's The Old Women of Ancient Greece and Louise Pratt in The Old Women of Ancient Greece and the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, acknowledge that old women in ancient Greece certainly appeared to be marginalised for having passed their prime, with Bremmer going so far as to say, "in ancient Greece old women constituted a marginal category, which was loathed and feared by the males" (Bremmer, 1987: 204). On the other hand, Pratt goes onto correctly note that the *Homeric Hymn* itself does not fall under this category as the *Hymn* tends to describe old women, particularly Doso, in a much more positive light than other ancient literature. The cycle of women and fertility becomes complicated in this regard as older women who had past the stage of menopause did not have the same social standing or social value as younger women who were considered of age to still bear children, thus making them more valuable members of society. Yet, both young and old women's values were placed on their ability to be fertile and bear children, and, in the case of older women, such as Doso who was acting as a wetnurse, their dues to society in terms of childbearing could be considered already paid.

In Kate Rice's *Ukuthwala in Rural South Africa: Abduction Marriage as a Site of Negotiation about Gender, Rights and Generational Authority Among the Xhosa*, Rice explains the significance of older women in African society that reflects the similarities observed in ancient Greek culture. Rice explains: "While older men command the greatest authority, older women often command considerably more authority and respect than younger men. For instance, while older men are always fed first at events such as weddings and funerals, older women are fed before younger men. Young women are fed after the men, but

before children of either sex. Furthermore, at community meetings the vast majority of the talking is done by older men, but older women will often attend, and will sometimes voice their opinions. Young men, however, are very rarely given the opportunity to speak" (Rice, 2014: 386).

While this approach does not exactly correspond to ancient Greek practises, where rules applied differently more to class groups before gender groups, there are echoes of familiarity in the approach to society and societal function. Power is given to those with the wisdom to assert it correctly, and this is seen in both African cultures, as well as ancient Greek traditions as illustrated by the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*.

Despite the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* being a cornerstone of Western Literature, observations from the *Hymn* itself align more noticeably with cultures outside of the Western sphere. While the similarities between ancient Greek cultures and African traditional cultures discussed here are by no means exhaustive, they are ones that are significantly apparent. As more African scholarship is brought to the fore, the similarities between the two cultures become clear and demonstrate that despite the fact that these two cultures seem vastly different from a theoretical point of view, due to matters such as geographical location, historical eras, issues of race, and differing cultures, what remains palpable is the similarity between two groups of people with the same approach to the growth and preservation of community based society.

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