



## Gender Inequality: An Alien Practice to African Cultural Settlement

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the roots of gender inequalities in contemporary African lives. The study has surveyed the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial gender relations in the continent. The study points that during the pre-colonial era there was equilibrium in accessing privileges and chances between men and women, such equal balance was defined by division of labor and specialization. In the colonial phase, however, colonialists favored men and infused the concept of Victorian women in all colonial projects; subsequently, the patriarchal system started to have its hold on African lives. Consequently, the modern African communities have entered into an independence era while incorporating the colonial patriarchal structures into their modern communities. Surprisingly, researchers on the topic under discussion continuously find African cultures' guilt as they still offer patronage to such inequalities as it was in the pre-colonial epoch. Henceforth, its obliteration is essential in a long walk to gender equalities on the continent. On the contrary, this study points that labeling African culture as the enemy of gender equalities is a miss location of the problem source as the problem started from the colonial epoch and therefore these inequalities are the continuation of the legacies of patriarchy structures imposed in Africa by colonizers.

**Keywords:** African Culture, Colonial Africa, Contemporary Africa, Gender Inequalities, Pre-colonial Africa

### 1. Introduction

This study deals with the conceptions of gender inequalities in Africa and the position of African cultural traditions in holding such inequalities has a division of four major parts. The first part introduces the current debates on the question of gender inequalities, particularly in Africa. This part also carries two arguments of the study, which all suppose that the lenses that scholarly writings have offered on the current gender inequalities do not have any link with the pre-colonial African life was merely a misconception of the problem, which finally points a finger to African cultural traditions. The second part provides methodologies employed by the study in approaching the discussion of the subject under investigation. The third part exposes ideas that are dominant in literature in an attempt to find the root cause of gender inequalities in Africa. Preceded by the discussion part, where ideas obtained from literature and video interviews and Researchers' experience on the topic under inquiry are critically judged. Finally, the study offers conclusive remarks on the presentation of the paper.

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## 2. Background

We live in a world where human equality has become the order of the day. Various governments', international organs, and non-governmental organizations have been closely observing equilibrium in determining access to privileges and chances regardless of race, tribe, and gender bars among many others.

Among the prevailing discussions that received significant attention in scholarly writings is the question of gender issues in Africa. Voluminous writings argue that in Africa gender relations are worse as there are inequalities in access to economy, politics, and social changes between males and females (Anunobi, 2002; Atanga, 2013). This has been greatly associated with the presence and dominance of the patriarchal system attached to pre-colonial African cultural traditions, which oppressed and sidelined women from accessing privileges (Davison, 1988). Thus, the contemporary prevailing gender inequalities in Africa have evolved from such traditions, which still have deep roots in African day-to-day lives.

It is from such vacuum efforts from local to global levels have been taken to address the situation as a thrust to attain the desired free and democratic societies in the continent. The Feminists and international organs (Atanga, 2013) supported researches that identify all the vices of inequalities between males and females in Africa as a springboard to decimate the patriarchal systems in African lives.

This study however argues that the conception of gender inequalities in Africa regarding Africans past life traditions is a mere recent creation, which has no particular historical reality and existence in the continent. It is the view of this study that activists and researchers have misconceived pre-colonial African gender relations, which were structured in terms of specialization and division of labor that gender identities were important determining criteria in such a system. The placement of one gender into a certain specialization and labor was fair as nobody complained over the system during their lifetime. Therefore, applying the language of gender inequalities by tracing its genesis to the pre-colonial African lives is to use present connotations as understood in the modern world 'which has no exact meaning in addressing the past lives.

This study also argues that the attachment of the question of inequalities in the history of gender relations in Africa by tracing its root from African traditional lives is a conspiracy aiming at devastating African culture in the process of re-westernization.

### 3. Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach in its course of conduct. This is because the data collected were in the form of words, which carried opinions, feelings, and attitudes that reflect people's understanding of the phenomena and do not need any quantification to understand them. In this study, three methods were taken into use for data collection. First, the documentary review has been used to collect facts and identify debates prevailing in existing writings. Besides, recorded video interviews have informed this study with significant information on gender inequalities as understood by people. Alongside the two methods, the researcher's own experience has been of importance in offering data significant for the study. Being born into one of the rural families in Africa, the researcher experienced many issues informing about gender relations locally.

### 4. Results

The question of gender inequalities was early felt and discussed in academia in European communities before the rest of the globe (Butler, 2012). The main idea in the discussion was on the fact that males have been for a long time dominating all privileges and chances for human survival compared to females, thus disequilibrium in accessing opportunities between them (African Feminist Charter, 2006; Atanga, 2013). Female scholars opened the door by dressing social, political, economic, and cultural relations between men and women, which witnessed disparities veiled into the patriarchal system supported by capitalism in Europe (Butler, 2012). Supported by liberal ideas, the course of 20th century has been a significant landmark in the development of women's struggle for equal gender representation in all aspects of social lives. The struggle against the patriarchal system was famously identified as 'feminism' 60 (Robertson, 1986; Atanga, 2013). The universal declaration of human rights under the United Nations organization offered an impetus in intensifying the struggle, which then went at the global level (United Nations, 1949).

In Africa, Movements against patriarchal systems received attention in the late decades of 20th century with scholars such as Marjolie Mbilinyi Mama Amina, and Sylvia Tamale being frontline in the movement (Tamale, 2006). Various conferences were organized discussing how to improve women living conditions by confronting the webs of access shrouded in the patriarchal system (African Feminist Charter, 2006). Parallel to that, research publications addressing women's conditions have been important thrusts in the battle against gender inequalities in Africa (Tamale, 2006; Henry, 2018). The non-governmental and

international organizations have been vital agitators providing imperative data informing the globe on the context of gender issues in the continent (Meena, et al., 2018). However, the individual African governments made some efforts in devastating the problem as a means to attain the universal human rights agenda. In Job opportunities, political positions, social services access, and entrepreneurship women empowerment has become a sounding slogan for decimating inequalities (see Linda, 2014, p.30; Henry, 2018, p.7-8). Although (Meena, et al., 2018, p.1) purport that the pace to empower women is still low contrary to expectations as male dominance is still high.

Discussing at society level, literature has sensed the channels of gender inequalities. Most families belong to the patriarchal structure, which considers man as a symbol of unity, the head of the family, and the supreme judge in all family quarrels (Therborn, 2006, p.13; Henry, 2018, p.8). In Tanzania for example Linda (2014, p.30) submits that women are sidelined from families' decision making thus bringing dominance of men's ideas in family decisions. Addressing in a similar context (Nonjoge, 2018, p.2) shows that education on gender equality has at least risen in Tanzania as when the majority interviewed on gender relations to accessing land, education, and leadership they responded by calling for equilibrium between the gender. (Noyoo, 2010) adds to this discussion with a new lens by asserting that in contemporary African families the question of male dominance is unsound as these families have embraced a bilateral system from which inheritance of wealth, decisions, and even family names are determined by both women and men sides.

It has been the view of feminist and human rights agitators in Africa that the cultures of African communities are central bottlenecks toward demolishing gender inequalities in the continent (African Feminist Charter, 2006). Scholars have depicted male cultural dominance over females (Patricia, 2011). This has been possible by tracing its root from the historical trend of cultural practices in diverse African communities. According to (Stephen, 2010) females have been oppressed and marginalized ever since before the colonization of the continent. Women are traditionally the potent tools in household production but are less considered in possession of products from their labor (Akyempong, 2012, p.2). This has been attributed to the fact that in many African societies women have been a property that men can possess (Tamale, 2006). It is from these historical practices the present manifestations of gender inequalities trace their evolutions. Thus, feminist scholars opine that in the battle against gender inequalities there is need also to devastate cultural holds that are eyesores toward the struggle (Tamale, 2006). However, there is some literature portraying a sense of gender equalities rooted in African life practices of the past (Mihanjo, Mpuya, 1998; Akyeampong, Pashington, 1995).

In identifying the roles of males and females in pre-colonial Africa there has been equal performance in economic activities (Idang, 2015). For instance, when women were key players in agriculture production in many African societies, men were engines in herding and hunting activities; however, sometimes, men also engaged in agriculture production (Ilife, 1979, p.6). Similarly, when discussing the life traditions of the Kisi people in the southern rural Tanganyika Mihanjo and Mpuya (1998) asserts that when women were mundane in pot making which formed the base for the society's economy, men practiced fishing activities. Quarcoo and Johnso (1968) have used the same lens in studying the Shai people in southern Ghana where women were dominant in pot making and men were not allowed to involve in such activity. This was embedded by the claim that once one was involved in such activity he would lose his sexual potency thus women's supremacy continued in such activities while men were to do other activities including serving in militaries.

During the colonial period, colonialists elevated men over women in their projects. Various projects such as agriculture cultivation, mining, and construction activities used the male labor force to perform. Even armies' recruited males and excluded females. Consequently, the system appeared more patriarchal by nature (Fetter, 1979). The fact colonialism was a womb child of capitalism which feminist scholars have greatly shouted against in Europe, is equally associated to infuse and celebrate gender inequalities in African colonies (Akyempong, 2012, s.10). These colonial hangovers on gender relations manifest themselves in the modern era of globalization.

The question of globalization in African countries has been closely discussed about the dismantling of African traditional relations (Mikail, Abdullah, 2017, pp.13-14). The system is said to bring a new face of colonization where the weaker countries unconditionally respond to the social-cultural and economic structures of the powerful countries. The United States of America and European countries and China are highly mentioned to be the leaders in making the smooth running of global interconnectedness. According to (Glück, 2015.) globalization plays a vital role in enhancing cultural imperialism in the weaker countries. Therbon (2006) has put the concept in a proper context by asserting that globalization has a great position in understanding the current gender relations in Africa.

## **5. Discussion**

In discussing the question of gender inequalities across history in Africa, writings seem to position African men as an eyesore in the development of African women. Most of the conferences held and

research presented and published on the area of gender relations in Africa man has always been portrayed as the spring toward the existing inequalities. The image of the African woman as a key role player in the development of African societies has been wiped away by the patriarchal system that is historically part of African cultural traditions (Henry, 2018). This understanding is, however, placing the current African generation at a crossroad as when one traces the history of gender relations in Africa via the lens of African practices he cannot find out the said inequalities. Adeniyi when presenting African roots of gender equality has evidenced this when purporting that:

“... In 2012, I started a nonprofit organization called Africa’s promise youth leader club. In working with the youth, I found that gender equality was viewed as a foreign concept . . . . . It must be known that gender inequality that exists in Africa today is a continuation of the legacies of colonialism. I hope that African man joined African women in the fight against colonial ideas that still suppressing them. . .” (Adeniyi. African roots of gender equality TEDs Talks. Dec 18, 2017).

For the context he was discussing, Adeniyi gives insights that these discussions on gender equalities do not have a foothold in African ways of life. Thus, even the youth generations fail to define its origins in their localities but just treat it as an imposed foreign concept. Perplexing, African traditions have been considered a central focus that if destroyed there would be a chance to attain gender equalities. Perhaps the imperative point to interrogate is the gender relations in African cultural practices before colonial onset.

According to feminists and human rights activists, African cultural practices are the impetuses in the prevailing gender inequalities in Africa. The central argument for such a claim lies in the patronage that African culture offers to the dominance of patriarchal structures (African Feminist Forum, 2006). African women have been considered mundane in the economic production and prosperity of African communities since pre-colonial times (Kay, 1972). Thus far, the patriarchal system consistently smothered and unnoticed women’s roles in social existence. It is this conception, which created a continuous anathema against African cultural practices in thoughts of current African women in the continent associating the current woman’s social, political, economic, and cultural suffocates with the existence of African tradition. For this reason, the obliteration of African lifeways will pave a way for women’s success over the dominance of the patriarchal system in Africa. On the contrary, however, such conception becomes hardly hard to verify concerning African cultural traditions.

History informs us on how was African women valued in African communities before the advent

of colonialism. In political matters, for instance, the continent of Africa has memories of those women who had the trust and confidence of their communities to the extent of assuming leadership positions (Rodet, 2010; Meena, et al., 2017 ). Yaa ash ant, for example, managed to organize and lead her people in battles against British occupation in Ghana. Similarly, in Zimbabwe Niagasakana was an oracle leader who led her people to confront the British in the first Chama Ranga war. Correspondingly, the Bondei oral tradition informs us of the oracle of Mwakyuma who was a woman and the leader of the Bondei tribe, which is currently located in Muheza district Tanzania. When her tribe entered into a fight with their neighbor Digo tribe, Mwakyuma organized her armies and gave commands until they won the battle. Whilst, in the Shambaa Kingdom ‘who were the closest Bondei neighbor’ after the death of king Bughe there was a struggle for succession of the throne among the loyal descendants of Vugha and Kilindi. Where Bughe’s sister is mentioned to be the mediator that solved such a contest until Shekulwavu entered the throne. These few sampled insights among many others imply that pre-colonial women had an equal political position to that of men in the communities (see I’ajemmy, 1962; Feirman, 1974; Akyeampong, Pashington, 1995).

In economic spheres, African history recorded women waging their labor on diverse activities equally to men. Mihanjo in his study on the Kisi community found in southern Tanzania portrays that, women involved themselves in pottery making as a way to earn their daily bread. Equally, men were involved in fishing and hunting activities which all were potent for the economic performance of the Kisi people (Mihanjo, Mpuya, 1998). Herbert (1993, p.203) stretched further by telling the experience in Bunyoro and Buganda that women specialized in pottery working while fellow men engaged in ironworking. When interviewed with Kiss Tv about her lecture on the experience of African women and militarization in Africa, the feminist professor Mama Amina said that:

“... One of the key enabling factors in the survival of African people has been formerly hidden in the invisible eyes of labor of African women... .The secrets of Africa’s survival very much I think we can now locate in the network that women do ‘and have always done which has been essential to the survival of our societies...” (JSO interview with Mama Amina on Jun 28, 2013).

I think the point that the professor wanted to make here was to stress the role of the African woman as the crucial individual in the survival and development of African communities. Such roles that women played however have always not been exposed in the history of the development of the continent Africa. This is partly correct, as nobody will object to the role of women in the development of African communities

in the whole course of the history of the continent. Meanwhile, we could not have the courage to point fingers at women as the sole creature deserving such credits since even men engaged equally with women in production activities. This has been well-dressed by Ilife as cited in Patricia's Doctoral thesis that:

“... Social organization and roles of men and women varied. Division of labor provided context for differing roles between men and women in society. In pre-colonial, a woman is portrayed as completing mundane agricultural work while men spent time herding and hunting. Although there is evidence available on men's involvement in agriculture.” (Ilife, 1979, p.6).

I would like to draw a simple conclusion on the economic aspect of gender relations as experienced in pre-colonial times with an important note. That what are said to be inequalities in economic spheres as claimed by some researchers, feminists, and human rights activists seem to be nothing but just specialization and division of labor which were equal and fair. This situation was not experienced differently in social affairs.

At the social level, the pre-colonial societies in Africa were tied with a variety of practices that defined gender relations. Many interpretations offered on this aspect seem to elevate men over women in Africa (see for example Linda, 2014). Such elevation is conceived in many of the existing writings as the thrust for the contemporary women asphyxiates in the continent. The fact, that modern African women have lagged behind men in education, decision-making, and health services provision among many others has been explained in association with African cultural lifeways. According to Henry (2018, p.7) in Tanzania, the illiteracy level is 23% for females compared to 17% for males. This indicates that males are more educated than females in the country. Whilst, the father is considered the symbol of unity and the supreme judge in family matters and possesses all mandates in making decisions over the family. Subsequently, male children then inherit these privileges as they grow old (Henry, 2018, p.8). This reflects the current family situations not only in Tanzanian societies but also in many communities in Africa. To put things in context, however, Henry elaborates the cause for this situation when he asserts that:

“These privileges and attention offered to male children do not come for free. There is a price to pay in terms of reciprocity tendency embedded in this process because parents support from these male children at their younger age in exchange for emotional and material support from these male children when parents get older and retire from work. In rare cases, female



children also support their parents though not highly expected by parents and they are not blamed if they fail to do so” (Henry, 2018, p.8).

What Henry has put forward resembles what I and my relatives in my village at Kivindo in Muheza district Tanzania experienced to date. In my family, we were born two, I and my elder sister Asha. My sister started elementary school in 2002 at Kivindo primary school, which I was registered and joined in 2004. When we were back from school Asha was obliged to fetch water from Mkurumuzi River, which is about one and a half kilometers distance from our home, and cook for the family evening meal. I was obliged to milk cattle and go into bushes that normally did not cover the distance of more than one kilometer from home to collect a bundle of grasses to feed cattle. In 2011 we were all at secondary schools; however, my sister was a form three student at Kwabutu ward school in Lusanga whilst, I was joining Muheza Muslim Secondary which was one of the famous and better private schools in our district. The distance to both schools from our home is about nine kilometers.

Surprisingly, our father gave five thousand Tanzania shillings as weekly school pocket money to my sister which is about two United States Dollars and I received two thousand and five hundred Tanzania shillings which are about one United States Dollar for weekly school pocket money. Honestly, I felt envy and unfairness toward Asha’s pocket money as she received twice mine and I was not able to notice the reasons behind this. During annual and terminal holidays, it was only Asha who was given chances to travel and visit our relatives in Dar es Salaam, Tanga town, and Morogoro. While parents required me to stay home and assist them in farming and cattle caring. Unluckily, she did not perform well in her form four national examinations and finally I am the only family child who has reached university and pursued undergraduate and postgraduate studies under my parents support with the hope that I am obliged to offer financial support to both parents and Asha in the latter days.

What I have come to realize in my adulthood is that bringing up a male child in Africa is somewhat different from bringing up a female one. We believe that there are certain kinds of teachings that a female child needs to acquire contrary to males and vice versa. For instance, it is shameful according to our traditions for a man to stay in the kitchen and cook it is a female usually duty (See Nchimbi, 2009). In the same way that, Women do not go hunting as it is the duty of males. However, there is some knowledge equally acquired by both genders such as washing clothes, respect, and ethics of the society. Going to school was for both, although; families have high expectations for their male children than females. This is conceivable because when females marry their husbands they subscribe to their husbands’ clan but do not lose their chance of inheritance from their parents. This family system subscribes to what Noyoo

(2000) has referred to as the bilateral family system in Africa. Before the colonial onset, the question of marriage formed a very essential part of African gender relations which I think is proper now to widen its discussion.

In the Pre-colonial era, African cultural traditions on marriage varied according to the societies practiced. Economic production was an important aspect defining marriage systems in pre-colonial times. In communities where women were the main economic producers, polygamy was valued by men who were to pay a bride price for marriage but in areas, where men were the main economic producers women, were to pay a dowry for marriage (Akyempong, 2012, 7; Herbert, 1993). Audime (1987) adds that according to Igbo traditions if a woman is infertile, she can marry another woman to her husband. And If married, women have to have children with other men then these men would not have claim over the children since they belong to the women who have offered dowry to marry other women.

Equally, Mbonde (1973, p.24) in his study over the Makonde of southern Tanzania tells that, according to marriage traditions of such tribes after a man marrying a woman they all go to live near the wife's parents house. There a man is always responsible to care for his wife's parents by giving them food and cultivate a farm for them. Sometimes a man has to stop all his activities and go to perform what his mother or fathers-in-law have requested. For a man, it is pride managing to solve and fulfill the needs of his wife's parents. In that regard, a good husband is determined by his ability to perform his activities and those demanded by his wife's relatives. At the onset of colonialism in Africa, gender relations assumed another face quite different from pre-colonial times.

Colonialism destroyed the preexisted gender relations in Africa (Ginio, 2006). Colonialists imposed various new systems in economic political cultural and social structures, which were foreign to Africans (Karagoz, 2020). The fact that the central aim of colonial systems was to exploit Africans at the maximum level, made them seek for smartest alternates to achieve such a target. In this regard, they preferred much to incorporate men than women into social-economic and political projects. For instance, the construction of railways, barracks, administrators' houses, plantation farming, and mining activities needed manual labor that for colonialists' women were deemed unfit to carry do. It is, therefore, only men were highly drawn into colonial projects. This was also a reason for recruiting only men into colonial armies and only young boys were given priorities in school. Colonial systems excluded women from accessing colonial privileges and this is what staged long-standing gender inequalities in contemporary African societies (Akyeampong, 2012, p.15).

Colonialism was detrimental to gender equalities that existed in Africa prior to colonial inception.

It is known that colonialism was the womb child of capitalism, which in Africa was brought under the policy of imperialism. In Europe, capitalism was early noticed as a patriarchal system in totality due to its tendency of sidelining women to access privileges in all spheres of human existence and leaving free chances for men to enjoy the fruits of its operation. In Africa, Adenyi (2017) points that, colonialism brought the concept of Victorian women who should stay at home and leave real works performed by men. Subsequently, women have been deprived of the rights and privileges which African traditional systems offered them. In access to education, African boys were preferred to girls thus boys who were future men then became educated than girls. An impact of this was the absence of women in colonial administrative posts. It is from these relations that colonizers implanted into African lifeways the current gender inequalities have evolved.

The prominent feminist Mama Amina while responding to the question on the future of feminism and the struggle for women's rights in Africa asserts: "The future is bright we've got lots of work to do, but the ultimate future should be to render feminism and the struggles of women for freedom irrelevant" (JSO interview with Mama Amina on Jun 28, 2013). I think now these movements to make feminism and the struggle for women's rights irrelevant have to offer a keen eye in struggling against colonial hangovers which still waters the colonial germinated seed of patriarchal systems in African communities. The label that current researches on gender issues give over African culture as the source of the existing gender inequalities has no any realities. Patriarchal structures have been infused into African lives mainly during colonial domination. Globalization has now taken its cause in addressing gender subjects in Africa.

The concept of global interconnectedness has its way of obfuscating the understanding of the root cause of gender inequalities in Africa (Gluckman, 1963). The fact that the field of knowledge production is in large part dominated by western and American ideas has complicated the way toward understanding gender inequalities in its context. A spectacle that westerners have offered seems to stress the burden on African cultures consequently; researchers on the topic have been highly drawn to such conceptions (Glück, 2015). I guess this to be an outcome of a conspiracy to dismantle African culture and elevate western culture under the umbrella of imposing democracy and human rights, liberalism on the continent of Africa. These entities carry ideas to liberate women from the nails of traditional African patriarchal systems. Westerners have always placed funds in fostering research on gender issues that normally find African culture guilty of nurturing gender inequalities. Thus, I suspect Africans to have continued with it unconsciously which is why it becomes hard for them to identify the definite sinister for gender equalities in their continent.

## 6. Conclusion and recommendations

This article has discussed the prevailing notion of gender inequalities in Africa as an outcome of the existing patriarchal systems mantled into African cultural traditions. This article has found that the so-called gender inequalities between males and females do exist in the continent at the contemporary time. However, in attempts to find out its roots, researchers have wrongly accused African culture of being the patron of patriarchal structures. The article has also discussed that what we call inequalities at present was nothing but the division of labor and specialization between males and females. There is no pre-colonial record of women complaining of social, political, cultural, or economic oppression and exploitation done by men. Perhaps, the problem comes when we use our understanding of the contemporary world and assume that the past was in the same way as it is today. This is likely to be an outcome of what historians have referred to as presentism in research of the past.

This article also has witnessed that colonialism is the total syndrome from which the current gender inequalities have evolved. The fact that colonizers came from the continent with deep patriarchal systems then it was infused into African colonies via various colonial projects. Gender relations in modern Africa are the hangovers inherited from the implanted seed of excluding women from social-political cultural and economic structures. However, in the battle to dismantle these inequalities globalization and the process of westernization have been noted as great menaces that have offered feminists, researchers, and human rights agitators a contrary lens in viewing the problem from its proper context. In that regard, the argument in this paper that gender inequality is merely a recent creation, which has no root in the African lifestyle seems to be correct. Likewise, an argument that the attachment of the question of inequalities in the history of gender relations in Africa by tracing its root to African traditional lives is a conspiracy aiming at devastating African culture in the process of westernization seems to be relevant in dressing the demands of this study.

### Kaynaklar

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**Author(s) Contributions:** The article has a single author.

**Conflict of Interest Disclosure:** No potential conflict of interest was declared by the author.

**Supporting/Supporting Organizations:**No grants were received from any public, private or non-profit organizations for this research.

**Ethical Approval and Participant Consent:** Scientific, ethical and citation rules were followed during the writing process of the study titled “Gender Inequality: An Alien Practice to African Cultural Settlement”; No falsification has been made on the collected data, and the ”Universal Journal of History and Culture” has no responsibility for all ethical violations that may be encountered, and all responsibility belongs to the authors.