

WOMEN IN YORUBA RELIGION AND CULTURE

Prof. Ikechukwu Anthony, KANU (OSA)

*Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies
Tansian University, Umunya
Anambra State
ikee_mario@yahoo.com*

&

Immaculata Olu, OMOJOLA, (SSMA), Ph.D

*Department of Business Administration and Management
Villanova Polytechnic
Imesi Ile
Osun State
omojolassma@yahoo.co.uk*

&

Mike Boni BAZZA, Ph.D

*Department of History and International Relations
Veritas University Abuja (The Catholic University of Nigeria)
danbazza68@gmail.com*

Abstract

This paper discusses the place of women in Yoruba Culture and Religion. It first established the fact that Yoruba culture and religion are strictly related. While culture expresses religion, religion is part and parcel of Yoruba culture, and these two elements occupy a valuable place in the life of the Yoruba. It observed that the Yoruba value motherhood even as polygamy was common, targeted at having more children, specifically, male children because of inheritance. The women were indispensable partners of the men folk; it was the women that managed the home and made Yoruba valued festivities a huge success. They were not just partners in relation to the men, they assumed leadership offices like the Iya Laje. This paper also discovered that women were the sustaining force of Yoruba Religion. Women did not only participate but played leadership roles, especially as concerns rituals. In several cults for instance, women were priestesses like, Ìyá Ọ̀ṣun, Ìyá Ọ̀gún, and Ìyá Sàngó. They were also readily accessible to feed the gods and take care of

shrines. This paper discovered that women were not only well involved in the Yoruba life, culture and religion, they were indispensable. For the purpose of this study, the phenomenological method of inquiry would be employed.

Key words: Women, Yoruba, Religion, Culture, Motherhood, Iya Laje, Priestesses

Introduction

This paper discusses Women in Yoruba Culture and Religion especially in the precolonial period. Yoruba people according to Atanda (1989) constitute one of the major ethnic groups in modern Nigeria and they effectively occupy the whole of Ogun, Ondo, Oyo and Lagos State and a substantial part of Kwara State. A considerable number of Yoruba people also inhabit the South- Eastern part of Republic of Benin (formal Dahomey). As a group, they have distinguished themselves in their belief and traditions. The Yoruba deities are called Orishas and the oral traditions have it that they have more than 420 Deities that are worshiped differently without clashes with rituals, music, dances, and prediction practices from their priests and priestesses. Yorubas believe that when they die, they go to the realm of ancestors where they can still have influence on events taking place on earth. They believe in re-incarnation. Hence there is a link between the living and the dead. God Almighty to them is called Olórun.

Most of the Yoruba people take part in farm work. The men grow foods such as corn, yams, cocoyams, nuts, and cocoa. Men are also often traders and craftsmen as well. Women do less work on the farms, but are important traders as they market their husbands' farm produce. Their rank traditionally depends on that of their husbands. Therefore wives of kings, chiefs and Ifa priests were honoured more than those that were married to ordinary members of the community. Some of Yoruba values are respect for elders- growing up has benefits. They also value honesty, collective community development, cultural observes reflecting in their interaction with others- mode of dressing and diets. They also value humility and perseverance. And more importantly, they value communal life. All these are inculcated in their informal training originally called home training.

Akíntúndé and Fálọlá (2016) summarize Yoruba values as follows: "Good virtues can also be learned through proverbs (òwe), Ifá corpus (odù), and some mythical stories and parables. Generosity, hospitality, and kindness are interconnected and closely related. The Yorùbá expect that a person who possesses a virtuous moral character,

such as kindness, ought to be generous and hospitable. All virtues are intrinsically connected with and relevant to individual and communal peace. When these qualities are in abundance, the Yorùbá consider the society to have abundant life.”

Yoruba culture and religion are closely related. While culture expresses religion, religion itself is part and parcel of Yoruba culture. This is simply their ways of life as well as their belief. Any effort to separate culture and religion among the Yoruba will surely be ineffective. According to Olajubu (2008), “the traditional cultural and religious practices of the Yoruba people are closely intertwined. In traditional Yoruba religion, women are its majority membership and sustaining force. Consequently, women play leadership roles in Yoruba religion, especially as concerns rituals.” The researcher witnessed in some villages in Yoruba land, while women would carry sacrifices in afternoon to ensure safety in the environment. At times, they may be two or three women doing this at the same time with total enthusiasm and seriousness.

Yoruba believe that women apart from being complementary, they are representation of peace and harmony. Hence the common wish and prayer at the beginning of a New Year “*òdún á ya’bo fún wa o*” (This year will bring us all that the female principle stands for). This prayer is a representation of the people’s conception of female (*abo*) and male (*akọ*). A “female year” in this context is a blissful and pleasurable year. Since Yoruba belief that symbols of calmness and peace (*ẹ̀rọ̀*) represent female principles, whereas toughness represents male principles.

Another important fact about Yoruba women down the ages is their trust in motherhood. Motherhood is cherished beyond any other thing. Despite the fact that polygamy was common in the indigenous Yoruba culture, having children was as good as living or being alive. To this, Ilesanmi (2013) opines that “among the Yoruba people, motherhood transcends biological readiness” Akíntúndé and Fálọ́lá (2016) explain this concept better in these words “a woman must bear children; motherhood is highly valued by the Yorùbá people. A proverb states *ọ̀lọ̀mọ̀ ló l’ọ̀kọ̀* (the one who bears children is the owner of the husband).” Many a time they say *olomo lo l’aye* (the one who bears children owns the world). Therefore, you have names like *Omojola* (A child is greater than wealth), *O moyajowo* (A child is preferred to wealth), *Omoleye* (Children are honorable), *Omolabake* (A child is to be pampered), *Omobanji* (A child awoke with me), *Omolade* (A child is a crown), *Omoniosinmi* (A child will bury me), *Omolere* (A child is a reward), *Omolaso* (A child covers nakedness), *Omolara* (A child is family), *Omolayo* (A child is joy) in Yoruba culture to drive home the fact that children are better than any other thing in life. A mother then

will stay in her marriage through tick and tin because children are involved and many a time it becomes the only reason why they have to persevere. In the midst of chaos, they remove their children first and any other thing can perish.

Akíntúndé and Fálọlá conclude by saying that “a barren woman does everything humanly even spiritually possible to have a child, which may result in the children of cowives becoming possible targets of attack from a barren woman or other enemies.” As they struggle to become mothers, the desire to have male children is another important issue. Male children are highly valued than female children because of inheritance as Ilesanmi (2013) consents therefore, “the heir receives much honour but a female child cannot be a heir in Yoruba land.” Along with this struggle, they still participate actively in the affairs of the society and in religion by taking leadership positions by becoming regents, priestesses and even Deities.

Women in Yoruba Culture and Religion

Women in Yoruba Culture: The culture of Yoruba people reflects in their trades and professions, music, dressing, choices of meals or diets, celebration of the living and the dead, togetherness, arts and festivals, folktales, proverbs, myths and symbols. This culture is also their religion and Idowu (1966) asserts to this by saying that “the religion of the Yoruba permeates their lives so much that it expresses itself in multifarious ways. It forms the themes of songs, makes topics for minstrelsy, finds vehicles in myths, folktales, proverbs and sayings, and is the basis of philosophy.”

Yoruba women were always available to take care of their homes and children even the extended families. They were useful domestically, such as catering, tailoring, and housekeeping. They were helping their husbands in farm work as very popular in the traditional Yoruba culture. They always break into age groups for support and encouragements through regular meetings and connections. Akíntúndé and Fálọlá (2016) in their contributions are of the opinion that the precolonial Yorùbá woman’s active participation in economic activities allowed for accumulation of wealth, through which she accessed sociopolitical space. Prominent examples of women who achieved socio-economic power and subsequently wielded great political influence in their societies and environs include Ẹfúnṣetán Aníwúrà, the Ìyálóde (woman leader) of Ìbàdàn and Mògàjí of her lineage, and Madam Ẹfúnróyè Tinúbú, the first Ìyálóde of Ègbáland. Other women became adelé ọba (regents) to fill leadership vacuums in their communities, and some became the ọba of their communities, such as in old Oṅdó kingdom.

In the culture, Yoruba women were part and parcel of war even though men were always at the war front. Ilesanmi (2013) asserts that, “while men rely on brute force and medicinal power in fighting wars, women rely on psychological and the cult knowledge which are by far superior to those of brute force and medicinal aid.” They have a particular role to play in all the events of the traditional life be it related to peace or to war. In the mind of Ilesanmi (2013) as well, “women most of the time were responsible for the happenings of the environment as he identifies them as a group that “can cause war, act as instrument of war, act in avoidance of war and their role in the formulation of peace treaty.” A good example is the story of Moremi, who sacrificed her son Oluorogbo to a goddess for her people to have peace.

Women in Yoruba Religion: Yoruba people stand out in their religious practices. They believe in God and in other gods that are closer to them and they carve images of them in their shrines. In relation to this, Johnson (1921) affirms that “Yoruba people believe in the existence of the ALMIGHTY GOD, him they term *Olorun*- Lord of heaven. They acknowledge Him, maker of heaven and earth, but too exalted to concern Himself with men and their affairs, hence they admit the existence of other gods as intermediaries and these they term *Orisas*.” He went further to explain Yoruba belief by adding that they also believe in the future state, therefore the worship of the dead, and invocation of the spirits and in the “doctrine of metempsychosis, transmigration of souls, hence they affirm that after a period of time, deceased parents are born again into the family of their surviving children.” Women are the majority when it comes to practicing traditional religion. However, Idowu (1966) is of the opinion that Yoruba people are “religious in all things.” He states further that “Religion forms the foundation and all-governing principle of life for them. ...the full responsibility of all the affairs belongs to the Deity...through all its changing scenes, its joys and troubles; it is the Deity who is in control” Women were very much ensnared into this religious practices that apart from the time of worship, they make their religious practices part of their daily activities. Idowu (1966) opines that “usually, women are more religious ones who are more frequently caught in this practice by wayside shrines, sacred trees, sacred brooks, at cross-roads, or at any other places marked with some sacred signs, asking for a blessing on their journey, their work, their wares, their family or their private undertakings”.

As we pay attention to the role of women in Yoruba culture, some of them became Deities with specific responsibilities like their male counterparts like: Ajé - orisha of wealth, Ayao - orisha of air, Yewa - orisha of the river Yewa. Of the maternity and of the children, Nàná

Bùkùú - orisha of the river and of the earth, Ọbà - first wife of Ẓàngó and orisha of domesticity and marriage, Ọtìn - orisha of river, she is hunter and wife of Erinlẹ, Olókun - orisha of the seas, Ọṣun - orisha who presides over love, intimacy, beauty, wealth, diplomacy and of the Ọṣun river, Ọya - orisha of the Niger River; associated with wind, lightning, fertility, fire, and magic, Yemoja - a mother goddess; patron deity of women and of the Ogun river and finally Yemowo - wife of Ọbàtálá and of the water.

Each òrìṣà has its shrine and favorite sacrificial offerings, and its followers observe a distinctive set of food taboos. Women were readily available at these shrines to feed the gods and clean the shrines. They equally make provisions for food during festivities. To their followers, the òrìṣà bring the benefits of health, wealth, and children, but they punish negligence, offences, and the breaking of taboos. Various worshippers enjoy the support of the ruler (ọba) and some of the worshippers visit the palace to greet him and impart on him the blessings of the òrìṣà on their feast days.

In line with this, Akíntúndé and Fálọlá (2016) arrive at a beautiful description on the role of women in Yoruba religion. "Women play key roles in religious ceremonies as priestesses and prophetesses. Some important deities are female. For instance, several cults, including Ọṣun, Ọgún, and Ẓàngó, have women priestesses who are known as Ìyá Ọṣun, Ìyá Ọgún, and Ìyá Ẓàngó, respectively." They went further to explain that Yorùbá women in precolonial period were admitted into sacred knowledge (awo). As initiates, such women could participate as leaders in high religious ritual practices from which uninitiated men and women were excluded. The admission of women into sacred knowledge translated into religious powers for those women. They went on to serve as diviners (Ìyánífá).

Yoruba women have mystical powers as they appear weak physically; some of them have more than they carry outside. "Yoruba people also believe that some women have extrasensory, celestial powers. Some of these powers are intended for destruction, and these women are referred to as ìyá ayé (women of the world). Women were often regarded as atúnnidá, or women who have the ability to affect one's destiny and possibly change such an individual. Akíntúndé and Fálọlá (2016)

They were the brains behind most of the happenings in cults. Ilesanmi (2013) says emphatically that "there is no Yoruba native cult without women as its backbone" and always women were deprived to see or witness these happenings hence the saying; *Obinrin o kii wo oro* which means that women must not witness the happening within the cults. And to this, Ilesanmi says, "It is women who ban other women from seeing

the cults.” Apart from women this, “the most powerful women’s cult is witches cult” Ilesanmi (2013). He explained further that men fear them most because they decide who should be king and put a mark on him from birth. Also, women cults controls men as vanguards; they can make men suffer indescribable pains and yet pretend that they knew nothing about the genesis of the suffering and they give full support to the one they love.

Conclusion

The participation of women in Yoruba culture and Religion are not prominent today like in the traditional culture. Colonization and civilization has really influenced these practices. Today, Christianity and Islamic religions are becoming popular and women are not taking active participation in them. It appears to be men religion. For example, women are no longer participating in rituals; they are not even recognized in worship. Although in some cases they still take care of the places of worship as cleaners but not as prophetesses and priestesses except in some white garment churches. Women are still the majority in places of worship, at Prayer Mountains and attending vigils, asking for blessings on their journey, their work, their business, their family or their private happenings. Nonetheless, they are in the minority in the political and economic structures of the society. Yoruba women today struggle alone in this individualistic society. Thanks to colonial masters who brought civilization in its positive parts but this has really destroyed Yoruba values and women participation in their culture and Religion.

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