

MOTHERHOOD AS A SOURCE OF EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN YORUBA CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

The paper looks into Yoruba culture with emphasis on motherhood and how it empowers women in Yorubaland. It also looks at other areas of Yoruba perception of women and how these different perceptions empower women in Yoruba culture. It tries to find ways by which consideration of Yoruba culture as regards women can contribute to the improvement of life for women generally.

In order to achieve this objective, the paper looks at the various ways by which Yoruba culture views women – as priestesses, as wives, as daughters, as witches, and, most especially, as mothers. Both the positive and the negative aspects of the culture are discussed. The paper comes up with suggestions on how the conception of motherhood in Yoruba culture can enhance the considerations given to women at the policy formulation stage.

Keywords: motherhood, culture, empowerment

The Yoruba people live mainly in the southwestern part of Nigeria occupying virtually all of the area formerly known as Western Region. They are also found in some parts of Kwara, Benue, and the Delta. The language is Yoruba with many dialects – Ijebu, Ijesa, Ondo, Oyo, and Ekiti, among others. Yoruba people are found in other countries along the coast of West Africa such as the Republic of Benin, and are also found in Brazil and in Cuba (Lawal 1996)¹. Most important is that the Yoruba people are rich in culture. My discussion will focus on the various ways in which women are perceived in Yoruba culture, with emphasis on motherhood, and the possibility of giving consideration to the Yoruba concept of motherhood in the process of formulation and implementation of policies especially with regard to women.

Culture, as defined by Geertz cited in Shapiro (1984), is “whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members.” Adefuye (1992: 1) defines culture as:

The sum total of a people’s way of life consisting of values, beliefs and perceptions of the world that underlie a people’s behavior and which are shared by members of a particular society and it contributes to the way

¹ References are made to Yoruba in Brazil and Cuba by Lawal (1996, pp. xiv and 71) with regard to Gelede spectacle, a performance by some Communities in Nigeria to appease the witches usually referred to as “Iya Nla”.

they perceive themselves as well as others. It is that aspect of our existence that makes us similar to some people, yet different from other peoples of the world.

Every society has a culture that is unique and such culture contains the norms and values of the people that are different from those of other peoples. The people, therefore, see things differently from those from another culture. Culture is reflected through language, song, works of art, etc. In other words, the culture of a people affects their actions and/or reactions to situations.

A woman in Yoruba culture occupies various positions – a mother, a wife, a daughter, a priestess, or even a witch. The way she is perceived depends on the position she occupies, and the different perceptions are reflected through songs, works of art, music, language, and religion. The highest value is given to woman as a mother because Yoruba people revere motherhood. A popular proverb among the Yoruba presents motherhood as very precious:

Iya ni wura
Baba ni dingi

Meaning: Mother is gold
Father is a mirror

Even in songs, mother is rated as precious gold:

Iya ni wura iyebiye
Ti a ko le f'owora
O l'oyun mi f'osu mesan
O pon mi f'odun meta
Iya ni wura iyebiye
Ti a ko le f'owora

Mother is a precious gold
That cannot be purchased with money
She carried me in her womb for nine months
She nursed me for three years
Mother is a precious gold
That cannot be purchased with money.

The way mother is revered in the culture makes most women look forward to motherhood as she is even deified thus:

Orisa bi iya ko si
Iya la ba ma a bo

There is no deity like mother
It is the mother that is worthy of being worshipped

Motherhood is considered to be very important in Yoruba culture because the preservation of humanity depends on the role of mothers in the society (Lawal 1996). Writing on the *Gelede* Society among some communities in Yorubaland, Lawal explains that *Gelede* is a form of advocating respect for motherhood as well as using the performance to entertain the general public and, in the process, sensitize the public to the virtues of social living and good citizenship. The *Gelede* spectacle is a means of educating, amusing, and inspiring worship all at the same time. At this ceremony, colorful masks are displayed in addition to arts and ritual dance. “The *Gelede*² society also endeavours to maintain good gender relations by advocating respect for motherhood within a patrilineal culture, such as that of the Yoruba, where men dominate the institution of kingship” (Lawal 1996: xiv). The *Gelede*’s costume includes big breasts reflecting motherhood. Interestingly, however, the wearers of the *Gelede* masks with the big breasts and big buttocks are always men. The explanation given for this was that since the performance is in honor of women, it will be inappropriate for women to wear the masks as that may be interpreted to mean that the women are the ones honoring themselves (Lawal 1996: 78)³ Yemoja is one of the goddesses in whose honor *Gelede* is performed. Yemoja or “yeye omo eja” (mother of fishes) symbolizes motherhood and is eulogized as:

Iya oloyan oruba
Onirun abe osiki
A b’obo fun ni l’orun bi egbe isu

The pot-breasted mother
With much hair on her private part
The owner of a vagina that suffocates like dry yam in the throat.

The eulogy brings to mind the two most important parts in the process of becoming a mother – the breasts and the vagina. The heavy breast is assumed to contain an inexhaustible flow of milk for her children. Because Yemoja is also referred to as “the generous and the dangerous mother” (Lawal 1996: 73), the suffocating vagina may be the source of the power of life and death. Despite the encomiums poured on mother, however, a wife is not so revered.

In most of Yoruba culture, a wife is referred to as “*eru*” (slave) and yet it is still the ambition of almost every girl to be married, because through marriage she can become a proud mother. I used the word ‘proud’ to qualify ‘mother’ because of the society’s negative attitude towards having children out of

² For more on description of *Gelede* society, see Lawal, Babatunde, *The Gelede Spectacle: Art, Gender, and Social Harmony in an African Culture*, pp. xiv–xv.

³ Other reasons given include the strenuous exercise associated with the *Gelede* dance. It is also believed that masking, because of its male association, can metaphysically interfere with the innate reproductive powers of a woman (Lawal: 78–79).

wedlock. By becoming a mother, a woman is promoted to the esteemed position in which she can be referred to as a precious stone. Therefore, it is a tragedy for a Yoruba woman not to have a child, and this is reflected in songs:

Omo l'okun, omo n'ide
Enia t'o wa saye ti ko bimo
Aye asan lo wa

A child is a coral bead; a child is silver
A person who has none
Has not lived a fulfilled life

A child is described as *Okun* (beads). These are a type of traditional necklace worn by *Obas* (kings) and *Ijoye* (chiefs); wearing of '*okun*' is a symbol of royalty and authority. Using a royal symbol to describe a child, therefore, may be interpreted to mean that a child confers on his/her mother the power to exercise authority in her husband's home. The importance attached to motherhood thus reduced the negative effect of being referred to as an '*eru*' (slave) on the psyche of women.

To be an '*eru*' connotes subordination of the woman to the man. It presupposes that a wife is a property to be owned and used as the owner wishes. No wonder, the accumulation of wives in many Yoruba communities brought power, prestige and more wealth. Curiously enough, some women are not bothered about reference to them as '*eru*,' and they even pray that they will be '*eru*' for a long time, i.e. that they will not be rejected as wives. To them, it means staying married till the end of life. The alternative, of course is to get out of the marriage to remarry or remain single. The former is more popular because of the social stigma attached to being a single woman. The implication of this attitude is that they are prepared to remain married at all costs. Their attitude may not be unconnected with the Yoruba adage which says that "*tita, riro ni a nkola, ti o ba jina tan, o di ohun oso*" meaning "after pain comes pleasure." Women also ignore the slavery attached to wifedom because they know that the authority that they lack as a wife, they possess both as a daughter and as a mother. As a daughter, she has wives, that is, women who are married into her own family – both her patrilineal and matrilineal sides – over which she exercises a form of authority. And as a mother she can exercise authority over her daughters-in-law. Even where she has all female children, she will be highly respected by her sons-in-law and their families because it is the custom of the Yoruba to give due respect to parents of one's wife. There is the Yoruba saying which says:

Eni ti o fun ni l'omo ti pari oore

Meaning: He/She who gives one his or her child to be one's wife
has given the best gift.

Even the mother of a male child believes that a successful life cannot really start until her son has a wife or wives. The importance of this belief is brought out vividly from the 'ese' (verse) from *Osetura* in *Ifa* literature where it says:

Aini obirin ko se e dake lasan
Bi a dake lasan, enu ni i yo ni
Nini ejo, aini oran
Enia ko l'obirin
O to ko kawo l'ori sokun gba oja lo
Ki i se oran aseju
Oran asesa ko

Having no wife calls for positive action
To keep quiet is to invite trouble and inconveniences
Having a wife is as difficult as having none
One without a wife
Should cry and weep publicly in the market place
It is neither an extreme action
Nor an over-reaction

(Ogunbowale 1966: 1)

But why are wives so valued, one may ask? Judging from the level of importance attached to motherhood, wives are valued for the purpose of procreation. They also provide helping hands on the farm while the children they produce also work on the farms. They are, therefore, also valued as factors of economic production.

The third line of the above verse (having a wife is as difficult as having none) is rather contradictory. The fear of having a wife as expressed in the verse under reference may not be unconnected with the fact that women of any age are seen as potential witches (Abiodun 1989: 7) who can use their witchcraft to deal with their husbands positively or negatively, as will be discussed below. The monthly bleeding of women also is seen as a source of special power to women, and it is believed that a menstruating woman can render any traditional medicine impotent.⁴ Women are therefore barred from many rituals and rooms where powerful traditional medicines are kept.

A woman as a child has double value. The Yoruba culture considers lucky a couple who has a girl as their first child because of the belief that they will

⁴ This belief is very strong among traditional healers (adahunse and onisegun) in Yorubaland. For instance, my discussion with Prof M. A. Makinde, a philosopher, confirms this belief. His father Pa D.K. Makinde, a notable traditional healer in Ekiti, used to warn him about this matter. Prof. Makinde's discussions with his father on traditional medicine culminated in a project supported by the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) and the Fulbright Programme in the 1983/84 academic session at the Ohio University, Athens, Ohio, U.S.A. This project led to his publication of a book titled *African Philosophy, Culture and Traditional Medicine*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 1988.

experience ‘*owo ero*’ (the hand of appropriation) “which ensures ease and success in any undertaking” (Abiodun 1989: 7). Looking at it also from the point of view of what she will likely become after marriage – a mother, a precious stone – there is no doubt that she will be doubly valued. My experience also has shown that although male children are still valued among Yoruba because they carry on the family name and because they increase the family by bringing in women from other families as wives to become a part of their own family, more people are now beginning to say openly that they would prefer to have more daughters than sons. My father expressed this wish before he died. This might not be unconnected with the fact that, contrary to the old belief that only the men could achieve certain positions, women have successfully excelled in what used to be male-dominated professions. They are now found in the fields of medicine, engineering, academics, law and business. And, in spite of their busy schedules, most of them still find the time to nurture their parents. The nurturing attitude, I would attribute to the type of socialization given to female children in the society. As a result of the tender nature of a large number of daughters and the care they show for their parents in old age, a quality which most sons lack, parents with daughters are more confident of getting adequate care and attention when they become old.

The above thus raises a fundamental question as to why daughters are valued. Are they valued because of their usefulness to parents in their old age? Or, are they valued because they will bring in-laws and wealth to boost the image of the father?

In African religions, a woman holds important positions. She is a priestess, and, in some cases, a deity. A priestess possesses ritual powers, and she mediates between the spirit world and the people of the community. The ritual power of women and female priesthood has always been an important aspect of Yoruba society. In the *Ogboni* or *Osugbo* cult, for example, the position of the *Erelu* is very important, and there is a saying that “*bi ko si Erelu, Osugbo ko le da awo se*” (without the *Erelu*, the *Osugbo* cult cannot perform its rituals). Apart from priestesses, deities exist that are symbolized by women. *Osun*, for example, is a female deity. Others include *Oya*, *Olokun*, *Ogbese*, *Yemoja* and, *Iyamapo*, among others. All these deities are associated with water, in one way or another.⁵ Water in Yoruba culture depicts indispensability because, apart from its normal usage, it is an active ingredient in the Yoruba preparation of *ero* (a softening agent/medicinal preparation). A Yoruba adage says:

⁵ All the deities mentioned above are directly connected with water. *Iyamapo*, however, refers to the water from the vagina, a part which is considered as the place harboring the secret of a woman’s power. The child who exalts the woman to the supreme status of ‘precious stone’ emerges from the vagina.

OMI L'A BU WE

Omi l'a bu mu
Enikan ki i b'omi s'ota.

WE USE WATER TO BATHE

We drink water
No one quarrels with water

Also: *Bi ina ba njo*
Omi ni yio pa'na

If there is a fire burning
It is water that will quench it

As these illustrate, the power of these deities is unquantifiable because water is the source of life and, therefore, a necessity. Looking at it from another angle, a woman is a necessity for procreation, i.e., a woman is a source of life just like water. In order to bring out the values attached to women's cooperation in all endeavors Abiodun quotes Verger.

O ni gbogbo ohun ti enia ba n se
Ti ko ba fi ti obinrin kun un
O ni ko le seese...
O ni ki won o maa fi iba fun obinrin
O ni ti won ba ti fi iba fun obinrin
Ile aye yio maa toro

(Verger 1965: 218)

In anything we do,
If we do not guarantee the place of women
That thing will not succeed
He said, 'we should acknowledge the power of women
He said, 'if we acknowledge their power,
The world will be peaceful

Just as water is useful and necessary, however, sometimes it can be dangerous. It can cause flooding, which can wash off properties and people, just as a woman can be a blessing or a curse to her husband or to her community. This is reflected in Ogunbowale's verse mentioned earlier. In effect, womanhood is full of complexity and contradictions. In one breath, she is a precious stone and, in another, she is an 'eru' (slave). She is good and, at the same time, evil! She is a priestess and a deity; she is also a witch, known as *Iya Mi Osorongwa*.

Witches are women who are presumed to possess supernatural powers that can be used positively or negatively. It is believed that the consequence of ignoring them can be very grave:

*Won difa fun Iyami Osorongu
Ti won n tikole orun bo was sile aye...
Won leni ti ko ba fi t'awon se
Awon a maa baa je
Awon o maa ko ifun enia;
Awon o maa je oju enia
Awon o maa mu eje enia
Won o si ni gbohun enikookan*

(Verger 1965: 218)

It was divined for Iyami Osorongu
Who were coming from heaven to earth
They said whoever refused to acknowledge them,
They will afflict him
They will take his intestines
They will eat his eyes
They will drink his blood
And no one will hear a sound.

Yoruba culture recognizes these powers, which are seen as God-given. The recognition given to these powers is also expressed in a Yoruba mythology where Osun (the goddess of the river) was said to have possessed such powers, which she employed to deal with the 16 male 'Odu'⁶ whom God sent to the world along with her. According to this myth, all of the 16 male "odu" ignored her and thought that she was insignificant. They did not know that *Osun* was a witch and that God had chosen her as the guardian of all the good things sent along with them:

They never knew she was a witch
When they were coming from heaven
God chose all good things
He also chose their keeper
And this was a woman

(Abiodun 1989: 5)

Translation to Yoruba:

*Won ko mo wipe aje ni
Ni igba ti won nbo lati ajule orun*

⁶ 'Odu' refers to the messengers of *Olodumare* in Yoruba mythology. For more on Ifa divination on Osun and the rest of the Odu, see Abiodun, "Woman in Yoruba Religious Images" in *African Languages and Cultures* 2(1), 1989: pp. 3-7.

Olodumare yan gbogbo ohun to o dara
O si yan oluso
Eyi si je obirin

Rather than complain about their negative attitude toward her, she kept quiet and used her witchcraft to ensure that all their efforts to succeed in their mission on earth failed. Referring to *Osun* as “their keeper” suggests an important role for women: that of being the guardian of the society.

Different Yoruba sculpture also pay special attention to woman’s image especially as a mother. To quote Abiodun (p. 15) “if children are considered so desirable and beautiful, then it is understandable that the woman through whom the child comes into the world must be so highly regarded.” Therefore, powerful aesthetic and ritual significance has been given to those female organs that are contributory to motherhood. The organs to which prominence is given are the vagina, referred to sometimes as ‘*ona orun*’, ‘path from heaven’, ‘*omu*’, ‘breasts’ through which a child is fed at infancy, and the ‘*ikunle abiyamo*’⁷, ‘the kneeling with pain at childbirth.’

With the acknowledgement of the uniqueness of women as mothers in Yoruba culture, it may not be out of place to suggest that due consideration should be given to the Yoruba concept of motherhood especially when policies are being formulated. Although the status of women in Yoruba culture is complex due to some contradictions, it does not render all the contents of the culture ‘unusable’ in formulating policies that will enhance the status of women generally. The issue of motherhood is central to Yoruba culture. Motherhood is also attached to wifedom. The contradiction in the perception as a mother (positive) and as a wife (negative) can be resolved through positive socialization of the society.

Culture has a way of reflecting in the lives of the people as has been shown earlier. Therefore, some of the aspects of the Yoruba culture as it affects women may become handy in the process of policy formulation, especially in Nigeria. Our earlier discussion has shown the importance that the Yoruba attach to motherhood. In view of this attached importance, it is suggested that policy makers should find it adequate to make provision for day care centers for nursing working mothers near their working places. In addition, there is need for flexible working hours for nursing mothers. Such a step will enable women to contribute successfully to the development of their communities. Since the duty of a wife is also cherished as shown by Ogunbowale (1966), efforts should be made at improving technology to ease the chores of housewives, especially the working ones.

⁷ ‘*Ikunle abiyamo*’ refers to the position that a woman in child labour assumes when the baby is about to come. This is in a traditional maternity home. It also refers to a genuflection, a way whereby women are chosen to appease the gods. It is believed that whatever they ask from the gods in this position will be granted to them.

To be empowered, women need to attain political power. For this, they need to gain access to a good education and good professions, among other things. Since it has been revealed that women, as shown in the Yoruba myth on the 16 *Odu* sent to earth by God, have been made the guardian of the society (Abiodun 1989: 5), policies that would favor their being given political appointments should be formulated. And, where such a policy is in place, it must be properly implemented. A good example is the Affirmative Action that was agreed to at the Beijing Conference, which needs to be effectively implemented especially in Nigeria. The Affirmative Action states that a percentage of political positions should be reserved for women.

The saying: "What a woman can do, a man cannot do" (Sofola 1998) is very appropriate to the issue of motherhood. The difference is clear. A child can survive on her mother's milk alone for the first three months of her life, a feat that cannot be performed by any man since he does not lactate. Yoruba culture has clearly brought out the uniqueness in women through the various ways that the importance of motherhood has been stressed – songs, language, works of art and religion. What, in effect, I am advocating is a policy on women which will take the Yoruba concept of motherhood into consideration in the process of formulation.

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