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Proverbs and Gender Equalities and Equities in African Cultures: Yoruba Culture as A Case Study

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To invent a proverb one must be intelligent and have vast human experience of socio-cultural activity of his or her environment. It is not enough to be intelligent it has to be combined with age steeped in wide and vast experience. It is this that makes a good proverb stands the test of time.

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Proverbs and Gender Equalities and Equities in African Cultures: Yoruba Culture as A case Study

F.A Olasupo ^α, (Mrs.) Olugbemi Victoria Kikelomo ^σ & Jumoke Ajuwon Adeniran ^ρ

Abstract - Proverbs in Yoruba culture recognize the natural dichotomy that exists between male and female. But while it recognizes their co-existence, it as well underlines the fact that the relationship between women and men should be founded on equality. It is part of human nature to want to dominate one another. When this happens, both the oppressed and oppressor invent a proverb to back his or her position. And so while the oppressor would event one to justify his or her position, the oppressed would also think deeply and invent one that would show that the oppressor is oppressing him or her.

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More than thirty five years ago the United Nations embarked upon series of strategies aimed at improving the status of women politically, economically and socially. But from time immemorial, proverbs in Yoruba culture, demand for gender balance in virtually all spheres of human endeavor: governance, religion, politics, economy, sports and other human social activities. So, it was not the clarion calls of UN that sensitized Yorubas awareness of women marginalization; proverbs did.

In this paper however, how proverbs emphasized gender balance in power, governance, religion, and economy in pre-colonial Yoruba culture is what this paper sets out to examine.

I. INTRODUCTION

Proverbs play a lot of roles in the culture of the Yorubas, and its application depends on the situation at hand. It is used to buttress or stress a point in the course of discussion. Because of the natural sex dichotomy between female and male, Yoruba culture also assigns roles to these two entities based on the natural differences. In short, there is gender in role, which females and males perform in the Yoruba society. But from time immemorial there have always been

attempts by either of the two sexes trying to cross over each other's lines. A successful attempt in this provides precedent from which a proverb could then be invented. In short, while Yoruba proverbs recognize the natural dichotomy in sex, it does not always recognize the extension of these to other social roles.

In Yoruba culture for instance males dominate governance but females were not totally excluded, though they were underrepresented. Truly, traditional rulers are mostly males but there are instances where females also become traditional rulers either in acting capacity (regents) or substantive in some communities. Ekiti and Ondo communities are typical examples of these. Some communities in these two areas even have parallel female and male political institutions that are still maintained up till today. So, while there are princes, so are there princesses, kings and queens, gods and goddesses. And while there are priest, so are there priestesses. All these led to invention of proverb such as *meji meji ni Olorun da 'le aye, tako tabo* (God created the world in binary form, female or male, positive or negative).

This paper tries to examine proverbs that emphasis the equalities and equities of female and male in power allocation and distribution, governance, religion and economy etc. In so doing evidences to justify these will be provided.

II. DEFINITIONS

Two important words that need to be defined here are gender and proverb. Yoruba language defines proverb thus: *Owe lesin oro, ti oro ba so nun, owe la fi ng wa a*. (Proverbs are the horses words ride, when word is lost, proverb is used to detect it). Oxford Advanced learners' dictionary defines proverb as "a short well-known sentences or phrase that states a general truth about life or gives advice" (Hornby et al, 1974:933)

Gender, in its simplest definition, is defined by Ada, as the socially constructed roles given to men and women in a society. According to her, Gender is different from sex because it is not biologically determined. While one's sex does not change, gender roles can change from culture to culture and over time (Ude, 2006:1). Ritzer on the other hand says gender is

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often used euphemistically in sociology for “women”, the sociology of gender is more precisely, the study of socially constructed male and female roles, relations and identities (Ritzer, 1996:446).

III. EQUALITIES AND EQUITIES OF WOMEN WITH MEN

One of the proverbs that unequivocally state the equality of men and women is *ibi ko ju ibi, bi ati beru* and *OSA-GUD* – respectively state that:

Odu-lfa Ogbe-Wate	Ifa Verse (Ogbe-Wate)
Yemowo ni obinrin ekini ti o ko Wa laye, oun si ni olori gbogbo Obinrin ati jo. Ilu okunrin wa kete, obinrin wa kete nigba atijo,	Yemowo was the first woman to be in this world, and she was the leader of all women in those days. The town of Men was far apart, that of women was also Far apart in those days
Sugbon ni igba ti ara awon obinrin Ko gba a lati ma nikan gbe Yemowo Ru ebo yii tan, o ko gbogbo obinrin Lehin lo si ilu okunrin. Bi gbogbo won Ti de ehin odi ilu naa, Yemowo ati Mesa Ti o mu owa naa lowo wa si lu u na a bee Awon obinrin, won wa ng yoku wo won Lati ori odi, won fi owo pe won ki won Wo le wa, awon okunrin si n fowo pe Awon obinrin pe ki awon obinrin jadewa Bayi ni won n se titi ara awon okunrin	When women could no longer endure this Yemowo carried out rituals, she carried All women to the town of men. As soon as they got near the border of the town Yemowo and Mesan that brought owa to the Town begged them, instantly women began to peep at men from their camp Using hands; they beckoned on men to come Using hands, men also asked women to come to them. They engaged in this for a long time until men were unable to endure it any longer.
Ko gbaa mo...Nigba ti ako gbogbo won De odo Obatala Ti o si pin obinrin fun olukuluku okunrin Lati ojo naa ni okunrin kii tiile fi ife Obinrin pa mo si nu, sugbon tii maa wi Jade ni enu tire: bi o si ti wu ki obinrin Fee to, yoo fi pamo sinu (Akinwoso, 1986:120)	When they were all brought to Obatala Obatala lo mu Yemowo Obatala took Yemowo and distributed the rest of the women to men since then it became difficult for men to hide their affection for women and have to express this verbally: but no matter the interest of woman, they would hide it. (Our translation)

The other Ifa verse, *Osa-Guda*, corroborated this story. According to it:

Igba ti Ela tabi Olofin-Otete, ti as si tun n pe ni Oduduwa atewonro to lo gba ado-asuwa ni awon eniyan bere sii se ajumogbepo. Saaju eyi, okookan laa da gbe. Iyawo kii gbe odo oko re. Bi took-taya ba fe bara won lopo, o di ki won wa ara won kan. Bi won ba si ti se tan, o di ki won pinya (Akiwoso, 1986:120)

When Ela or Olofin-Otete, that is also referred to as Oduduwa atewonro went to collect secret of existence, and this marked the beginning of co-habitation of men and women. Before then, we lived separately; wife did not co-exist with her husband. But when they wanted to mate, only then they searched for each other. When they had finished with themselves, they fall apart again (Our translation)

bee la bi ome (the process of birth is not different, the way a free child was born so was that of a slave). Similarly is the one that states that *aparo kan ko ga ju okan lo afi eyin to ba gori ebe*. (Literally it means all animals are equal but some are more equal than others). The justification of these proverbs for the equality of women with men is supported by two Ifa verses. In fact these verses emphasize superiority of women over men. These two Ifa verses – *OGBE-WATE*

The emphasis of these proverbs is that the halved of male and female by nature is not intended for one to exercise dominion on the other but rather acting as supplements, complements and companion to each other. An Ife historian and a versatile traditional exponent of Yoruba culture, Chief Fabunmi, as Ilesanmi noted, used to say during many public gatherings that:

Meji meji l'Olorun daye wa yii:	God created our world in binary forms:
Tosan-toru, toke-tile, tako-tabo	Day and night, hill and valley, male and female
Tarugbo-toyiti, tile-toko, toba-tijoye	The aged and the young, the house and the farm, The king and the chief
Toorun-tosupa, tonile-talejo, tawo-togberi	The sun and the moon, the resident and the The sun and the moon, the resident and the Visitor, the initiated and the uninitiated
Teniyen-teranko, toko-taya, teru-tomo.	The human and the brute, the husband the wife, The slave and the son, etc.(Ilesanmi, 1998:29)

But because males have taken advantages of females' weakness, especially in the acts of carrying pregnancies and nursing of children, during which time they became less active, females had thus resolved to limit themselves to less strenuous roles. However, society erroneously accepted this as societal value and thus felt that there are male and female roles. Biologically, yes, there are male and female roles. While females carry the pregnancy, deliver it and feed it with breast-milk, males produce the semen that result in pregnancy. But in gender, this is not true. This was what Ada meant when she said, "While one's sex does not change, gender roles can change from culture to culture and over time" (Ude, 2006:1). Women, by themselves, have however proved this wrong as is evident mostly in how they have challenged their male counterparts spiritually and temporally: governance and power sharing arrangements in traditional rule.

IV. PROVERBS, WOMEN AND SPIRIT

Yorubas belief in male and female spirits (god and goddesses) but hold that male spirit (god) is superior to that of female (goddess). This informed the invention of proverb that says Sango loko oya (god of thunder is the husband of goddess of river, Oya). The word 'husband' is used euphemistically to mean superior. But realistically, Yoruba culture regards goddesses as wives of gods. For instance while Sango (god of thunder) has Oya (goddess of river) as wife, and Yemoo (goddess of the grove) is the wife of Obatala (god of divinity), Olokun (goddess of the sea, the giver of children, healer of abdominal diseases) is the wife of Oduduwa the progenitor of Yoruba race (Akorede, 1997:81-82) Sunday Tribune, 2003:32).

But classification of Oduduwa, the progenitor of Yoruba race as male god is seriously disputed. As a matter of fact, fresh evidences shows that the progenitor of Yoruba race was a female. While Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther "makes Oduduwa not a male ancestor but a goddess, Lt. Col. A.B. Ellis, in his "The Yoruba speaking people of the Slave Coast of West Africa" wrote about Oduduwa thus: "Oduduwa is the wife of Obatala, but she was coeval with Olorun (God) and not made by him, as was her husband"(Nigerian Tribune, 2006:35). "Oduduwa represent the earth, married to the anthropomorphic sky-god. Obatala and Oduduwa, or

heaven and earth resembling, says the priests, two large cut-calabashes, which when once shut can never be opened" (Nigerian Tribune, 2006:35).

V. PROVERBS, WOMEN AND POWER

In traditional Yoruba society, as in other areas, there is power in gender exercised by traditional ruling elites. But most men and women do not know this because while the one exercised by men is temporal that of the women is spiritual and hence erroneously held the view that women had no power of their own, or if they had at all, it was inferior to those of men. But our research has proved this wrong. To Ayo Opefeyitimi, women's power as against that of their male counterpart is "celestial, terrestrial, sophisticated and unrivalled, transcending those of men". Ilesanmi, on the other hand, identifies women's power as "power of endurance coupled with psychological, cultic, menstrual, lunar and water". Added to these mosaic powers were women's beauties and good conducts they used to influence not only their husbands but other admirers of their beauties and conducts. Whereas, Ilesanmi argues, men dominate temporal power women not only dominate spiritual powers but also monopolize it. In his terms, "While men rely on force and medicinal power in fighting wars, women rely on psychological and cultic knowledge, which are by far superior. Women can use their knowledge to disarm the strongest of men" (Ilesanmi, 1998:36). Simi Afonja sums it all up when she said "Women's power over men and women therefore derived from supernatural sources and could consequently be classified as a negative mechanism which developed in part from the weaker position of women relative to that of men in Yoruba households" (Simi Afonja, 1983:150)

But men's domination of temporal world is even contested. Professor Akinjogbin contested this on three grounds: first is "the power and influence of women in Ebi which you might call 'home'". To him the affairs of the home: bearing and rearing of children, taken care of the husband and home in terms of cooking and feeding the children as well as the husband is dominated by women. In short the entire management of the homes are under the control of the women. But more than that they also keep two homes: their natural homes, birthplace, and their matrimonial homes. Secondly, is

"the power and influence of the woman in the political order". Here, women disagreement with any political decision emanating from the palace is reflected in the way they stormed the "palace" ground wearing their dresses inside out under the leadership of Iyalode (women leader) (Akinjogbin, 2002:141).

In extreme cases, they had power to force the king out of the palace by appearing stark naked to him. "To prevent the king from seeing this he was rushed out of the palace or else "it meant he had seen his heaven (i.e. the passage through which he came into the world and could therefore no longer live. If fortunately he did not see them, the women would be placated and the issue settled in their favour" (Akinjogbin, 2002:142). This informed the proverb Ogboju lokunrin ni, Obinrin lo lagbara (men own boldness while women own power)

Most men, through proverb, often deride women on the source of temporal and spiritual powers exercisable in the society. One of such proverbs is awo egungun lobinrin le se, awo gelede lobinrin le mo, t'obinrin ba fo ju doro oro agbee (only the secret cults of Masquerade and gelede could women be part of, if they dare to be part of that of Oro, Oro would consume them). But there is a counter proverb that says in defense of women: bi a o ba ri obinrin awo ee pe (any secret activity without women is incomplete).

Traditional power in Yorubaland comes under two classifications, temporal and spiritual. The "two co-exist with spiritual powers being given slightly greater authority" (Akinjogbin, 2002:151). It is conceptualized to mean power shared among the traditional rulers, their council of chiefs, religious leaders, cults of various types such as, in the case of Yorubas, Egungun (masquerade), Oro (this is an annual event in Yorubaland when women and indeed females: young or old are not expected to go out of their houses for certain number of hours – 6A.M to 2P.M – the most useful part of the day, for a period of seven days. On the seventh day, it is in-door throughout), Gelede, Osugbo and others.

Of all the priestesses of various gods the most important ones are the cults because their function is unique and thus membership restricted but the restriction never precluded women. According to Barber, cults are "ones of the most important arenas in which women exercise power and influence"(Barber, 1991:274). Asked about powerful women in the past, Chief Sobalaju, according to Barber, said:

*Those whom we can call great women in the old days were those who practiced traditional religion. They could say what was going to happen, and it would happen. **There were many of them, in all cults.** Some were greater than other. I don't know their names. They were devotees of Oya, Osun,(Ebe in Igbo) (goddesses of rivers), Sango (goddess of Thunder), of Enla, of Orisaala – all kinds (Barber, 1991:274)*

These cults according to Biobaku, "stood between the sacred chief and his subject, preventing one from becoming despotic and ensuring proper subordination of the other"(Ekong, 1989:132, Ikelegbe, 1989:147, Osaghae, 1989:59).

As a matter of fact the pre-eminence of woman in secret activities is underscored by an Ifa verse, which states that the first woman to be created controlled all secrets including that of Oro. But the woman divulged these secrets to a male deity who upstaged her and decreed that women should henceforth be less involved in secret matters (Guardian, 2003:BB22).

However, special class of women exercises these power types, and varied nomenclatures are ascribed to them: Iya-aye (Women of the world); Iya-mi or Awon Iya wa (witch or witches; 'our mothers') or Obinrin-kunrin (Women-men). They are the ones "divinely let into the secrets of life (awon la kole aye le lowo) (Simi Afonja, 1983: 150, Opefeyitimi, 1998:44, Faleti 1972: P29, Ilesanmi, 1998:31)

A demonstration of how women exercise some of these powers could be found in the government and administration of old Oyo Empire. If Alaafin of Oyo, in the days of Oyo Empire, wanted to misbehave, women, especially Palace women had power to check him. Within the then Oyo traditional institution, Johnson identified a woman that constituted an institution of her own able to arrest the king for misdemeanor. The power of the king and that of his official mother (Iya-Oba) was checked by another woman official, though lower in rank to the king's official mother but more powerful than her. This powerful woman official was called Olosi. She had power to arrest the king and "put in irons if he offends". This powerful woman was said to be the "feudal head of Aseyin, Oluiwo and the Baale of Ogbomosho (these traditional ruler were kings in their own rights, in their various towns, Iseyin, Iwo and Ogbomosho). However, once a woman ascended into this office, according to Johnson, "she is, of course, to be celibate for life" (Johnson, 1921:58).

VI. PROVERBS, WOMEN AND GOVERNANCE

In traditional rulership, women have for long been marginalized. Most traditional rulers in Yoruba cities, towns and villages are mostly male. Where females traditional rulers are found at all, they are there as regents. It has thus become a tradition in every Yorubaland for male domination of traditional rulership. And this is backed up by a proverb which according to Mary Modupe Kolawole, states that Iyalode ko ni dagba dagba ko ni o un fe je Oba ilu (The women chief will never aspire to the king's throne) (Mary Kolawole, 1998:21) But this is false. Women were in fact once traditional rulers in most Yoruba towns before circumstances such as war stresses, women inability to keep secrets and treachery forced them out of contention; even then their exclusion was not total. War

stresses as one of the reasons is anchored on the fact that the kingdoms were often engaged in wars against each other, and against other neighbouring people. Thus, because of these incessant wars, most of the "states had male war-gods as their protective deities" (Alagoa, 1992:Pv.)

Inability of women to keep secret as a result of which they lost their pre-eminence in traditional ruler ship is underscored by an Ifa verse, which states that the first woman to be created controlled all secrets. But the woman divulged these secrets to a male deity who upstaged her and decreed that women should henceforth be less involved in secret matters.

Treachery as part of the reasons for pushing women out of being traditional rulers in the pre-colonial days has to do with men. If the male deity to whom the woman counterpart divulged the secret had kept the confidence reposed in him and was not power ambitious it would not have been easy for the man to

make use of the information made available to him by the woman to organize a putsch against her (Guardian, 2003:BB22).

Added to the above-mentioned reasons were the rigours of childbirth and marriage. Among many Nigerian communities were the wrong notions that women were weaker sex and therefore can never be head although they are disciplined and harsh (Faseke, 1998:151)

These form the basis of women challenge of male domination of traditional ruler ship. These in turn form the basis for the proverb: *ki lokunrin ng se ti obinrin ko le se?* (What is it that men do that women cannot do). In the pre-colonial days there are evidences of women traditional rulers in two of the most important kingdoms in Yorubaland: Ife and Oyo and even today you have some of them (women traditional rulers), in part of Ondo, Ekiti and Oyo states. See Tables 1&2.

Table 1 : Statistics of Some Yoruba Women Traditional Rulers in The Pre-Colonial Days.

	NAME	TOWN OR VILLAGE	L.G.A	STATE	TYPE OF RULERSHIP	DATE	TIME SPENT IN OFFICE
1	Oduduwa	Ife	Ife	Osun	Progenitor	Pre-colonial	
2	Terracotta evidence	Ife	Ife	Osun	Queen or Ooni of Ife	Between 12 th and 13 th centuries	-
3	Luwo Gbadiga	Ife	Ife Cent. L.G	Osun	Ooni of Ife	Pre-colonial days	-
4	Debooye	Ife	Ife Cent. LG	Osun	Ooni of Ife	-	-
5	Moremi	Ife	Ife Cent. LG	Osun	6 th Ooni of Ife	-	-
6	Iyayun	Oyo	Oyo L.G	Oyo	Alaafin	-	-
7	Orompoto	Oyo	Oyo L.G	Oyo	Alaafin	-	-
8	Jomijomi	Oyo	Oyo L.G	Oyo	Alaafin	-	
9	Jepojepo	Oyo	Oyo L.G	Oyo	Alaafin	-	
10	Yeyenirewu	Ado-Ekiti	Ado-Ekiti	Ekiti	Ewi of Ado-Ekiti	-	1511 - 1552
11	Eye- Moin	Akure	Akure L.G	Ondo	Regent/Monarch	-	1705-1735 AD
12	Ayo-Ero	Akure	Akure L.G	Ondo	Regent/Monarch	-	1850-51AD
13	Pupuupu	Ondo	Ondo LG	Ondo	Monarch	-	1898-1901

Sources : Books e.g. Dora Obi and Juliet Njoku, *Nigerian Women and the Challenges of our Time*, Lagos: Malthouse Press Limited, 1991, P27; Akinjogbin I.A, *Milestone and Social System in Yoruba History and Culture*, Ibadan : Olu-Akin Publishers, 2002 P143-144; Olowu and Erero, *Indigenous Governance System in Nigeria* (ed.), Ile-Ife: Research Group based in the Department of Public Administration, OAU, pp, 71&78. McDonnell M.O (2003), *Gender Inequality in Nigeria*, Ibadan: Spectrums Books Limited. The Westerner of February 5, 2006,P2. The Westerner of February 19-25, 2006, P8 Nigerian Tribune of February28 2006, P35.

Table 2 : The Statistics of Some Present Women Traditional Rulers at the Local Level in Nigeria.

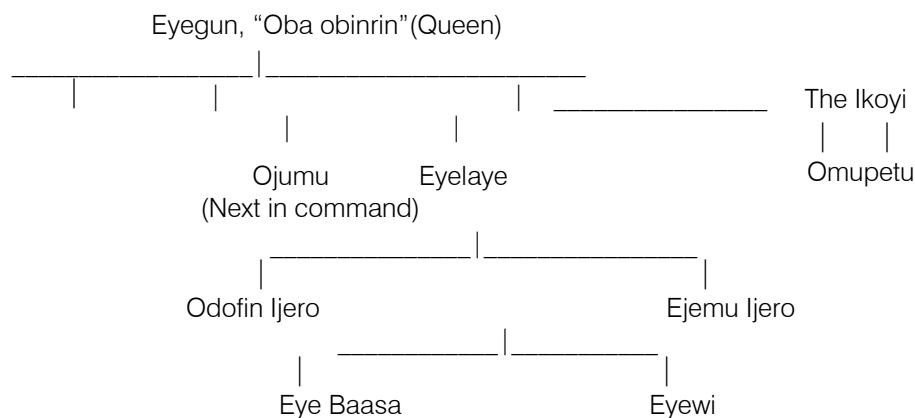
S/N	Name	Town or Village	L.G.A	State	Type of Rulership	Date	Time Spent in Office
1	Oba Comfort Adesida	Ondo	Ondo L. G.	Ondo	Substantive Traditional ruler	1992-2006	14years
2	Oba Kokumo Bolatito Unice	Ijero	Ijero L.G.	Ekiti	Substantive Traditional ruler	1990 –2006	16 years
3	Princess Adeyinka Adesida	Akure	Akure L.G	Ondo	Regent	2000-2004	5 years
4	Princess Adejoke Adekanye	Akungba Akoko	Akoko South West LG	Ondo	Regent	2002 to date	4 years
5	Princess Joke Adesunloye	Ifira Akoko	Akoko South East LG	Ondo	Regent	2001 to date	5 years
6	Princess Janet Adigun	Iye Akoko	Akoko North LG	Ondo	Regent	2003-date	3 years
7	Princess Ade Gbolarin	Ire-Ekiti	Oye L.G	Ekiti	Regent	1999-2004	5 years
8	Princess Fehintola Omolewo	Ayegabju – Ekiti	Oye L.G	Ekiti	Regent	1997-2004	7 years
9	Princess Bosede Elizabeth Fadiya	Oloje-Ekiti	Oye L.G	Ekiti	Regent	2002-2004	11 1/2 years
10	Princess Adeboboye Aladeyelu	Igbara Odo Town	Ekiti South West	Ekiti	Regent	1996-2006	11years

Sources : *Dailies, Periodicals, books and fieldwork.*

The equality of women with men in traditional rule is nowhere more prominent in proverbs than in a popular proverb among the people of Owu kingdom, which according to Johnson, says: Abimo l'Owu oni ako tabi abo ni, ewo ni yio se omo ni be? (a child is born at Owu, and you ask male or female: which will be a proper child?) (Johnson, 1921:206). By this proverb, among the people of Owu, sex has nothing to do with who occupies traditional stool but ability to perform.

However, in places with rigid patriarchal domination, females rebelled by embarking upon formations of similar governing institutions to intervene in monopolization of governance by males. This, in the pre-colonial days, led to establishment of what is variously called “dual-sex political system”, “dualism of nature” or “man-woman bi-polarity” (Uchen, 2001:42&43, McDonnell, 2003:11, Yoruba voice, 2005:14). In Ilesha, Osun State, for instance, in

response to the tyranny of male rule, each neighbourhood had its own female chief chosen by the female members of that neighbourhood and she represented them in the council of women chiefs. Among the Ondos and Ijero-Ekiti as well, women had their own complete governing institutions and leaders “Oba”(king) called Lobun or ‘Oba obinrin’ (Queen) in Ondo and Ijero-Ekiti respectively. They had their own palaces, High Chiefs, chiefs and attendants like their male counterparts (Makinde and Aladekomo, 1997:78, The Westerner, 2006:2). See the organogram below. Their own council of chiefs also deliberated separately on matters affecting their towns. In fact they also have the power to confer chieftaincy title on the deserving people like the male monarchs, although in the case of Eyegun in Ijero-Ekiti, permission to do this, especially in this modern time, must first be sought from the king (Makinde and Aladekomo, 1997:78).



Source : Dele Olowu and John Erero, (1997) *Indigenous Governance System in Nigeria, Ife: Research group on Local Institutions and Socio-Economic Development, Department of Public Administration, Obafemi Awolowo University.*

MALE KINGS



Alake of Ilawe-Ekiti
(Obabinrin) of Ilawe-Ekiti



Ajero of Ijero-Ekiti



Asarun of Isharun

FEMALE KINGS



EYELOFI (OBABINRIN) OF ILAWE-EKITI



EYEGUN (OBABINRIN) OF IJERO-EKITI



EYEULE (OBABINRIN) OF ISHARUN



THE LOBUN OF ILE-OLUJI



THE LOBUN OF ILE-OLUJI



OSHEMAWE OF ONDO

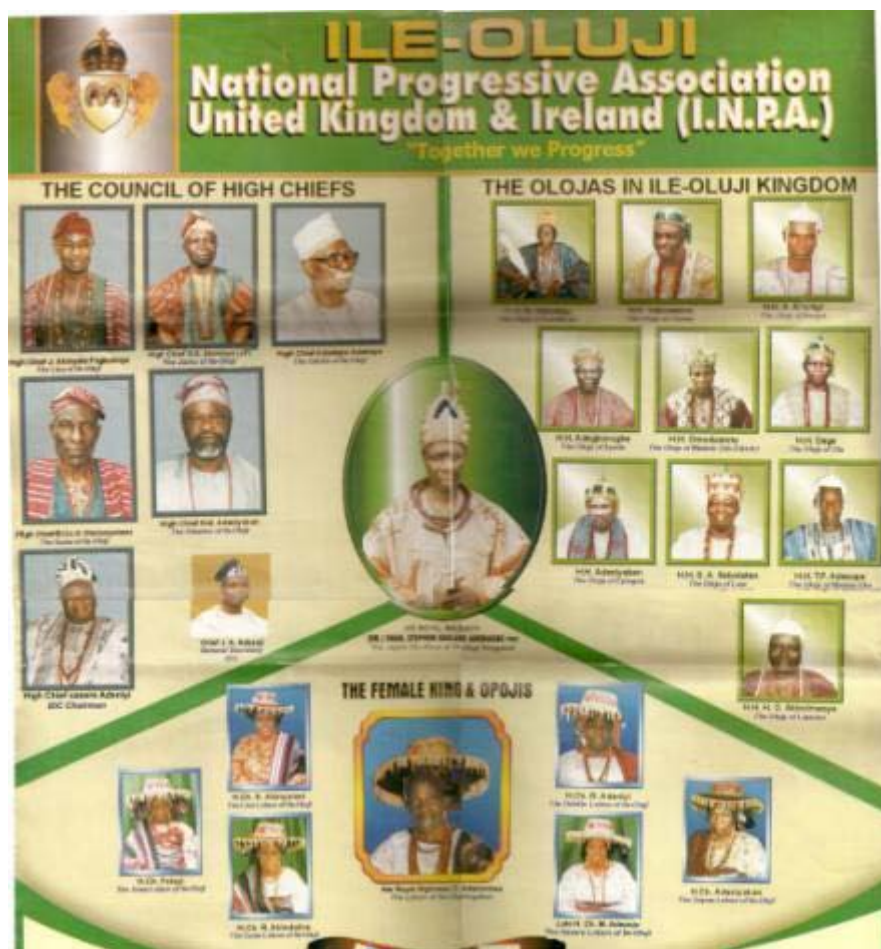


OSHEMAWE OF ONDO



The Omu of Okpanam
Dr. Marthia Dunkwu

The calendar below illustrates the manner of relationship between male and female kings in the communities where this tradition prevails in Africa:



Above is a calendar of Male and Female kings with their respective chiefs at Ile-Oluji in Ondo State of Nigeria.

MALE PALACES



The palace of Osemawe of Ondo.

FEMALE PALACES



The palace of Lobun of Ondo



The palace of Obi of Okpanam



The palace of Omu of Okpanam.



The Palace of Jegun of Ile-Oluji.
(Olasupo, 2010:148)



The Palace of female monarch of Ile-Oluji

Female King Cabinet Members in Ondo and Ile-Oluji

Lobuns (female kings)	Osemowe and Jegun (male kings)
1. The High Chief Lisa Lobun	1. The High Chief Lisa
2. The High Chief Jomu Lobun	2. The High Chief Jomu
3. The High Chief Odojin Lobun	3. The High Chief Odojin
4. The High Chief Orangun Lobun	4. The High Chief Sama
5. The High Chief Supou Lobun	5. The High Chief Odunwo
6. The High Chief Sasere Lobun (Olasupo, 2010:145)	6. The High Chief Sasere

At Ibokun in Oriade Local government of Osun State the male and the female king have equal number of king makers and nomenclature. Find them stated below:

MALE KINGMAKERS	FEMALE KINGMAKERS
Odojin	Odojinbinrin
Ejemu	Ejemubinrin
Aro	Arobinrin
Osolo	Osolobinrin
Saba	Sababinrin
Sajuku	Sajukubinrin

(IsholaOlomola, Bade Ajuwon, Dayo Omotosho, 2003:102)

Male and Female kingmakers in Kajola Ijesha, Ori

Male king	Female king.
Baba Orisa	Yeye Orisa
Baba Odofin	Yeye Odofin
Baba Aro	Yeye Aro
Baba Salaro	Yeye Salaro
Baba Ejemo	Yeye Ejemo

(Olasupo and Fayomi, 2012:17)

Related to this is the equality of women in provision of certain services to the state. One of the traditional state services, which women provided in the pre-colonial days, was security not only for the king and the state but themselves as well. For instance in the days of Oyo Empire, the Ilaris (Female bodyguards of the king numbering up to 48 but denizens of the king's

harem provided security for the king (Johnson, 1921:67). When the security of the empire was breaking down as a result of the disagreement between the ruler of the Empire, Alaafin Aole, and his prime-minister Basorun Gaa, it was the Palace women that intervened not only to support the king but more importantly took over his personal security. They said:

A wa lehin re. Gbogbo irunmole aafin yi wa lehin re Awon iyami wa lehin re.... Osoronga –a-pa-ni-ma-wa-gun Olokiki oru at'ori jeran Ati'idi j'edo enia... Awon l'olobe ide Awon l'ogalanta ti mu 'mi talotalo Awon ni ifa, awon l'Odu-aiye –Iya ooo! (Faleti 1972: P29).	We support you All the spirits in this palace are behind you My mothers (the witches) are behind you Osoronga –one that kills without a trace One prominent at midnight, that eats Animals from the head They are owners of the bronze knife They are ogalanta that drinks water talotalo They are the Ifa, they are the hidden truth-of The World –Oh Mother! (My translation)
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For them as well, where the traditional state fails to provide security for women, especially the traders, they, (women) responded appropriately. According to Faseke, Mabogunje and Ade-Ajayi:

The women, like the men, traveled in caravan for protection. In 1833, Lander observed that one hundred wives of the Alaafin trading at Ilora.

Writing of Ibadan in the second half of the 19th Century, Johnson says: the women of those days were as hardy as the men and often went in a body of caravans to Ikere and Apomu for corn and other foodstuffs although the road was unsafe for the kidnappers (Faseke, 1998:153)

Hugh Clapperton in 1825 also found the wives of the Alaafin of Oyo trading far away from home at 'Duffo', south of Shaki, and noted "like other women of the common class they carried large loads on their heads from town to town". Other travelers in 19th century Nigeria who met trade caravans along their journeys emphasized the considerable number of women amongst them (Mabogunje, 1961:15)

Traders gathered at agreed times and places and traveled together in caravan (Ade-Ajayi and Smith, 1964:3)

VII. PROVERBS, WOMEN AND TYRANNY

The proverb *ki lo kunrin se ti Obinrin ko lese* (what do male do that female could not do) is exhibited in the fact that there is gender in tyranny and war. Yoruba history record a powerful high chief in Oyo Empire (Basorun Gaa) that became the head of Oyo Empire (Basorun Gaa) that became the head of Oyo mesi and became so tyrannical that he installed and removed not less than four Alaafins in succession, all of whom he made to commit suicide (Akinjogbin, 2002:38). Ibadan kingdom provided a female counterweight to this. In it emerged a tyrant woman chief, Efunsetan Aniwura (owner of Gold) lyalode Ibadan (woman leader in Ibadan) Many factors contributed to seeing Efunsetan as arch-tyrants. One, she was alleged to have refused her female slaves to marry. Two, in her court, she tried, found guilty and executed expectant mothers among her slaves – without recourse to the traditional ruler of the community, Latosa (Awe, 1992:69), Akinyemi, (1998:174). Although Awe tries to white wash this by claiming that Efunsetan was so powerful that no one dared take liberties with her female slaves. "Indeed" Awe continues, "many of them got married to other slaves or contracted marriages with free men outside Efunsetan's compound on the payment of the usual

redemption price. There is also strong evidence in the traditions of her humane treatment of these slaves". The defence, being put up by Awe to rub off these accusations of tyranny against Efunsetan, continues thus. "For instance she" Efunsetan "developed great attachment to one of her slave whom she nicknamed Bobore (i.e. if you have a real friend she is worth more than a host of relations). Part of other defence of Awe, for Efunsetan, was that, after Efunsetan's death, one of her slaves was still well enough to go back to his home in Ilesha and rise to become the ruler, Owa Ataiyero".

But these are weak defense that cannot clear Efunsetan of this accusation of tyranny. Efunsetan was not the supreme authority in the community of her time. Latosa, the traditional ruler of the then Ibadan kingdom, who installed her as Iyalode was. Even Latosa was not himself absolute, as Alaafin of Oyo was then Ibadan's overlord. When similar case of murder took place within the same kingdom at that time, Latosa referred the case of the convicted murderer to Alaafin (Awe, 1992:69). Why didn't Efunsetan take Latosa, her ruler, into consideration before she carried out execution orders her court passed on the expectant slaves? The convicted and executed slave ladies should have been

allowed to appeal to this higher authority, Latosa, who could have in turn sought the view of his overlord, Alaafin of Oyo. On similar case of murder committed in his domain Latosa sought the view of Alaafin before he carried out the death sentence passed on the accused. If Efunsetan's paramount ruler, Latosa, could do this why must Efunsetan by passed not just her ruler, under whom she was a chief, but also her community overlord, Alaafin of Oyo? That she did not consult with the higher authority of her community of those days but took laws into her hands was a serious crime against the traditional state. Hence, she stands condemned as a tyrant.

VIII. PROVERBS, WOMEN AND WAR

Initially in Yoruba history, there was gender in war roles. While men went to war front to fight, women, according to Akinjogbin, formed "a kind of rear army to organize food for the soldiers and organize civil defense for the town" – chasing back any soldier who ran home from the war front (Akinjogbin, 2002:147). But when women discovered that men were not properly securing their securities, they picked up the gauntlet. Hear Madam Tinubu for example:

Eyin e wo o. Obinrin lo n jiya ibe.
Boko ba ku gbogbo eru a di toun nikan.

Bomo ba ku, a dagan osan gangan,
A donibanuje okan
Obinrin lo n jiya ibe! Eran ku o fise
Sile fawo
Iwofa ku, o da aawo sile
Eni to ku, eku isimi, eni to ku
E kuu wahala
Awa o nii gba ki okunrin kan sa lo
Awa o nii gba ki ogun wolu Egba
Eyin okunrin Egba e ye e ma fiya yi
je waa

Look. Women bear the brunt.
When husband dies all the belongings
Go to him alone.
When the child dies we became barren.
we became sorrowful
Women bear the brunt! When animal dies
the skin bears the brunt
serf's death create problem.
He that is dead, rest in peace, he that is alive
Carry on your stress.
We wont allow any man to run away
we won't allow incursion of war into Egba
You Egba men stop punishing us women
(Isola, 1983:5) (**My Translation**)

This clarion call of Madam Tinuubu was heeded not only in Egba kingdom but other ones in Yorubaland. For instance a woman said to be the daughter of Ogunmola, a powerful Ibadan warlord, "gathered a small army of her own, rode on a horse back and patrolled the boundaries of Ibadan to make sure Ijebus did not come in". In Benin, Queen Idia was believed to have her own army that she once led to war that defeated the Idah army. Similarly, in the pre-colonial inter kingdom wars, "Of the total force of sixteen thousand (16000) that attacked Abeokuta" according to Uku, "during the warfare with the Amazons of Dahomey, over six thousand (6,000) were women"(Uku, 1991:28, Akinjogbin, 2002:147, Awe, 1992:27)

As a matter of fact two leading Yoruba women who were wealthy, influential and high chiefs of their respective kingdoms, who also dealt in arms and had their own standing armies, were Efunsetan Aniwura (Owner of Gold) and Madam Tinuubu. While Efunsetan mingles with military leaders in Ibadan at that time, and had large number of slaves she readily put to the use of these military leaders, Madam Tinubu had her own standing army. Besides, both of them, Efunsetan and Tinubu, also dealt in ammunitions such as gunpowder, guns and other related ammunitions, which they sell to war leaders mostly on credits (Awe, 1992:67). Madam Tinuubu testified to this when she said:

Mo lomo ogun, mo lota mo letu,
Mo lowo, mo leeyan, mo si lenu

I have warriors, I have bullets, I have gunpowder,
I have money, I have people and I have mouth
(Our **translation**) (Isola, 1983:7)

These activities of women regarding war and war related matters are buttressed by a proverb that says, *ki lobinrin ng se ti obinrin ko le se?* (What do men do that women cannot do?)

IX. PROVERBS, WOMEN AND ECONOMY

Evidence of dual sex economic system, just as dual sex political system, also existed in the economy of the pre-colonial Yorubas. While males dominated the farming activities, females dominated trading and craft. But farming, being the largest and most important economy, men used their patriarchal advantage by making women assistants to their husbands in the farms. In fact the institution of polygamy arose from this system of farming that made women subservient to their male counterpart. However, when market economy developed, women who formed the bulk of the traders and crafts rushed into it and dominated it (Vagale, 1971:1, Osinubi and Amaghionyeodiwe, 2005:74).

The humbleness of women was reflected here unlike males who believed in rigid stratification. Queens, wives of the monarchs were not left out in the development of the state economy. They carried large loads on their heads from market to market not only within the town but also between them, including long distance ones such as Shaki, Apomu and Ikire (Mabogunje, 1961:15, Faseke, 1998:153). This never reduced their royalty, as they were deferred to in the area of tax. While ordinary women traders carrying loads were taxed, wives of the various kings were exempted as a mark of respect for the institution they represent (Hodder and Ukwu, 1969:27). According to Hodder and Ukwu:

"these asses were the first beasts we had observed employed in carrying burdens, for hitherto people of both sexes and of all ages, especially women and female children, have performed these laborious duties. Taxes were usually imposed on those traveling along the roads" (Hodder and Ukwu, 1969:27)

Given these, *ki lokunrin ng se ti obinrin ko le se?* (What do males do that females cannot do?). As a matter of fact the dominance of market by women led to the creation of market deity whose priestess was called Eni-Oja (owner of the market) before who even the king leaned on the day he went to worship in the market (Johnson, 1921:66).

X. PROVERBS, WOMEN AND RELIGION

In the Yoruba traditional state, religion is used as a powerful means of checking the rulers. Among the Yoruba people, the king is perceived as "Alase Ekeji Orisa", (meaning the Chief executive and the next in rank to the gods). Whatever he does as the traditional ruler or king of a particular community is believed to be derivable from the supernatural forces – guide

against misuse of power and growing despotism, it also acted as a check. (Ekong, 1989:132, Ikelegbe, 1989: 147-151, Osaghae, 1989:59)

Initially, goddesses in Yorubaland were wives to the male gods. The varieties of gods with their goddesses are Oduduwa, the progenitor of Yorubas (this is contested) and his wife Olokun (the goddess of the sea); Sango (god of thunder) and his wife, Oya, (goddess of the rivers); Obatala (god of divinity) and his wife Yemoo (the occupier of the groove). With time ordinary women began to see these goddesses as pro establishment, since their husband priests controlled them. Proverbially, they (ordinary women) derided the wives of the priest who also doubled as priestesses thus: *ta lesinsin ki ba gbe fun bi kii se elegbo* (whom would the flies support if not a person with sore). See picture below:



ODUDUWA THE PROGENITOR OF YORUBAS



GODDESS OLOKUN, WIFE OF ODUDUWA



The devotees of Olokun that does not exclude male kings at Olokun annual festival



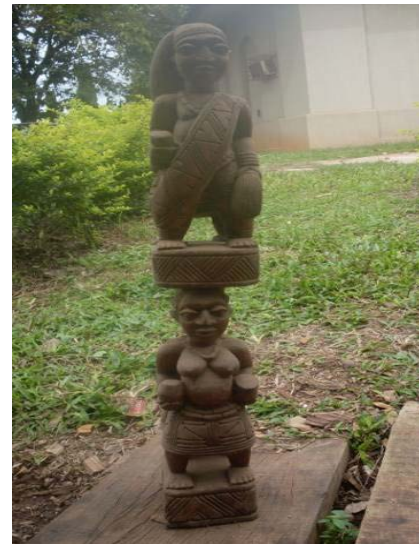
SANGO (god of thunder)



OYA (goddess of the rivers)



OBATALA (god of divinity)



OSUN (goddess of river Osun)



OSUN (goddess of river Osun)
Source : Palace of Ooni of Ife.

With this, ordinary women began to realize their potentials as individuals and groups. They discovered that they are, by nature, "patient, methodical and, in some cases, endowed with supernatural power" – supernatural power they can exercise through witchcraft and ritual roles as priestesses and guardian of religious cults. Thus, those of them having supernatural power (witchcraft) constituted themselves into cults that were exclusive to males. But a sizable number of them are also present in other male dominated cults such as Ogboni, Egungun, Gelede, Oro and Osugbo. These cults exercised a lot of powers in the selection of a new king, constituting a check to his power and deposing him if necessary (Ekong, 1989:132&136; Ilesanmi, 1998:38; Makinde and Aladekomo, 1997:74). As a matter of tradition, in some communities, women were organized into junior and senior cults that served as machinery for inspiring and mobilizing women to play

these specific roles in the society. In Akure, Ajashe-Ipo and Igbomina, for instance, association of princesses of the royal family constituted the kingmakers for choosing the next traditional ruler of the town (Afolayan, 1998:24). In Akure, the association of the princesses became so prominent that the monarch of the town began to give them recognition. While the official recognition for them in Akure came about in 1533, in 1599 Oba Atakumosa created one in which "Members were his own daughters and the other princesses in the kingdom" but ensured that one of his own daughters headed it (Afonja, 1983:146). Post-colonial continuation of this was the constitution of Orangun, another association of princesses, by Oba Adesida in 1940.

Women without any supernatural power also had raw power to check the excesses of not only the king but cults as well, where they (cults) appeared to gang up against traditional processes or procedures of doing things, especially if it concerned selection or deposition of unwanted traditional ruler. Owu women of Abeokuta demonstrated this in 1938. In their protest, according to Bola Ajibola:

"women removed all their dresses and marched out and protest naked, and Somoye was prevented from becoming the Olowu of Owu (Comet, 2005:11)

Women in this same place demonstrated again in 1948 against the imposition of the autocratic Sole Native Authority system on the people of Egba., women in Abeokuta, under the leadership of Mrs. Ransome Kuti,, protested. Their disgust with the Sole traditional ruler was expressed thus:

The system of Sole Native Authority (SNA) had been a great source of oppression and suppression to the Egba people. Even most of the members of the council were not free to express their minds. The Alake always passed as 'Mr. Know all'. The Egba women would very much like the power of SNA removed because we are not happy under it. It is foreign to the custom of Egba (Awe, 1992:139).

Parts of the dirge composed by Abeokuta Women Union (AWU) for their traditional ruler, Alake, who asked them to pay tax, ran thus:

*Ademola Ojibesho
Big man with a big ulcer
Your behaviour is deplorable
Alake is a thief
Council members, thieves
Anyone who does not know Kuti will get into trouble
White man you will not get to your country safely
You and Alake will not die an honourable death (Awe, 1992:79).*

(Translated by Mrs. Ransome-Kuti)

The women's protest culminated in the abdication of the Alake, the traditional ruler of the town,

from office and was exiled to Osogbo in 1948. He abdicated with these words:

I cannot bear any longer the sight of turmoil, strife and discontent. I have decided ...in order to avoid blood shed, to leave the environs, of my territory in the hope that after a time, frayed tempers will subside and atmosphere of calm prevail (Awe, 1992:143).

Inspired by these developments in Abeokuta, women in Ijebu and Iseyin followed suit by fighting their paramount rulers, the Akarigbo of Remo and Aseyin of Iseyin, for asking them to pay taxes (Uku, 1991:29). So ki lobinrin ng se ti okunrin ko le se? (What do men do that women cannot do?

XI. CONCLUSION

In all, about six proverbs that challenged patriarchy and demonstrated women equality with their men counterparts have been examined. They show women relegation in all spheres of human life in Yoruba traditional society is as old as the society itself. As well, they show that the struggle to rectify this by women in particular and all believers of gender equality in general, are as well antiquated as the gender inequality and brutality. Thus, modern efforts to elevate women, hooked down by traditional and cultural biases, are catalysts to addressing Yoruba traditional biases against women but not the initiator. Proverbs are. They not only highlight the problems but also took steps to concretely address them. However, the intervention of United Nations and its globalization of gender problems, as well as ways forward, more than three decades ago, have impacted strongly in addressing the gender problems raised by Yoruba proverbs.

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