Gender Issues Among the Yorubas

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Abstract:

In this essay, I critically look at the question of feminism from its theological and academic perspectives and how it has impacted women’s lives around the world. I argue that pre-colonial and missionary incursion into Yoruba land in West Africa the question of feminism as it is argued today was none existent. From a historical purview, feminism among Yoruba women is examined from the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras to locate the shift in perception and ideology of feminism among Yoruba women. In this essay, both colonialism and missionary activities during the colonial period are held responsible for whatever kind of feminism which exists among the Yorubas today.

Introduction:

Currently, the Christian Church in the western hemisphere has had to re-address the question of gender. Feminist writers have worked very hard across a wide range of disciplines to address this question. From a theological perspective, the fight against patriarchy by feminist theologians have been taking against what is generally described as a mostly male dominated hierarchy, an archaic homophobic clergy and the reliance on scriptural texts written mainly by a biased male dominated group of writers. The patristic era is as guilty as modern day Catholicism for propagating patriarchy and the subjugation of women.

The feminist/womanist ‘war’ against patriarchy has spread quite rapidly around the world. In sub-Saharan Africa, feminists abound within and outside of the academia. It is not clear if the
bone of contention is one and the same within European, American, Latin American and African feminist claims. However, what stands out, which is foundational to writing this paper is to call attention to the fact that historically, feminism is not one and the same from these different culturally perspectives. This accounts for why there exists a hermeneutical differentiation between a feminist and a womanist group. What theological claims can feminism when approached from different historical and cultural milieus offer a public intellectual theological conversation? In this essay, I look at the question of gender from a theological, historical and cultural perspective of the Yoruba women of the south west of Nigeria. Their history as it will be enumerated will show that any claim to gender differentiation is not only strange but exists only within the prism of post-colonial, post missionary and post-independence experience of Yoruba women.

Within the gambit of the on-going dialogue and research, some feminists have wrongly included African women and lump them into the presupposed view that they also have suffered a history of patriarchy. In this essay, I will be drawing on the experiences of Yoruba women of the western coast of Africa to argue that Yoruba women have not always been subjugated as some western feminists would want us to believe. Research points to the fact that prior to the slave trade, colonialism and missionary incursion into Yoruba land; women enjoyed a great role with equal privileges as their male counterpart.

Pre-slavery and pre-colonial era, the Yoruba woman occupied a significant place in the political, economic, religious and family life setting. Traditional Yoruba culture gave pride of place to women under two designations: their status as daughters in their father’s lineage and as wives in their husband’s lineage. However, women are respected even more as mothers based on the
logic that all men are born of women. It is expected, therefore, that men pay the same maternal
respects they have for their mothers to all women. With this understanding, pre-colonial Yoruba
land rarely experienced violence against women or divorce. Divorce was considered only when
both families have exhausted all means of arbitration. Consideration for divorce commonly
included extreme cruelty, infertility, insanity, extreme promiscuity on the part of the woman,
irresponsibility on the part of the man or indebtedness. British missionary records show that
polygamy was practised among the Yorubas but mainly among the upper class. It is not clear if this
is traditional to the people or an influence of Islam.

To support the position that gender was not understood as a tool of patriarchal oppression
of women in the traditional Yoruba setting, I will proceed to present the historical development
and paradigmatic shift in culture and the understanding of ‘gender’ in the following order: Pre-
Colonial, Colonial, and Post-Colonial Era.

The Yorubas: A Short Introduction

The Yoruba people of the western coast of Africa are considered to be the largest single
ethnic or tribal group among the many tribes that make up what eventually became known as
Nigeria. While the majority of the Yoruba live in western Nigeria, there are also a substantial
number of people of Yoruba descent who live in the Republic of Benin and Togo, in addition to
large groups of Yoruba migrants living in the United States and the United Kingdom. The Yoruba
nation is also said to be the most widely dispersed around the world through the trans-Atlantic
slave trade. The descendants of the Yoruba nation in diaspora are commonly referred to as
“Afro” cultures. They can be found in the US, Haiti, Cuba, Jamaica, Trinidad, Puerto-Rico, Dominican Republic, and Brazil.

The History of the inhabitants of the lower western Niger region, later referred to as the Yoruba race is traced to around the 4th century. Not much else is known except that they grew and thrived as a tribe. They built their cities and had market economy, a stable political system and were in contact with other kingdoms and empires in existence at the time. History locates the golden age of the Yoruba nation between 1100AD and 1900AD with the emergence of the great Ife kingdom, Oyo Empire, and finally Benin kingdom.

Yoruba culture is mostly patrilineal and patrilocal with the wife(s) regarded as permanent member of the family she is married into. Unlike some other neighbouring cultures, a married Yoruba woman remains with her family of adoption by marriage even after death. The married woman, who dies, is buried with her own family where she is married into, and her corpse is never returned to her own family of birth. Marriage also unites two families, even though they are in-laws, the Yorubas relate more like family. The Yorubas did not practise polygamy in the sense in which we understand it today. A man had more than one wife usually because of his office, for instance, the king. At other times, rich and successful farmers take on more than one wife for reasons of man power to keep up the work load on the farms. At other times, brothers take on their deceased brother’s widow, because she remains a member of the family. To have children by her is optional and often times decided by the entire family.

Yoruba culture does not place women at a lower pedestal to men. It is clear that Yoruba men have a keen sense of protecting their women and providing for them. But Yoruba culture
does not discriminate against women participating in decision making within the home and political or public sphere. Although, Yoruba culture is hierarchically based with men on top of the ladder, respect is reciprocal and understood to work for the preservation of the community. For this reason, every member of the community knows his or her own responsibilities to the one or the whole. Differentiation is more likely to be viewed from age or position (respect) rather than gender in the traditional Yoruba society. Yoruba women are regarded as ‘orisa’- deity, and so are cared for and respected.

In her book, *The Invention of Women*, the leading Yoruba ethnologist, Oyeronke Oyewunmi argues strongly that there is a flawed assumption about the relevance of gender issues in Yoruba history, pre-colonial era due to the imposition of Western thought and categories on the discussion of Yoruba women feminism. According to Oyewunmi, until the arrival of the colonialists, in Yoruba land, there were no women or men because in the Yoruba language the categories ‘okunrin’ which she translates as ‘anamales’, or ‘obinrin’, ‘anafemales’ were never “neither binarily opposed nor hierarchical”, they were persons whose anatomy “did not privilege them to any social positions and similarly did not jeopardize their access.” Oyewunmi critiques what she calls Western ‘soma-centricism’ in gender studies. She counters Western feminists’ assertions that gender categories and the subordination of women are universal and timeless, seen as an organizing principle in all societies. Arguing from a linguistic and cultural analysis point of view, Oyewunmi demonstrates that gender in Yoruba culture pre-colonial era, was inconsequential. She insists that “Yoruba social identity was, and is, fundamentally relational, changing, and situational, with seniority the most crucial determinant of ranking.”
Pre-Colonial Era

Missionaries, colonialists, western feminists and modern historiographers all agree that the traditional Yoruba society focused on women within married life as the grounds of accessing social, economic and political power. Yoruba women were never confined to their domestic roles only. The ability to exercise freedom in trade implied also the woman’s ability to take care of her children. Through known history, Yoruba women wield economic power since the market sphere is considered strictly the domain and political hegemony of women. The market days were seen to be ‘holy days’ and observed in very specific and meticulous order. The women choose a president who directs the affairs of all the traders. Usually in Yoruba land, the Iya L’oja, (President of the Women Market Association) also seats on the king’s ruling council, and wields tremendous political influence and power. Missionary accounts from the 1800s show clearly the economic independence and business acumen of Yoruba women who engage in in the tie and dye trade, cotton spinning, pottery, processing of the palm produce into oil and soap. Women also engaged in household production of crafts, petty trade, weaving, bead making, mat weaving, beer brewing, home economics and management; all of these starts early under the mother’s tutelage. At the early age of seven or eight, girls are already sent out to hawk various household commodities.

Yoruba women translated their economic power into political power as noted already. Specifically, it is important to note that at some point in the history of Yoruba kingdoms, a woman regent has reigned as the king. There are records of Yoruba women warlords and founders of kingdoms, i.e. Moremi (Olurounbi), who is said to have sacrificed an only child to
save her people. The great kingdoms of Oyo, Ife, Ondo, Ekiti and Ijebu were all ruled at one point by a woman. It is not uncommon that within a variety of Yoruba cultures, a hierarchy of female chiefs existed. Most popular among the female titles includes; Iya Oba (The King’s mother), Ayaba (The Queen), Iya L’oja (women President in the market), IyaL’ode (women’s Prime Minister usually also on the king’s council).\textsuperscript{x} At all levels, and for this point in pre-modern history, the Yoruba society had evolved in their understanding and respect for gender way beyond their contemporaries in Europe and North America.\textsuperscript{xi}

Women also played a great role in the rituals and cultic religions of Yoruba land even though it is arguable that this role is limited to certain and specific cults. Mostly, Yoruba women priestesses are associated with fertility cults and young women’s initiation rites into womanhood and marriage. In this instance, note again how the role of ‘motherhood’ is closely associated to what makes a woman a woman. She is the harbinger of new life, of kings and noble men. She is the nurturer and the care giver who sustains this life until maturity. In Yoruba philosophy, she recedes into the background when her son becomes a man yet remains a pillar of wisdom and support especially as he starts his own family.

In Yoruba philosophy and religion, names given to a child at birth often times designate among other things tribal or clan affiliations, family ties, religious/deity affiliations or even the hopes of the family for their child. These names tie neatly into family praise singing known as ‘oriki.’\textsuperscript{xii} One of the popular poetries of Yoruba culture states in praise of a woman as a mother: “\textit{Iya ni Wura, baba ni digi. Ojo ti baba ba ku, digi omo baje, sugbon ojo ti iya ba ku ni wura omo wo’mi...Iya ni wura ti a ko le fowo ra!”} (Meaning: Mother is a jewel of inestimable value, father is
a mirror. The day father dies, my mirror is broken, and the day mother dies my jewel of
inestimable value is lost…. Mother is the precious jewel that cannot be bought with money.)

From the foregoing, it is clear that within Yoruba culture and tradition, a woman is held in
high esteem especially when she achieves the role of wife and mother. Motherhood in Yoruba
culture is cultic-ally associated with the womb of the earth which produces life and the ability of
a mother to carry a child in her womb. Sometime the Yorubas will say: “Orisa bi iya ko si!”
Meaning: There is no deity as great as mother. Even though it is not usually stated, in old age,
the mother assumes a matriarchal role where she is revered and respected for all her years of
labour of love.

The Colonial Era

Not many scholars and historians are able to agree on the impact of colonialism on
indigenous cultures. The contention is usually as to what extent did the colonialist’s culture
positively or negatively impact the local culture? Overall, when this same question is applied to
gender issues within the traditional Yoruba cultural milieu, it can be conclusively said that
colonialist culture negatively impacted Yoruba culture. In very minimal ways, the colonialists
benefitted some women causes but on the over all, it caused the decline of women’s status.

The Colonialists positively impacted women’s role within marriage in their ability to have a
say in the process of divorce which hitherto was limited to decisions taking between families which
was mainly men dominated. In Kristin Mann’s study of this phenomenon, she posits that the
educated elite men engaged in extra-marital affairs by having “outside wives”. xiii This was done as
to avoid being labelled a polygamist in the light of the quick spread and impact of Christianity.
Polygyny in some sense became the in thing- having more than a wife but not living together in the same house as in polygamy. The effect and influence of the colonial administration on the native law and customary courts was far reaching. It prohibited forced marriage, child marriages, woman to woman marriage and permitted easier access for women to divorce. It is recorded that between 1939 and 1947 the number of divorce cases in the customary court had risen so much that another court had to be instituted to handle the over flow. From this point on, Yoruba culture and tradition had clashed with the colonialists’ culture. The understanding of marriage evolved, divorce took on a new meaning, and gender above all things took on a new but negative meaning.

Between this political and social change, the first negative impact was women’s political power that was unrecognized by the colonialists. The British dealt directly with the men in the day to day affairs of the state. The British, acting from their own cultural perspective totally failed to notice, study or recognize women’s economic and especially political power. The Colonizers’ attitude, coupled with certain cultural attitudes also helped to put women in a second class position.

In the field of education, the colonizers gave the missionaries the free hand to operate schools. Unfortunately, based on the attitude of the Europeans, the local community subtly bought into the idea of educating boys more than girls. On the part of the indigenous people, they reasoned that Western education for girls benefited her future family. They also argue that the girls are needed to learn home management and understand petty trading. It was popularly believed at the time, that western educated female become arrogant, immoral and promiscuous.
The British also put in place a highly effective government machine of offices but fully staffed by British civil service men, while clerical work was initially under the control of British women. It was not until the 50s and 60s that indigenous women began to break into employments in clerical and government office work. It was therefore, understandable that parents were not willing to spend money training young girls who could not work beyond teaching, nursing or secretariat level within government employment.

The British patriarchal culture was embraced by the Yoruba men who suddenly found themselves in-charge. This factor played a huge role in the relegation of women into the background in education and politics especially. The work of the missionaries also contributed immensely into creating a dichotomy in gender and subjugation of one gender to the other which was almost none existent prior to the arrival of the missionaries and the colonialists. An example can be found in the seating arrangement in the various churches for Sunday worship. All the men sat on one side of the aisle, the women and children on the other side.

With the expanding possibilities in government paid work, came decline in private women industry. Most young educated people now looked down on what until now were indigenous enterprises. The urban areas witnessed a huge shift in population of migrants, male and female into the cities. Majority of the older women or the ones who did not achieve western education kept mainly to trading. The mass exodus of young men from the villages into the urban centers in search of white collared jobs created newer opportunities for these women to expand their horizon of trading. Unfortunately, this only led to more freedom and lack of cohesiveness and security found in structured family life.
The effects of the slave trade, colonialism and influence of the two main religious incursion into West Africa at the turn of the 17th to early 18th century is a topic of continuous studies among historians. The effects and impact of this collusion has changed the course of the black man’s history and perhaps destiny for ever. The scope of this paper does not allow a detailed analysis of this clash of cultures. It suffices to point out the highlights of how history was forced to change its course, particularly as it reflects gender differentiation and understanding. The first and most important influence has to do with how the Yorubas now view, understand and interpret familial relationships which hitherto formed the foundation and bedrock of every relationship. Gustav Jahoda notes;

....the ties of kinship, which are rooted in the old cosmology, have always been close and powerful in West Africa: and the feelings of respect and dependence towards the family of origin have not weakened in proportion to the acceptance of new norms in other spheres.... Even educated Africans derive comfort and security from the knowledge that they can confidently look forward to help from their kin if they should happen to fall upon evil days; it requires a very independent cast of mind to be able to cut oneself loose under such circumstances. Therefore it becomes necessary to tread an uneasy middle path between following the time-honoured customs as expected by one’s elders and pursuing one’s own goals and aspiration. xviii

With mass movement of people from their homes and families to bigger cities, with the new ‘freedoms’ brought about by western education and ‘liberation’ from the old ways came the destruction of family values and control. Men and women started to look at each other differently, it was precisely at this moment in Yoruba history that patriarchy and subjugation of women was born! Closely related was the immediate but not lasting effect of the new religions (Christianity and Islam). While the new religions were based on a philosophy of separate spheres where men were associated to the public world of work, women were associated to the private sphere of home. This ideology, which was totally strange to Yoruba culture, suddenly became the legitimate,
religious and imperial justification for gender differentiation.\textsuperscript{xix} Even though Christianity can easily be accused of engendering this ideology of separate spheres, paradoxically, this impediment also became grounds by which women, decades later will claim their liberation.\textsuperscript{xx}

Closely related to the paradox of the effects of Christianity on the traditional Yoruba culture and society is the same kind of ambivalent effects of western education. On the one hand, it limited the possibilities of what women could achieve within a British patriarchal set up. At the same time, it setup the possibilities for women who will eventually excel by breaking boundaries and barriers, especially after independence to begin to fight for women’s rights.

It is important to note that a few women within the Yoruba enclave were actively involved in the process of struggle for independence. There were two political movements in Yoruba land actively engaged in the struggle for independence; the Action Group (AG) and the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC). From the early 50s to independence in 1960, there were a few women in party politics whose main role was to support the men. They organized rallies, fundraisers, prepared women organizations pre-elections, etc. There were two iconic women leaders (among a host of others) back then: Mrs. H.I.D. Awolowo and Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti. They are iconic for the roles they and their families played in pre-colonial and post-colonial Nigeria. As for the women, in one word, generally, they were relegated to a second class position until post-independence, especially in the 1980s when women began to contest for elections and win seats in the high government offices or public boards.
Post-Colonial Era

In the few years immediately after 1960, the year of Nigeria’s Independence from British colonial rule, the new nation started to evolve its own history and destiny. Unfortunately, the entity created by British ingenuity called Nigeria was a miss-mashed of many cultures and peoples. As such, in Yoruba land, as in many other tribal cultures of Nigeria, a clash of cultures had occurred with greater repercussion than anyone could have anticipated at the time.

The post-colonial experience of women in Yoruba land contributed to a newer understanding of gender differentiation among the Yorubas. The traditional notion of marriage also changed structurally as an after effect of and influence of British culture and the Euro-centric culture of Christianity preached by missionaries of various European extract and persuasion. Mercy Oduyoye surmises that Christianity as preached from Western lenses in Africa does little to challenge sexism even though the Christian Church constantly mouths rhetoric of equal worth of persons. For her, “Christianity reinforces the cultural conditioning of compliance and submission and leads to the depersonalization of women.” She articulated further that African men and women are well aware of the impact of colonization and Christianization of Africa. But that, women particularly, accuse the Church of capitulating to Western norms which then is garbed in Christianity and presented to African women.

As women’s power and influence waned in the society, the African Independent Churches, (and later on the Anglican and mainline orthodoxy will follow suit) by creating offices within the church to cater for women’s needs. These Christian women leaders were commonly referred to
as *Iya-Ijo* (mother of the faith community), *Iya Egbe* (mother of Associations), *Iyalode* (mother at the forefront) etc. They were opinion leaders and represented the interests of women in decision making at the church council level. The early missionary churches also found out that the women responded and converted more quickly than men responded, (A phenomenon which is true till date in the Yoruba society). Women also converted for a barrage of different reasons, fear of witchcraft, infertility, success at trading etc. and because once the women were converted, most times their children came with them, the missionaries concentrated on converting women before the more sceptical men. Even though this worked for the missionaries, it did not help the women in understanding their role in the new post-colonial era. The church preached women’s subordination to their husbands in all things and in all ways. Here we find another instance where western culture negatively impacted Yoruba traditional norms. The Yorubas are a deeply religious people; therefore, women’s subordination to men as a religious injunction was accepted as sacrosanct. D. McCall in his essay referred to this situation as one of “superordination and subordination.”

Within the dynamism of change the Yoruba culture experienced a post-independence/colonial era creation of an elite class of educated and ‘society’ women. Tension therefore grew between the Yoruba local and uneducated women with the socialites. The class transformation of women city dwellers as against the uneducated women who lived in the suburbs or villages grew. The ability of these women to speak with a unified voice was broken once and for all. Notably, the elitist city dwellers created associations and groups which were meant only for educated women. This situation, according to Ifi Amadiume raised further questions of leadership, legitimacy, representation, accountability and corruption which
eventually marked various women organizations post-independence. It is not only that this natural ‘selection’ and stratification was culturally a taboo among the Yorubas, but that it shows clearly gender differentiation even within the women fold.

The new political parties in post-independence Yoruba land, (The Action Group which metamorphosed into the Unity Party of Nigeria UPN), especially between 1960 and 1985 proposed egalitarian reforms which will give equal opportunities to women in education and government service. These efforts have failed woefully, successive Nigerian government have kept women firmly in subordinate roles to men, in public service, in applying for academic seats, breaking new grounds in areas traditionally assumed to be men's jobs, i.e. the military, transportation services, and priesthood in Christian Churches, etc. Denzer encapsulates it thus:

Women employees suffered many inequalities. Pay scales were lower than for men, for example, and there were fewer chances for promotion. Until the 1950s government policy concerning the promotion of female civil servants specified that women should not be placed in positions of authority over men. They had to resign upon marriage, the customary practice then in the west, working after that on contract, renewable on a monthly basis. Young Nigerian professionals coming into positions formerly reserved for the British frequently faced racial discrimination from their white superiors.... Young women also experienced sexual discrimination both from their white male superiors and Nigerian male colleagues. xxvii

Evaluation

The world has become a global village and cultures have collided and inter-mixed, and there isn’t much anyone can do about this. It is a phenomenon that will continue to evolve as long as there is human society. We can only continue to learn from these interactions who we were, who we are now and the possibilities of who we can be in the future. The issue of gender, especially as it relates to marital union, differ from culture to culture. From the Yoruba world
view, gender did not exist in the sense in which we understand it today. From the Yoruba myths
of creation and evolution of human race, the tradition has a didactic model of equality of
understanding maleness and femaleness as a unique attribute of oneness. Yet, within this kind of
conversation, I find disconcertingly, that there are too many issues at stake so much so that at
every point of the discussion, we stand close to contradicting the previous thesis. Mercy
Oduyoye summarizes the situation thus;

The dichotomies of dualistic thinking we Africans usually associate with Western
thought begin to resemble male thinking: a scheme that enables those in power to
legitimize their authority over those not in power.... Dichotomies enable the
“distancing” of issues and challenges, while theorizing postpones action for change.
We African women observe the divide-and-rule strategy of paternalism and we see a
strategy we formerly taught to denounce as exploitative and domesticating, part and
parcel of colonialism.... Western approaches to feminism may differ, but the goal—an
end to the marginalization of women—is sound..xxviii

Gender discussion within the academic circle has gained a momentum in the past two or
three decades, especially among feminists and womanists circles. This debate has taken off in
different directions; emancipation of womanhood, fight for equality of genders, breakthrough in
feminist spirituality, self-identity and intellectualism, marriage and family life etc. This reflection is
interested in understanding the issue of gender from a particular tribal point of view so as to
understand a theological explication of gender and Christian marriage. After the analysis above, it is
legitimate to ask “what now?”

First, it is necessary that the African can re-claim some of their ancient practices which are
of value and can add to the quality of their integral human development. I do not suppose it is
wrong to learn from a culture that places equal value on men and women especially as society claim
to be more civilized and more advanced intellectually? Part of societal intellectual growth and
maturation is the ability to appropriate and synthesize moral and ethical conducts from past traditions, civilizations and cultures.

Secondly, within the academic, economic, political and religious spheres, women no longer should be defined in the narrow, restrictive and patronizing terms of biological function; wife, mother, sexual partner or even in their domestic role; house keeper, children rarer and chef. According to Pauline Webb, she points out that women’s identity should not be limited to the physical difference of skin, colour or sex so that the question of equality is not over simplified to merely treating everyone the same, rather, “how to recognize the several identities and affirm the diversity of race or gender whistle at the same time affording equal value and opportunity to these different kinds of human beings.”

Additionally, women themselves must overcome a self-limiting identification and classification. Women should no longer define themselves by relationships, i.e., mother, wife, aunt etc. The racialization of social relations which creates different molds of being a woman either as a “white woman versus a black woman”, “first world woman versus a third world woman”, or even the class and elitist separationism common in developing nations among women. All of these give credence to the way the rest of the world interprets what womanhood means and where she is placed within the order of things, as the popular Yoruba proverb goes; “bi onigba ba se pe igba e, la se nba pe.” - “It is the way you hold yourself in high esteem that others will hold you.” Or “If you put a small value on yourself, rest assured that the world will not raise your value.” Women have to be more convincing in their arguments for what feminism/ womanist really means different from a mere quarrel with semantics and a pursuance of an academic ideal which is trending right now but soon enough will be cast upon the heap of ruins of such novelties and dead ideas.
Finally, to be able to reclaim a gender equal society akin to what was obtainable in the traditional Yoruba society pre-colonial era, there is an urgent need to re-address social discrimination of women especially in the home and work places. There will be the need to re-evaluate gender roles within the family especially in the ways we carry out responsibilities as male or female within the family. The former ways in which ‘manhood’ and ‘womanhood’ is approached as a place of power must be dismantled. Power will have to be re-translated to mean devotion, protection and mutual submission. Womanhood also will be willing to rise to equality in social, political and familial responsibilities.

Conclusion

Most researchers and historians of Yoruba/West African cultures agree on the overall that slavery, colonialism and missionary activities changed the cultural and social life of the peoples inhabiting the Western shores of Africa. The impact continues to be felt even today in many different ways. Arguably not all of it is negative. But when viewed from the point of view of gender differentiation, marriage and marriage customs, European culture has negatively impacted Yoruba culture. I have carefully enumerated this in the economic, political, social, and familial settings. Pre-arrival of the colonialists and missionaries, Yoruba women had no notion of gender subordination. Yoruba men were not thinking in terms of patriarchy, because everyone understood relations in terms of family, tribe or cultural unity. It will serve the Yoruba community well to reclaim that aspect of their past history so as to re-invigorate family life and ties and to once again give women the place of respect they deserve as wives, sisters and above all, as mothers.
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ii Samuel Johnson. A History of the Yoruba: From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate, (Lagos: CMS Bookshops, 1960) P.113

iii For lack of space and time, this period will also designate pre-slave trade era.


vii Ibid. Susan Geiger, p.30


ix The fuller accounts can be found in the published works of missionaries, travellers and colonialists, i.e. Hugh Clapperton (1826), Richard and John lander (1830), Thomas Bowen (1857), William H. Clarke (1854-55)


xi Sandra T. Barnes. “Gender and politics of Support and Protection in Pre-Colonial West Africa.” In a Paper presented at a Conference on Queens, Queen Mothers, Priestesses and Power: case Studies in African Gender, New York University, April 8-11, 1991

xii Oriki is a form of Yoruba poetry which recants the valour of one progeny and applauds the achievements of ones ancestors. It also points one to trying to walk the paths of virtue trodden by one’s ancestors. Hen this poetry is done by those who hold the tradition, the praises and style of singing is so poignant that people have been known often to emotionally breakdown and cry, some others respond by giving gifts, especially cash reward to the bard and dancing in frenzy to his or her praises.


This became a sub-culture when educated women were seen at the dance with gentlemen, smoking and dancing the waltz which included holding unmarried young girls in what the locals considered too close proximity to married or unmarried men. It was simply cultures clashing.


LaRay Denzer, p.28

Ibid. Mercy Amba Oduyoye. P.214

Pauline Webb. “Gender as an Issue.” A Paper Presented University of British Colombia, Vancouver, for University Counsellors and Student Services Conference, June 1986. p.6

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