

The Dilemma of Male Child Preference Vis-À-Vis the Role of Women in the Yoruba Traditional Religion and Society

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Abstract

In Africa and other parts of the world, there has always been tension over the preference of the male child over his female counterpart. Such preference sometimes hinges on the biased perception of women through ages and other misconceptions which have continued to survive in many societies. Consequently, it is not strange that the male child enjoys a preferential desirability and treatment over the female child. This is true of most African societies, of which the Yoruba society is inclusive. Nevertheless, a contextual study of the role of women in the African societies in general, and the Yoruba in particular, reveals not only the enormous roles and contributions of women, but various institutions that enabled their religious and social functions. A careful examination of this concept- its rationale and implications, especially in the light of the roles of women in the society give no justification for this preference. Using random sampling, the study examined the perception of 100 Yoruba respondents on the rationale for and implications of male child preference and the role of women in the Yoruba religion and society. The result shows that whereas the idea of male preference is evident, women serve as society stabilizers. Indeed their roles touch on two important aspects of life- religious and the social aspect of life. Religiously, they have been ascribed important and indispensable roles. Socially, they meet the basic needs of man – of care, hospitality, and availability to render supportive services. Among the Yoruba, women are perceived to be honesty and submissive. These and other sterling qualities place them at a vantage point where they serve humanity. Consequently, we conclude that giving the female children adequate educational training, encouragement and support will be of immeasurable benefit to any family and society.

Keywords: Male-child, Women, Culture, Yoruba, Preference

1. Introduction

The popular perception by many that the African World to a greater or lesser extent is man's world (Friday M. Mbom, 1987) is worthy of note in any studies bothering on the place of women in the society. The influence of Western Education coupled with Feminism as well as women liberation movements, have made remarkable improvement in the social status and perception of women. Ursula King observes that "women have gained a new awareness which makes them question much of what has long been simply taken for granted. Feminists' experience and thinking now challenge many aspects of culture, especially many of the traditional ideas and practices rooted in religion"(Ursula King, ed, 1987). However, what seems evident from the studies on women is the notion that women have been victims of discrimination, intimidation, relegation, abuse, violence, prejudice and various kinds of ills which have remained accepted in the society as convention and even normative especially in some parts of West Africa (Gaius A. Umahi, 2010). The perception of women through ages has been colored with biases and various misconceptions. These biases have given rise to connotations such as "the devil's advocate" in describing women. Others perceive women as almost synonymous to carnality and evil; hence they develop a kind of natural abhorrence for women. Various expressions of wrong notions and perceptions of women have continued to survive in many societies. This has led to general impression that the female child is of lower value than the male child.

Consequently, it is not strange that the male child enjoys a preferential desirability and treatment over the female child. This is true of most African societies. For example it is observable that the expression and celebration of the news of a new born baby seems to be more hilarious, fulfilling and complete with the male child than the female child. Julie Mulins, (2010) succinctly put it: "When a boy is born in most developing countries, friends and relatives exclaim congratulation. A son means insurance. He will inherit his father's property and get a job to help support the family. When a girl is born, the reaction is very different. Some women weep when they find out their baby is a girl, because, to them, a daughter is just another expense. Her place is in the home, not in the world of men. In some part of India, it's traditional to greet a family with a newborn girl by saying "the servant of your household has been born."

This work examines the preference for the male child among Yoruba people in the light of the role of women in Yoruba Traditional religion and society. The outcomes of the paper hopes to strengthen the invaluable and unquestionable place of women, especially the girl child not only as one with full potentials but also able to contribute to societal growth and therefore should be treated with uttermost regard.

2. The Yoruba People

The Yoruba people are densely situated as their home in the South-West of Nigeria and are one of the largest ethnic groups in the country (Kofi Johnson and Raphael Tunde Oyinade, 2004). They have been estimated to number about 20 million people and occupy Lagos, Oyo, Ondo, Ogun, Ekiti, Osun, and parts of Kwara and Kogi States in Nigeria as well as parts of the Republic of Benin and Togo (J. F Ade Ajayi, 2003); with a unique tradition that has given them a prominent place among African societies with extending influences on the Caribbean and South-America Cultures (Ajayi, 2003). They speak Yoruba as their language. Hence the term Yoruba can be used to designate both an ethnic identity and a linguistic group (Robert O Collins and James M. Burns 2007). Bolaji Idowu (1996) describes the Yoruba as “several tribes which are bound together by language, traditions and religious beliefs and practices.” J. K. Olupona (1993) posits that the Yoruba are the most studied ethnic group in Africa. He asserts that the prominence of Yoruba Studies in scholarly work is underscored by their arts, music, religion and oral literature, all of which have received adequate scholarly investigation. Similarly, Yorubaland has been described to be one of the richest zones of Traditional African arts (C. O. Adepegba, 1998).

Etymologically, the word Yoruba, it has been proposed to have probably originated as an Hausa term for the people of Oyo in the Western part of modern country of Nigeria (Molefi Kete Asante, 2007). The Igala and Itsekiri speak languages that are closely related to Yoruba. Like the typical African people, the Yoruba people are highly religious and owe much of their way of life and philosophy to their religion. Their history is wound up in their concept of how the world began. They have a very strong concept of God. Johnson and Raphael Oyinade (nd?) submit that the concept of a Supreme God seems to be strong point in Yoruba Religion that it is difficult to find an indigenous Yoruba who does not believe in the Supreme Being. If there is any, he is one who has been exposed to non-African influences of atheism. This means that the Yoruba people like their other Africa peoples believe in a Supreme God. Contrary to some misconceptions, the Yoruba Religion and by extension the African Traditional Religion is monotheistic. (Ibid)

As a part of the African Traditional Religion, the Yoruba Religion has as its major pillars the five key doctrines: Belief in God, Belief in Divinities, Belief in Spirits, Belief in Ancestors, Belief in magic and medicine. These basic beliefs form the basic fabric of Yoruba Religion and around them revolves their religious practices.

3. Women in African Cultures

Gaius A. Umahi (2010) takes a critical look at the status of women in different selected cultures and among various groups. Speaking of some parts of West Africa, he informs:

In some parts of West Africa, it is...believed that a woman is ‘settled’ in her husband’s home only when she has given birth to a male child. And in a family where there are males and females, the education of the males must take preeminence over that of the females. At the demise of a woman’s husband, in some places in Nigeria, she is often made to go through some humiliating rituals which are not reversed if it happens to a man. As a result of this skewed view on women a lot of injustices, persecutions, denigrations and other travails have become their lot.

Emmanuel Martey (1998) examines the place of women in the Africa context. He highlights some of African proverbs that show the perception of women:

1. Women have no mouth (Beti proverb, Cameroon)
2. Women never reigns (Igbo)
3. What the Devil does in a year, an old woman does in an hour (Moorish)
4. If you give your heart to a woman, she will kill you (Northern Nigeria)
5. A man’s “Yes” is a “Yes”, a woman “Yes” is often a “No” (Tswana)
6. Obedience to a woman makes one enter hell (Moorish)
7. A woman is like the milk of the young coco-nut(sic), it is not pleasant except in its shell (Swahili)

He further observes that “even in African Traditional societies, where the female has a greater role to play in religion, and religion as well plays a major role in ascribing status to women- as they are found in categories of priestesses, mediums, diviners, medicine women and so on- yet, there is discrimination (Ibid). He mentions the preference for the male child as one of the expression of the discrimination against women.

According to Bidemi Lawal (2011), “women in Nigeria have over the years suffered discrimination from their male counterpart. They have been marginalized and exploited in almost all spheres of human endeavour.” She laments that while women constitute 49 percent of the Nigerian population, their participation in both the political and economic spheres has been minimal. For her, “the problem has its root in both the culture of some ethnic groups which relegates women to the background and religion, which sees no role for women in the scheme of things (Ibid).

4. Women in Yoruba World View

It has been observed and stated that from that the precolonial times to the early 21st century, the role and status of women in Nigeria have continued to evolve. However, the image of a helpless, oppressed, and marginalized group has undermined their proper study, and little recognition has been granted to the various integral functions that Nigerian women have performed throughout history (Toyin O. Falola, 2010). This is obviously not peculiar to the Nigerian context. Colin Brown (1990: 427) asserts that a careful examination of the various accounts of history of philosophy and theology obviously are male-oriented.

This is bound up with the fact that most of them have been written by men from a male point of view. Further, it is bound up with the domestic role assigned to women in the society and it appears the intellectual agenda has largely been set by men. This is true of the ancient Jewish- biblical times where greater percentage of women only occupy the domestic domain (Richard N. Longenecker, 1986: 66). Similarly, the Greco-Roman world one of the cultures out of which Christianity emerged was not also favourable to women. However, Adesina Yusuf (2010) informs that Yoruba women since the ancient times have been central to the Nigerian Society. Their roles cut across politics, religion, economics and every aspect of life.

The political system of the Yoruba people is based on kingdoms. Each kingdom is ruled by an *Oba*. The *Oba* rules with the aid of his council of chiefs (Olusegun Ekanade, 2010). Modupeolu Fasike (1998) gives an insight into the involvement of women in the politics of the Yoruba Society. According to her, the *Iyalode* was a prominent office occupied by women in Yoruba societies. This office allowed women to participate in the decision making process of the society. No much evidence to prove the crowning of a woman as *Oba*. Fasike also mentions of some women who served as kingmakers. She further informs that “although women were represented in the council of state by the *Iyalode* and other female offices, their numerical weakness meant that women usually deferred to the superior judgment of the male” (Ibid).

Like many other African societies the Yoruba societies are essentially patrilineal and even in few of the matrilineal ones women barely appeared in public and political scene. Fasike (1998) explains:

The marginal role of women in the political arena was due to several reasons besides the rigours of child birth and marriage. Among the Yoruba, the woman is regarded as the weaker sex. She is stereotype as cowardly, avaricious, jealous, highly sentimental and sensitive and because she is given away in marriage losing the family name, her status is low. Secondly, the society presumed that women by their very nature can never be ‘head’ and that the ability for successful headship is not in the nature of women. Thirdly, women are believed to be disciplined and harsh.

Fasike’s points may perhaps be a logical way to explain the scanty opportunity given to women in the Yoruba society. Toyin O. Falola (2010) explains that:

The most serious threat to the influence and privileges of women occurred during the 20th century, when patriarchy combined with colonial changes to alter gender relations. As male chiefs collaborated with the British colonial administration in collecting taxes and governing, the position of female chiefs declined in importance. When the economy became increasingly geared toward the production of cash crops for export, Nigerian men and European firms dominated the distribution of rubber, cocoa, groundnuts (peanuts), and palm oil. Women, pushed to the background, were forced to shift to the production of subsistence crops. A previous land-tenure system that had prevented land alienation gave way to land commercialization, favouring those with access to money gained from the sale of cash crops. Western-style education also favoured boys over girls and thus largely excluded women from many of the new occupations introduced by colonialism.

However, it is noteworthy to mention some prominent women in the political arena of the Yoruba society and Nigeria by extension. Notable among them are Madam Tinubu of Lagos, and Efusentan Aniwura, the *Iyalode* of Ibadan (Hannath T. Kehinde Ishola, 2006).

Economically, Nigerian women have contributed to the sustenance of the kin groups in the society. During the pre-colonial era when Nigerian economy was essentially at a subsistence level, Nigerian women participated

effectively in the economy. They were actively involved in the production and distribution of foods. The Yoruba women have been actively involved in economic and commercial lives of the Yoruba societies. Fasike (1998) points out that the diversified nature of Yoruba economy does not allow for the exclusive involvement of men in economic activities. In other words, it was impossible for men to spread themselves across the wide range of economic activities that early Yoruba societies were engaged. More also she notes that the urbanization prevalent in traditional Yoruba land demanded a widely varied products in terms of needs and wants. There were guilds known as *egbe* which were responsible for the proper coordination of women's economic activities. Two notable of these guilds are *Egbe Alajapa*, which traded in inanimate objects, especially food items, fruits and medicinal herbs, and *Egbe Alarobo* which traded in animate objects like fowls, sheep, goats, etc. There were also other guilds named after the items they traded in or the profession. Example of such is the *Egbe Alaso* (guild of cloth traders). From strong indications, agriculture was key to women's occupation in pre-colonial Yoruba Yusuf (2010).

In the area of religion, there seems to be an overwhelming scholarly attestation to the prominence of women in Yoruba Traditional Religion. Although the participation of women in politics appears to be limited, their involvement and participation in religion is adequately affirmed. It is interesting to note that religious influence in the Yoruba cosmic sphere is total – as nothing lies outside the scope of religion. Religion permeates every aspect of Yoruba living: be it governance, economics, or medicine (Olajubu, 2010). This fact is further delineated by Bolaji Idowu (1996) when he informs that the actual essence of the Yoruba life is neither in their noble ancestry nor the good deeds of past heroes but in their religion. This shows how important religion is in the life of the Yoruba people. Further, Olajubu (2010) notes that:

Ritual, an important component of religion and culture, is guided by gender construct and symbolism. It is a means by which humanity controls, constructs, orders, fashions, and creates a way to be fully human. Its components include prayer, song, dance, sacrifice, and invocative language. Symbols are central to understanding rituals as ritual meaning derive from multiple sources.... Women feature prominently in ritual, and feminine principles are prevalent as well, usually coded in symbols.

J.R.O Ojo as cited in Fasike (1998) informs that “Traditionally, feminine forms are included in ritual utensils of Ifa, Sango and Esu. Similarly Babayemi cited in Fasike (1998) asserts that:

Women were more involved in the worship of Sango than men. In fact men what (sic) were dedicated to the service of Sango must first take the position of women, plait their hair like women, assume women's posture, use cam wood and other women pomade to rub their body as women would do. Such men must first be married to Sango and they should never marry a Sango Priestess as they were both co-wives of Sango.

There are certain religious rituals which are exclusive to women. These include the fetching of water into the sacred pot at the shrine of Obatala which is done by a virgin or a woman in her menopause age. Besides, women are also responsible for the sweeping of the surroundings of temples or shrine, ensuring the environment is kept clean. They also do the cooking during festivals. Yet another important role is the singing and dancing during religious ceremonies. An important aspect of women's place in the Yoruba world view is the symbolism of male-female principle in Yoruba. Olajubu (2010) informs that female principles are in general regarded as symbols of coolness (*ero*). On the other hand, male principles are construed as representing toughness (*lile*). This lies at the root of the people's conception of female (*abo*) and male (*ako*). Hence people say “*k'odun yi y'abo fun wa o*” meaning “may this year be female for us” (bring us all that the female principles stand for) the converse implication of this is the avoidance of a male year, which by all means may be tough and unpleasant. This indeed brings to mind a profound fact that the role of women borders on the practical aspect of life. They (women in their capacity as mothers, wives and caregivers) serve as lubrication in the wheel of life. To ease the tensions of life, to bring comfort and add a touch of care, tenderness and coolness to life which has a constant tendency to be cruel, harsh, mean and mechanic.

From the foregoing, it evident that Yoruba Traditional Religion ascribe not only key but also certain indispensably exclusive role to women. Olajubu (2010) expresses this thought when she argues that “contrary the conventional and familiar submission that women's role is limited in Yoruba religion, not only do women play central and vital roles in both indigenous Yoruba religion and Yoruba Christianity; women are repository of these traditions and have contributed to the formation and growth of the religions under considerations.”

5. Preference for the Male child among Yoruba People

In a survey carried out among 100 selected Yoruba, 74% of the respondents said they prefer a male child as a first born. Similarly, 52% of the respondents said they preferred a male child to a female child. Responding to the issue of the domestic value of children, only 14% of the respondents agreed that the male child tend to be

more caring than the female ones. Although 25% said they are not sure, a larger number of the respondents (61 %) disagreed that the male child tends to be more caring than the female child. A similar trend is also observed in the people's response to the statement that male children take care of aged parents than the female. Only 9% of the respondents agreed, while 55 % disagreed. The rest 31% were not sure. This suggests why female children become extremely useful to parents in old age. Indeed the female child will suffice for the care of aged parents instead of old people's homes.

Respondents also disagreed overwhelmingly (78%) that male children tend to be more available to perform key and supportive roles in social functions such as Burial, ordinations, convocations, and other ceremonies. Only 15% agreed, while 7 % were not sure. Similarly, 78% of the respondents disagreed that male children are more submissive and honest than the females. On the other hand, a majority of the respondents (69%) agreed that female children tend to be more available to perform key and supportive roles in social functions such as burials, ordinations, convocations and other ceremonies. Only 18% of the respondents disagreed, while 8% were not sure. Further, 99% of the respondents agreed that most Yoruba people prefer a male child to a female child; 98% of the respondents also admitted this preference constitutes a problem in many homes. The following are some the problems respondents identified with the preference for the male child

1. Polygamy- the taking of a second wife
2. Discrimination- there is a discrimination against the female children since they are perceived as lower in value than the male child.
3. Denial of the female Child adequate educational training
4. Create a feeling of inferiority on the female child
5. Dispute in the home
6. Divorce
7. Enmity among the Children
8. Misuse of inheritance and wealth by the male Child
9. Broken homes
10. Gender inequality-disrespect for the female child
11. No or poor family planning. Some families will keep giving birth in search of a male child. By so doing they raise a larger family size which may often affect the economy of the family adversely.

6. Conclusion

The yearning for the male child has come to be regarded among the Yoruba as an approved and justifiable cultural phenomenon. The desire for a male heir to ensure continuity of the family name; the concern that the family name may wane and become extinct if left in the hands of women; the depiction of the male as head and superior; the less or little attention and interest that is paid to the role of women in the society have all made the preference and chase for a male child prominent among many Yoruba people. Christians and educated ones despite the strong counter influence of Christianity, western education and way of life may suggest how deeply rooted this preference is.

However, a careful examination of this preference- its rationale and implications especially in the light of the roles of women in the society give no justification for this preference. So far we have seen that women serve as society stabilizers. Indeed their roles touch on two important aspects of life- religious and the social aspect of life. Religiously, they have been ascribed important and indispensable roles. Socially, they meet the basic needs of man of care, hospitality and availability to render supportive services. Honesty and submissiveness and other sterling qualities they possess place them at a vantage point where they serve humanity. This paper contends that these, and not politics, or leadership or whatsoever are the real issues of life. Life becomes tough, hard, cruel, and mere struggle of the survival of the fittest without religion and a touch of care, coolness and ease. Women therefore can be correctly described as the preservers of tradition, religion and culture. Women are repositories,

preservers and transmitters of culture and religious beliefs and values. They represent the cool, tender and fruitful aspect of life. They give life a touch of care, hospitality, calmness, and are the greatest source of inspiration and motivation for achievement. They shape and build people in their roles as mothers, caregivers and wives at home.

There is an urgent need to give a closer attention to what the female stand for. To give a preferential treatment for the male child on the basis of societal general opinion about women is not justifiable - not only among the Yoruba, but among other groups of people in Africa. Giving the female children adequate educational training, encouragement and support will be of immeasurable benefit to any family and society. It has been said: "If you educate a man, you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate a family" the education of women means the education of the society. They are the primary educators in their capacities as homemakers and society stabilizers. God made both sexes to be complementary. None should be desired above the other. If we should do, may be the female even stand a better chance of preferential desirability.

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