

## Powerful and Powerless: Women In Religion And Culture In The Traditional Ijebu Society In South-West Nigeria.

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### Abstract

Women have been variously conceptualized by different people as the beaver of human beings or as a special specimen of the human race or as the chattel of men, whose purpose is to work and bear children. Also, they are regarded as the source through whom kinship and succession is determined or, better still, as the powerful pivot which present the picture of weakness both in the home and in the society. These and many more have engendered the various inhumane and agonizing circumstances in which women find themselves. It has often been asserted that the role of women could only be gleaned from the domestic chores they perform at home. Before now, women have been relegated to the background, they were treated as nonentities who could only be seen and not heard. They were treated as an inferior or less privileged class of people whose only duty was to manufacture children and to tend their husband's house. It was not until recently that women began to take issues relating to their well-being very seriously by taking steps to bridge the gap between themselves and their male counterpart. In spite of the debilitating circumstances in which women have found themselves, Ijebu religion places a premium on women and their roles in the society. This is as a result of their preponderant involvement in different cults of religious worship and their other roles in the society. This paper, therefore attempts to highlight the status of women in Yorubaland especially among the Ijebu people viz-a-viz their involvement in social, economic and religious activities, as well as their political roles. This presupposes that for a proper understanding of women, it is apposite to examine their involvement in social, economic and political roles in the society. It is on this analysis that their roles as mothers, leaders and religious experts are subjected to scrutiny in order to ascertain their contribution to social and particularly, religious developments.

**Keywords:** Women in Ijebuland, Socio-Political roles, Yoruba culture, Emancipation

### INTRODUCTION

It will be apposite to look at the place of culture viz-a-viz its relationship with the status of women in the society. Culture is a variegated phenomenon with a wide range of meaning and application. It is regarded as the totality of the ways of life of a people which are passed down from generation to generation. E. B. Taylor (1891:1) defines it as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquire by man as a member of society. Culture has both material and non-material components. The non-material aspect comprises of the inner behavior, attributes, ideas, desires, values and norms which are expressed in form of customs and folklore. The non-material components of culture tend to dictate many of the social arrangements which include gender role ideologies (Aina O. A. 1998: 1). This presupposes that culture is an intrinsic aspect of every society.

Yoruba culture places many barriers at the doorsteps of women. These hinder them in the realization of their goals. In the first place, among the Yoruba, women's activities seem to be subordinate to those of men. This is as a result of the patrilineal nature of Yoruba society. Patriarchy is the order of the day. By patriarchy according to Gray, (1982).

*...a culture that is slanted so that mean are valued a lot and women are valued less, or in which man's prestige is up and women's prestige is down (p. 19)*

*A system of social stratification and differentiation on the basis of sex, which provides material advantages to males while simultaneously placing severe constraints on the roles and activities of the females.(Aina, 1998, p. 6)*

This emphasizes male dominance at the expense of the female folk, who could be disposed of at will. Authority in the home rest with the husband who is responsible for all decisions in the family. The woman is to abide by whatever decision the husband makes. Thus, the inequality of men and women is clearly stressed. Therefore, for women to claim equality with men is an aberration.

In Yoruba society, there is a preference for male children over female children. This preference is due to cultural biases which regard male children as heirs to the father's property. They are also regarded as the agent

through whom the family's name will be perpetuated. Traditionally female children are not valued for the simple reason that they are expected to help their mothers in household chores, rearing the young ones, and getting ready for marriage. This idea of male dominance informs the general Yoruba preference for male children as carriers of the family name and tradition. Most parents prefer to send boys to school and allow them to continue to higher heights. The birth of male children is a mark of social fulfillment on the part of a man while the woman sees it as a sign of satisfaction and security in her husband's home. The same cannot be said of the birth of female children this often leads to rejection, anxiety and shame on the part of the mother whose position in the house seems threatened since the man could bring in another woman to replace her for failing to give birth to male children. In addition to this, the female children eventually leave their father's house at marriage and become members of other families. This accounts for the disdain with which women are treated, female children are given the barest education while male children are given the best education.

Men usually prove their dominance and superiority over women by marrying more than one wife as they see in this a confirmation of social status and responsibility. The number of wives and children a man has is an indication of his success in life, while having many children in assurance of support in old age. According to Olusanya, (1970, p. 150-161) polygyny in Yoruba society is purely "the exploitation of females".

### ***OPO SISU AND PARTICIPATION IN TRADITIONAL FESTIVAL***

A Yoruba woman has no right to inheritance; she herself can be inherited at the death of her husband. She may be asked to eat a particular food for a certain period of time, or she may be asked to observe a period of mourning ranging from forty days to one year as the case may be. Women are also barred from participating in certain traditional festivals. During *Oro* and *Agemo* festivals women are required to remain indoors. A Yoruba song in this regard says:

*Awo Egungun l'obinrin le se  
Awo Gelede l'obinrin le mo.  
B'obinrin f'aju kan oro, oro a gbe e  
Eti l'obinrin fi ngbohun oro*

Meaning:

Women can participate in the ancestral masquerade cult  
Women can be involved in the Gelede cult;  
If a woman sees *Oro*, *Oro* will carry her away  
It is with the ears that a woman hears the voice of *Oro*

When the *Agemo* is out, it is accompanied with a cry;  
*Eeke... e! Obinrin ma ii wo o...!*  
*O wo o fere, o ku fere*

*Meaning:* "Eeke.. e! it is forbidden for women to see it.  
A superstitious look, a surreptitious death"

These restrictions were placed on women because of a belief that women are not able to keep secrets. *Obinrin o ni gogogongo*. Meaning: women cannot keep secrets.

### **WOMEN AND ECONOMIC POTENTIALITIES**

With reference to economic potentials, women have been at the receiving end. Women have been subjected to harrowing and debilitating conditions without regard for their persons. Parpat, (1989) surmised that:

*Whatever the state's ideology or level of economic development, women never control the ruling apparatus... women generally work in the worst paid, least skilled, most unsecured jobs. They exist on the economic margin of society, often surviving through back-breaking, poorly paid labour in the informal sector or casual labour.(p. 25)*

Women work in the most excruciating conditions as they engage in such activities as trading and farming. Thus, women have the ability for independent economic activity. Boulding, (1977, p. 10) assessed the role of women from the perspective of their womanhood as “breeder, feeder and producer”. The participation of women in economic activities presupposes that they contribute to mainline sustainability of the family and the society. However, this contribution of the womenfolk is not adequately rewarded. “In spite of the fact that women produce most of the food crops, and do the bulk of the processing, what they earn is nothing when compared to men’s earnings”, Ashworth, and Bomerga, (1988, p. 65). “While women do about two-thirds of the world’s work, they receive less than one-tenth of the world’s income”. Rewbotham, (1992, p. 40). This shows the pathetic conditions under which women work. This absence of economic assertiveness runs counter to the male dominance of all economic activities and creates a gulf between men and women. Thus, we can posit that while women participate actively in economic activities, these have not been adequately rewarded.

In Yoruba society, whatever achievement a woman makes in her economic pursuit, the glory goes to her husband. According to Awe, (1989, p. 315) this is tantamount to subjection of the womenfolk by the opposite sex. In this regard, women become economically dependent on men since they make only little money from selling consumer goods or social services. Until recently women were denied jobs in industry, in transport and in administration: a greater part of their economic activity took place in the non-formal sector of the economy. This shows the inferior status of women in the society. A man is like a person who sits on one’s back, choking life out of one but at the same time assuring one that he would like to do everything in his power to lighten one’s burden everything except getting off one’s back. The Ìjèbú women are majorly agriculturists. Agriculture is one of their occupation and they produce large quantities of varieties of food crops, which are meant for domestic consumption and commercial use. Some of the crops are exported out of the country or to other neighbouring villages, towns and cities. To these women, farming is not only an occupation but a way of life. Cultivation is manually done with local tools made by the blacksmiths and procured at a very reasonable price. They produce such crops as water-yams (*isu-ikókoré* or *Obí Isu*), cocoyams, maizes, oranges, plantains, mangoes, and a lot of cassava from which they get the popular “*gàrí Ìjèbú*” and vegetables.

Apart from the food crops and vegetables, women, like their male counterparts, work on oil palm and kolanut trees. The process of harvesting of the palm fruits from the tree is done by men but the process of producing palm oil and palm kernel oil is exclusively the work of women in Ìjèbúland. Women are responsible for storing farm products so as to preserve them till they were needed to be sold, consumed or planted in the next farming season. In Ìjèbúland, everybody has an ancestral farmland for cultivation whether you are a woman or a man.

Women also take part in animal husbandry like hens, pigeons, goats, ducks, sheep and pigs, which are for home consumption or commercial purposes. Apart from this, women also engage in the industrial sector of the Ìjèbú economy. These industries include pottery making, soap making, mat making, and hair dressing. They use clay to mould variety of clay works ranging from pots of various sizes and various purposes, cooking stands (*Àdògán*), money savers (*Kóló*), *Ìkòkò* and *Lóbìrì* (large pots) used for cooking pap and frying *gàrí* (cassava powder), *Àmù* (local water pot), *Ìsasùn* (pot for preparing soup or stew), *Fitílà* (Clay oil lamp), *Otùn* (used by the priestesses to collect water from the river) and various emblems of the divinities.

Ìjèbú women are also good saw-millers and traders. They travel to nearby villages living with the inhabitants for several days to purchase food items and household goods, which are taken to nearby cities to be sold. Women, like their male counterparts, participate in the selling of logs (wood) to the extent that they own sawmills, have tippers lorries (*Okò-agbé’gi*) all over the place.

Furthermore, they also involve themselves with traveling up north to get dry hides which are later processed to remove the hair, soaked and turned to fine leathery delicacy called (*Pònmó*). *Pònmó* is taken to far and near towns and cities for sale. Some of them are also good businesswomen, selling textiles, provisions and cosmetics. It could be surmised that, the roles of women in Ìjèbú economic activities cannot be easily quantified. They participate in agriculture, retail and wholesale trade and other industries situated in and around Ìjèbúland. In a nutshell, women sell their husbands’ farm products.

#### WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP ROLES

Women are the most marginalized in Yoruba society: they are placed under the authority of men. They are denied any leadership role, especially in political affairs. Traditionally, life revolves around the men the place of women is understood in the context of men’s identity. Women are excluded from leadership positions in the society and are barred from participate in political activities. They could not participate actively in decision making. Awe, (1989, p. 316) pointed out that:

*In the political sphere.. women lost even more than the men, as colonial officials denied them the opportunity which they had enjoyed to participate, if only to a certain degree in decision-making.*

This presupposes that women did not enjoy any visible political authority in the society and they are continually marginalized in the political sphere.

This notwithstanding, it is gratifying to note that in Yoruba society some women play an important role in king making and some occupy important positions in the *osugbo* the highest legislative council among the Yoruba. In the *osugbo*, a woman occupies the position of *Erelu*. Her participation in this council is very important and her consent is important in any decision making. This is why it is often remarked that:

*Da 'gi ge, da 'gi ge!  
Aake kan, ko le da 'gi ge  
Da 'gi la, da 'gi la!  
Aake kan, ko le da 'gi la  
Laisi Erelu, Osugbo kan ko le da 'wo se*

Meaning:

No axe can cut wood by itself.  
No axe can split wood by itself.  
Without the *Erelu*  
No *Osugbo* can perform any cultic activity,

In addition to this, another position of note among the Yoruba is that of *Iyalode*. This is another title through which Yoruba women participate in politics. The *Iyalode* is a powerful political figure who fights the cause of women in Yoruba society. Notable among these are Efunroye Tinubu, the *Iyalode* of *Egbaland* and Lagos and Efunsetan Aniwura in Oyo to mention to mention a few.

The position of *Iyaloja* is also important as she represented the economic fortunes of the women. Yoruba women could occupy significant positions in the political climate of their society. *Ìjèbùlánd* is a male dominated society; men occupy most of the prestigious political posts such as being the “*Oba*” (*Oba* is the Yorùbá word for king) This is not the exclusive post for men as we have heard. There were female kings in *Ìjèbùlánd* just as in other towns among the Yorùbá. Looking at the past and present list of kings in *Ìjèbùlánd*, one could see among them three female Kings namely: *Ore-yèyè*, *Ore-geje* and *Róbakóyè*. Recently there are no female regents, though they were not excluded from that position by any law, written or unwritten.

In the complex palace administrations, the *Oba* ruled with the assistance of a number of women referred to as the ‘women of the palace’. These women were of various ranks and grades. Women were admitted by initiation into the popular *Òsùgbó* cult but such women must have reached menopause. *Òsùgbó* cult is a fraternity of chiefs and elders, which was also the executive authority of the town. It also has a religious character. Its symbol is the two brass images known as “*edan*”. It is the highest cult group in the land and commanded the respect and obedience of all.

Among the various towns in *Ìjèbùlánd*, there is an important chieftaincy title which is classified as the *Pampa* class of chiefs. There are at least four women among the men in this group. They are: *Ìyálóde*, *Òtún Ìyálóde*; *Ìyálájé* and *Òtún Ìyálájé*. There is also a woman member of the *Ògbóni* cult who is known as *Erelú*. These women run the affairs of women in *Ìjèbùlánd*. Thus, Mba, (1997) posited that:

..., they participated at all levels of policy makings, including that of the *Òsùgbó* secret cult and the *Ògbóni* council of *Ìwàrèfà* Chiefs.(p. 12)

This indicates that women participate actively in the political process in *Ìjèbùlánd*.

We also have the institution of the “*Ìyálójà*” which is also another political office for women. In all, we see that in *Ìjèbùlánd*, just like in other towns in Yorùbáland, women were involved in the political processes affecting the whole community. They effectively controlled their own affairs as well as certain aspects of men’s affairs in the community.

#### WOMEN SOCIAL ROLE

In *Ìjèbùlánd*, the man is considered as the head of the family, while the woman is the mother of the house. Women are mothers and wives, taking care of the home front and the domestic sector of their various families. The domestic well-being of their families depends very much on them. Women are closer to their families, as they are usually the first to know when things go wrong. They are concerned about the well-being of

the society. They pray a lot, in season and out of season. They are always ready to make necessary repairs where there are damages. They provide health care and spiritual services for their community. As observed by Uwalaka, (1992) and as applicable to Ìjèbú women, their well-being and that of their families is believed to depend very much on the maintenance of a favourable relationship with the Supreme Being and divinities.

It is the women's role to teach the child the traditional norms and values of the community. This is because they lay the foundation on which education of their children are built, they spend more time with the children than their male counterpart and they are the children first teacher. It is through the mother tongue that the children begin to learn. It is the responsibility of the women than their male counterparts to teach the child the traditional norms and values of the community. This role is transmitted through the various folk-tales, songs and myths which they recite to the youngsters. The women teach the younger ones the taboos of the society as they affect their families, personal life, the various cult groups, the preparation of meals, how to observe personal hygiene and general home training.

Women in Ìjèbúland are seen as agents for execution of community rules and regulations, for maintaining order and transmission of traditions and development through the process of socialization. A proverb from Ghana as quoted by Mbiti, (1988) really shows the beautiful picture of women in Ìjèbú society. The proverb declares that:

*A woman is a flower in a garden; her husband is the fence around it ... she shares directly with God in a personal way, the secrets and mysteries of life and birth. This role of the woman in sharing in the mysteries of life started already in the mythological time.*(p. 69-82)

#### WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS ROLE

That women have been subject to discrimination is not in doubt. In spite of this women have been able to assert their influence in Yoruba traditional societies especially as a result of their involvement in different religious cults where they play leading roles. In essence, therefore, women have not been completely relegated to the background in traditional societies, they have been able to demonstrate their leadership role in society through religious engagements. It is in the religious sphere that Yoruba women "make their most important contributions to the running of the Yoruba society" (Beier, 1955, p 95). This whole idea about women's religious role is supported by Aina (1998) when she said that:

*Women's visibility in the traditional Nigerian society has been largely associated with their role in traditional religious life.*(p. 12)

The Yoruba woman is responsible for the cleanliness of sacred places of worship. In Yoruba society women participate actively in religious ceremonies. In some cases they serve as religious leaders. Adewale, (1998, p. 10) opined that there were some cults where men and women had equal participation and the leadership of such could fall on either male or female members, depending on seniority or heredity election or choice by the divinity.

There is no doubt that Yoruba women took active interest in *Osun* in Osogbo. There are some cults which are female dominated cults. In these cults, women are more prominent than men in the conduct of religious duties. History is replete with women who performed extra-ordinary feats in Yoruba society – feats which qualified them for the status of goddesses. Notable among these are Moremi who single-handedly delivered her people (the *Ife*) from *Igbo* oppression by sacrificing *Oluorogbo*, her only son *Osun*, *Orisa-Oko* (*Yemowo*, *Obatala's* wife), *Oso-Usi*, *Yemule*, *Yemoji*, *Yemoja* are all female goddesses. Women constitute the hierarchy of officials in these cults.

Women are admitted into the highest priesthood. They serve as priestesses in the cults. In the cult of *Sango* (the god of thunder) *Iya-Sango* ("the mother of Sango") plays a predominant role. According to Beier, (1955, p. 95)

*...through the respect owed her by all the worshippers of the cult and because of the importance of the power of her dominations and sacrifices, this woman – "Iya Sango" - wields tremendous influence.*

In Osogbo, the king could not take decisions without consulting the *Iya Osun* – the *Osun* priestess Aina, (1998, p.13).

Women also act as medicine women with some knowledge of divination. They constitute the sustaining factor in the cult of the divinities and men often consult them in time of depression. As medicine women, they

combine the art of healing with that of child-bearing, Yoruba mythology ascribes the art of healing to *Osanyin*-the wife of Orunmila Ajanaku (1973).

Thus among the Yoruba women healers are admired and respected. They are seen as powerful. They are given such titles as *Iya Onisegun* (the woman who makes medicine), *Iya Abiye* (the woman delivers safely), *Iya Elewe Omo* (the woman who knows the herbs for the cure of children's diseases). Odebiyi and Aina, (1995). From all these, one can say without any equivocation that women in Yoruba society could not be relegated to the background especially in the religious realm where they have made considerable impact on the growth and development of the society.

In Ìjèbù community, women play significant role in the religious activities of the society. Like their male counterparts, they believe in the existence of God and have many myths to explain His reality. The women appreciate God. He is real and practical in their religious experiences. They also believe in lesser divinities through which they contact God. To understand women in Ìjèbùland thoroughly, it is essential to study their religion. It is religion that binds all elements of human life and culture. Religion, which is among the facets of culture, plays a dominant role in the life of the people. It is that which they hold dearest and which gives their life its basic rule of behaviour. The traditional Ìjèbù women are known to be intensively religious and they get involved in it from the cradle to the grave. To this group of people, as opined by Ìdòwú, (1979)

*... the real keynote of the life of the Yorùbá (Ìjèbù women inclusive) is neither in their noble ancestry, nor in the past deeds of their heroes. The keynote of their life is their religion.*(p. 6)

We could truly say of the Ìjèbù women just like Paul the Apostle said of the Athenians, "In all things they are religious" (Acts 17: 22). They are good at offering prayer for their families and the people of general goodwill. Women provide music, songs and dances required during religious activities, while men are the drummers. They officiate as priestesses, diviners, healers, traditional birth attendant and the custodians of sanctuaries for divinities. Corroborating these roles, Mbiti (1988) observed that:

*In many areas there were (and still are) women priests (priestesses); almost everywhere in Africa the mediums (who are so important in traditional medical practice are nearly always women, those who experience spirit possession are in most cases also women. Traditional healing is a profession of both men and women and it is more often the women practitioners who handle children's and other women medical needs.*(pp. 69-82)

Women in Ìjèbùland play prominent roles in their various cults. They have *Erèdógun* (It is called *Erèdógun* in Ìjèbù dialect but *eerindinlogun* in general Yorùbá language) which they use for divination. They also cast the "*Àbàtá*" (*kola nitida*) and they are usually consulted by all and sundry in and around Ìjèbùland. They are the people selling herbs in and around the market places, a profession no man performs in Ìjèbùland. It is believed that women are the people who are exclusively in charge of the sale of these herbs by virtue of the fact that they are knowledgeable in the art of divinities. In addition, most of these women are also devotees and adherents of these divinities. They are even consulted by men when they are in need of herbs. They are "herbalists" who have special knowledge of medicinal herbs and use herbal remedies to treat all forms of illnesses. They may charge some amount of money which could be small or huge, depending on the nature of illness. A careful look at some of the various cults in Ìjèbùland reveals that women are in-charge of prophecy and they are the ones that usually go into trance for divine inspiration and visitation. They are in-charge of the mysteries surrounding the rituals and they perform the necessary rites. Therefore, as in the words of Ogundipe, (2007, p. 28), in spite of the patriarchal structure of the society, we can see the uniqueness and sacredness of womanhood.

*Woman is considered among the Yoruba and other Africans as both a giver of life and a giver of meaning through doing. In fact, she is considered primarily a doer because the spirits do not come down without the power and blessing of the woman. As priestess... the woman blesses and interprets the code of the spirits and thus, interprets existence, to the community she interprets the meaning of life of her community.*

Women are an important element in the Ìjèbù traditional society. Their multi-dimensional roles as economic, medical, mothers and political-cum-religious leaders show their worth in the survival of mankind. Johnson, (1956) rightly concluded that:

*On the whole the women seem to be far more industrious than the men, for whereas the men always contrive to have leisure hours and off days from works, the women seem to have none. Boys and young men certainly have more idle hours than the girls. The care of the children also devolves almost entirely upon their mother...(p. 125)*

### **THE QUEST FOR EMANCIPATION AND SELF-WORTH**

Development has been understood as the fusing of social and economic objectives not only for an increase in production, but in order to ensure considerable structural and social transformations as well as a resource distribution, resulting in improvements that will benefit the entire community. Akinrinde, and Barling (1987). The hallmark of development is hinged on the improvement of the life of the people, and Yoruba women have performed excellently in this regard. According to the International Planned Parenthood Federation, Africa Region.

*Development should not be seen only as a desirable goal in itself but also as an important means of furthering the equality of the sexes. For true equality to become a reality for women, the sharing of power on equal terms with men must become a major strategy. There is a need for women to participate fully in political processes and to have an equal share of power in guiding development efforts. (p. 83)*

Women have played and are still playing prominent roles in the improvement of the society. The formation of the women party in 1944 by Lady Oyinkan Abayomi and the formation of Nigerian Women's Society in 1963 by the late Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti illustrate the role which women have played in political emancipation. Awe, (1992, p. vii) notes the inspiring role played by Charlotte Olajumoke Obadan, who championed women's rights.

Economically, women have contributed and are still contributing immensely to the economic development of their localities through active participation in and promotion of trading and farming activities. Basically, women engage in trading activities through the organization of household industries and the operation of the local market system. Women constitute a larger percentage of those who engage in farming. Their role in farming is an indication of their contribution to food production and security in the society. They plant specific crops either on a small or a large scale thereby bringing about food sufficiency in the society. Apart from farming, Yoruba women engage in other crafts – weaving, pottery, mat-weaving, cloth-weaving, etcetera. they have helped in boosting the economic situation and they will continue as their maker allows them, thereby making them less dependent on their male counterpart.

### **CONCLUSION**

It will not be an over statement to say that women in Ijebuland and Yorubaland generally have played and are still playing prominent roles in the society. They constitute an indispensable element in society. They have been described as “heaven's best gift, man's joy and pride in prosperity and his support and comfort in afflictions”. Ada, (2000, p. 16). Women possess the highest power, which is power to give life, which only God, the Creator and Controller of the Universe can give. They are endowed by the Supreme Being the ability and power to give life and as such they are considered sacred. Women have direct connection with spirits and the spiritual world as a result of the priestly role they offer through rituals, domestic, public, social and political.

If women had failed to be fertile or if they had refused to contribute to the welfare of society on any people would have given up while society would have ground to a halt.

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