

## The Images of Women in Yoruba Folktales

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### Abstract

*Because much of the anthropological literature appears to tell us that men are everywhere superior and dominant and women everywhere play subordinate roles, we must then ask what the evidences are and what it means. Therefore one tradition of folklore has been chosen for the purpose of this research in order to see if there is any evidence within it which adequately illustrates the inferiority or superiority of the Yoruba woman. Thus this work examines the images of woman in Yoruba culture as observed in their folktales. The ethnographic collection and expository of published Yoruba folktales form the data and basis for explaining certain salient issues concerning women. The interpretation of the symbolic undertone of these folktales provides a basis for understanding the limited types of female power that contradict the inferior status accorded to Yoruba women in most literatures.*

**Key words:** anthropology, ethnography, women, culture, Yoruba, folktale, symbolic interpretation

### 1. Introduction and Statement of Problem

Anthropologists have suggested that folktales are more than the literary and oral expression of the people, but the totality of their ethnography. And if systematized by a researcher give a penetrating picture of a given way of life, of what was and what has come to be. Boas demonstrated this in his study of the myths of the Tsimshian Indians of the Pacific North-west. From this great collection of myths are abstracted descriptions of Tsimshian material culture, economy, social structures and religion practices, accounts of the life cycle of individuals, of secret societies, of the prestige-giving contest of economic waste known as the potlatch, of their ethical concepts and emotional life (Boas, 1914: 199-149). Thus, literary expression, in whatever form in which it exists, draws its materials from the experience of its creators, giving us what Boas termed an “autobiography of the tribe” (ibid. 451-490). So that the artist who works with paints or in words, in wood or stone, acts as a creator of his culture; his responses are always relative to its formal patterns and his values reflective of a collective consciousness.

The Yoruba people have a rich and complex folklore system, which is a composite of riddles (*alo-apamo*), jokes (*efe*) wise sayings and maxims (*oro*), proverbs (*owe*) folktales (*alo*), *Ifa* corpus (*odu-Ifa*), hunters chants (*ijalalode*), bridal chants (*ekun-iyawo*), praise songs/names (*oriki*), poetry (*ewi*) and others.

Scholars like Olurode (1999), (Awe 1997) and Udegbe (2004) have reiterated the equal positioning of men and women in African socio-political systems. Olurode specifically approached the subject by focusing on traditional Yoruba proverbs and adages in order to establish the authentic traditional social status of women among the Yoruba ethnic group of Nigeria. By this methodology, he was able to argue out what the images of women were, are now and what ought to be in the traditional Yoruba socio-cultural space.

With the cited works serving as motivation, one is concerned about the construction of gender in the folktales of the Yoruba people, with a view of exposing the power distributions between the male and the female, and how they may serve in rehabilitating the current received notion of gender structure. Folktales will be considered from the perspective of their functioning as an embodiment of socialization process, worldview and, in short, ideology. The significance of this study lies in its aiming to show that in the authentic Yoruba tradition, the conceptualization of gender is not the same as what has been touted as traditional practice owing to years of alien domination of both the political and conceptual structures of the Yoruba people.

The principal objective of the study is to analyze the projection of women in Yoruba folktales in order to identify what the authentic Yoruba gender ideology is, with the purpose of putting into perspective the construction of women and the discourse of development.

### ***Literature Review /Theoretical Leanings***

The distinction between folklore and folktales has not been comprehended. It is a relational distinction. All folktales are part of the body of folklore within a given culture. However, not all folklore is folktale. The defining element in folktale, as has been said, is its fictional characteristics. The major focus of ethnography is studying the ways, in which people understand and interpret their surrounding, as well as the actions and utterances of the members of the society. The interpretation form a shared cultural system of meaning, that is, understandings shared to varying degrees, among members of the same society, (Des Chene, 1996:1274). Symbolic anthropology studies symbols and the processes (such as myths, rituals, language and folklores) by which humans assign meanings to these symbols in order to address fundamental questions about human social life (Spencer, 1996:535). According to Geertz, man is in need of symbolic “source of illumination” to orient himself with respect to the system of meaning in any particular culture (1973a:45). Turner states too that symbols instigate social action and are determined influences inclining persons and groups to action (1967:36).

Symbolic anthropology views culture as an independent system of meaning deciphered by interpreting key symbols and rituals (Spencer, 1996: 535). There are two major premises governing symbolic anthropology. The first according to Chene is that beliefs, however intelligible to others, become comprehensible when understood as part of a cultural system of meaning (ibid.). The second major premise is that actions are guided by interpretation, allowing symbolism to aid in interpreting ideas as well as material activities. Traditionally, symbolic anthropology has focus on religion, cosmology, ritual activity and expressive customs as mythology, folklorics and the performing arts (ibid.).

This theory is however, relevant in our discourse of folktales and the symbolic undertone of the construction of the woman. The theoretical stance of symbolic anthropology indicates how the ideas a people hold of reality can be deduced by looking at the ways these are expressed in their folktales. In terms of Yoruba notion of gender relation, therefore, a symbolic handling of the evidence from data clearly demonstrated that the gender roles in the stories are “real” for Yoruba people, at least in ‘traditional’ society. This is so, because the use of folktales is still predominantly a feature of the Yoruba in the villages, where traditions are still highly revered. In addition, the symbols in Yoruba folktales have carefully distinguished between the representation of common human nature on one hand; and on the other hand, the strict configuration of gender dichotomies. For instance, Ijapa may stand for males in some stories and for humankind as a whole in others.

Characters and personages as well as themes, settings, and indeed the bare plots of the folktales are of symbolic significance to Yoruba people. These tales symbolize the domains of - warfare, hunting, domestic affairs, politics, religion, marketing and others. The arguments in respect of these domains have demonstrated that even though they may be gendered, they are not stratified in any order of importance. For instance, in the tale in which the dog’s mother provides food for him by lifting him to a place in the sky by means of a chain, the identification of the mother with food is not a gendered role that is pejorative. What this tale indicate is that in Yoruba world view, the mother (woman) is one’s last resort when everything goes wrong, and that she is the ‘institution’ that a person in desperation would try not to desecrate if possible. However, for the interpretations of these symbols to make sense and be meaningful, must tally as closely as possible with what the owners of these symbols make of them. It is on this theoretical premise that we shall be answering these questions.

- i. How is gender construction projected in these folktales?
- ii. How is the image of women projected in the folktales?
- iii. What is the implication of all of the above in contemporary Yoruba gender relations?

### ***Data and Methodology***

The data for this study is the Yoruba folktales and oral narratives taken from the *Odu-Ifa*. These narratives are very important to the Yoruba as the people regard them as a store house of their world view. It is on this premise that they express the Omni-potency of the *Ifa* corpus; and the adequacy of *oro* (words) and *owe* (proverbs) in searching for the truth. That is, the correct perspective of the status of women in Yoruba culture can be measured vis-à-vis its oral narratives that bordered on women and gender construction. The research also peeped into existing collections of published works and compendium of folktales; such as Adebayo Babalola’s *Akojopo Alo Ijapa* Vol. 1&2, Olatunji Opatotun’s *Asayan Alo Onitan* (1982), Yemi Elebuibon’s different works on *Oriki* (both recorded and published) and Wande Abimbola’s work, *Odu-Ifa*, (1976, 1977).

The research also used participant observation method. This method chosen within ethnographical milieu for data collection is structural observation. Here participant observation was seen as the best option, in order to get the true reaction of the participants in the dramatization of folktales. There was a need for this because of assertion that the true picture of human being cannot be gotten when such people realize they were been studied. Thus, the technique of participant observation, enable the researcher to share in the experience of the people by not merely observing what was happening but would also be able to feel and tell it.

Then other methods such as focused group interviews and key informant interviews were adopted. Participants were sorted according to their relevance on the various themes of study. Children and teenagers were interviewed on the theme that has relevance to the issues of the use of folktales in socialization and education process. Adults were interviewed on the concepts of folktales in Yoruba culture; and how westernization has come to influence the practice of tale narrations over the years. The Sessions were systematically arranged for the performances of folktales narratives that brought together the children and adults participants.

### **Data Analysis and Discussion**

#### **Summary of the Gender Distribution in Yoruba Folktales**

- (i) Female representations in themes of human tales are more than male.
- (ii) Heroes are more than heroines in heroic or legend tales.
- (iii) Male animated tales outnumbered female animated tales.
- (iv) The leaning towards females was greater if focus was on adult character (especially the *alo olorogun*) (5-8), and less if focus was on child characters (4-7) and much lesser if focus was on animals (2.6)
- (v) The imbalance in depicting males and females varied from one locality to the other: male is better represented in Oyo/Ijebu folktales. While female enjoys a better coverage in Akoko-Ondo/Ekiti folktales.

#### **The Place of Yoruba Woman**

The Yoruba maxim below perhaps explains this in entirety, that is, the place of the woman in traditional Yoruba society:

*Iya ni wura*

*Baba ni jigi*

This is to mean that mother is gold (symbol of a precious possession) while father is a mirror (symbol of identification). Moreover, when the mother dies the most precious possession is lost. This perhaps goes a long way in bringing to the open the highly revered, positive and idolized position of the woman in Yoruba culture. It is important now to note that the woman does not have differing pictures but when cautioned, corrected or praised according to cultural or customary prescriptions, it is then wrongly believed that the Yoruba's place for the woman is a negative, oppressive and placatory in all the sense of it.

These perceived images are not only post western originated but also institutionalized. These perceptions by the westernized Africans and their European counterparts, could not understand the rationale behind Yoruba cultural practices. In addition, as such, they tend to impose a western category of judgments (morally or amorally) on a purely Yoruba action or practice. Hence, a distorted and misinterpreted picture of the true position of women in Yoruba culture is what we have today (fig. 4).

#### **Long Time Ago**

This section examines the different folktale materials available on the Yoruba woman, with the purpose of bringing out the symbols and consequently interpret them.

...And were told to sacrifice to Ogun. On the day the women were preparing to call out the spirit of their departed elder, Ogun suddenly appeared in their midst and, followed by the braver men, chased the women into the bush. (Euba, 1985: 14)

The above narrative will suggests to a foreigner that these women were weak and could not put up a fight when they were being chased. To a logical mind however, it seems males in this tale had been planning this action over a long period. Let us see the preceding narratives.

We learn from Ifs that long time ago, when women used to terrorize their men folk with their knowledge of possession, the men consulted Ifa. (ibid)

In addition, a conspiracy started in trying to upsurge the female power. They would have succeeded, if on one hand, the women were not prepared for such attack and on the other hand, they had not made proper sacrifice like their male counterpart. From time, the Yoruba people believe that the women possess the quintessential power of spirit possession. The symbolic relationship of the spirit possession is located in the structural relationship of woman as container and the man as contained. So that ritual containers in Yoruba land are primary symbol for female power. The notion of woman as container based on cultural interpretations of biological factors, for instance, women are believed to possess the secret of knowledge of life itself (Drewal, 1992).

### **In the beginning**

Olodumare sent forth the Orisa on a mission to create the world and all other living and non-living structures. On getting to the world, one of them was left out of the process of creation. However, they could not get to do their mission without the problem of the witches' disruptions. This gave them a lot of concern and forced to return to Olodumare, who consulted with Ifa on their behalf. Moreover, there was revelation that they had left out one of the entourage for the mission. They however claimed not to have left anybody, except a woman. It was decided there and then to go back and beg the woman orisa who had by then, employed the wrath of the eleye (owner of birds) to destroy any thing that she did not sanction. It was after the appeasement and propitiation that the mission of the orisa is accomplished. A key informant (2011: verbal recording)

In the traditional Yoruba society, the people envisioned their world in two halves – masculine and feminine. Their *Orisa* both male and female worked together to keep a balance of power. When a male and female were balanced, there was harmony in the world. When they were unbalanced, there was chaos. In another narratives concerning *Osun*: the deity happens to be matron deity of a group of people in Osun State. According to an oral narrative from Osogbo:

Osun is a symbol of a mother who is capable of loving passionately and a symbol of an assertive woman, who can take a decision on her own. Before a person is made a patron or matron in Yoruba culture, he or she must have contributed meaningfully well to the cultural, spiritual, political and economic life of the people. Osun in her own case is a symbol of a religious philosophy; her town is one of the most noted for creative arts in Nigeria, since she happened to have crowned the first king, it has been accepted that she is political. In considering her domestic role as a mother, her adherents believe strongly that she had cared and nursed her “children” with love, so that water taken from her river cures all forms of infirmities.

In addition, Osun could be the symbol of contemporary feminists, because oral tradition alludes to that fact (if the contemporary feminism is anything to compare with the actions of some traditional Yoruba feminists' symbols). It is a known fact that Osun was promoted to the position of the fertility deity because of her fruitful marriages to almost all the primordial deities of Yorubaland. During the course of research into the roles of women in Ifa, there was another twist to this story; the key informant an *Iyanifa* from Ose-meji Ibadan believed strongly that “Osunlenyo”, wife of Orunmila was assertive. In her words:

*oti pe ti a ti ri awon obinrin ti'a ma si kiri, papajulo ti ipo akoko o'bate won lorun. E mari iru Iya wa Osunleyo ti'n s'aya Orunmila, o fe le fe gbogbo awon irumole tan! Ti o ba je lode oni, wonni wipe adojutini ni iru obinrin bayi? Sugbon ni aye ojo hun, ohun to be lorun lose o, se a tun wa je abiyamo obinrin bi?*

It is been long that we have women leaving a dissatisfactory marriage to a better one. For instance, *Osunleyo*, wife of *Orunmila* married almost all the deities. If it were today, such actions are condemned and the woman reprimanded. Then she was responsible for her actions and especially as she was blessed with children in these marriages (oral interview for an earlier work. 2001)

The concept of women as life-bringer was the foundation of Yoruba traditional religion. Childbirth was perceived as mystical and powerful. Yoruba ideology of progeny is overemphasized. The quintessential power of childbearing becomes a source of physical and spiritual attainment. This ideology progresses to some fundamental socio-political issues. For instance, the symbol of the political Yoruba brotherhood; (Aboriginal Ogboni fraternity), accommodates both women and men, as against its Reformed type.

The symbol of the earth as seen in the staff of Ogboni itself communicates femininity. The staff is literally the ancient symbol of womanhood and fertility. The power of the female and her ability to produce life was once very sacred, but it posed a threat to the rise of the predominantly male oriented religions, especially Christianity and Islam.

### **The king must apologize**

The tale below would be used in assessing the different paradigms that could be paraded by a woman in any society. However the Yoruba people have learnt over the time that gender issues are better left to individual interpretation. Such interpretation is brought to play in this tale.

*Use mo je mi'a o! Emi Aroge Ola Ojibetimogbon, Kimi mori pisa pisa kimi de'legbe aborogi; kimi mori pisa pisa kimi de'legbe iwin. Emaya su hon Oba Ado ojomilapara keya dami lohun ki mi a'roko mi o. use moje mi a o, Aroge!*

(I will not heed the call of the Ado king because I'm very busy now. I, Aroge Ola Ojibetimogbo (praise names), that has so much suffered that I have now turn to a spirit, the extent of the hard times had turned me to a masquerade. Just go back to tell the king of Ado Ojomilapara, to allow me return to my work, because I'm too busy for any triviality.)

The king of Ado and the king of Ife were friends. In order to consolidate their friendship, the king of Ife decided to give his daughter, princess Aroge in marriage to his friend (the king of Ado). The arrangements went well and the princess was sent to Ado with male and female slaves numbering about thirty. On getting to Ado, she was to be received by the Anosin (most senior wife of the King). However the Anosin conspired with the other wives not to allow the princess access to the palace, so that she had to pick the most beautiful Eru (woman slave) to replace the princess. The rest of the entourage was diverted to a virgin land outside Ado land. Some years had passed and there were periods of so much hardship such that had never been recorded before. Barrenness, famine, deaths, sickness and a whole lot of pestilences became their lots, so much so that Ifa was consulted. It was during the cause of divination that a very disturbing revelation was made as to the whereabouts of the Princess. After a confession to that fact was taken from the impostor (Eru), emissaries were sent to fetch the princess. After a long search, the princess was located and the message of the king delivered.

The princess as at that time had released all her slaves, many of whom had married and multiplied exceedingly, said she could not leave her subjects to go to another kingdom. Finally, she was convinced to go with them after so much appeal from the king himself.

The Anosin was subsequently punished, and the princess got her position back, but she however did not leave her kingdom and her subjects. (Has been narrated by the people of Ogbagi-Akoko in Ondo State).

The tale has its origin in Akoko-Ondo. They strongly hold the belief that the Ado people are the present inhabitant of Benin in Edo State. Moreover, that the town princess Aroge occupied with her own children and people, is where the heir apparent to the Benin throne is sent to while his father still lives. And, it is her offspring that had since then been producing the lineage of the Oba of Benin.

This tale symbolizes three categories of women: the Anosin symbolizes a desperately jealous and deceitful woman; the Eru is an opportunist and disloyal woman and while the princess is a symbol of compassionate, fruitful, hardworking and intelligent woman. The princess did not wallow in self-pity, but instead she took a decision, which benefited her at the long run. If a woman is just in Yorubaland there is a reward for that.

A woman who is not productive (either in economic contributions or in childbearing) is not, accorded any respect in Yoruba culture. The princess demanded the apology of the king and his people because she was justified. However, in other cultures of the world, whether such a woman could have been co-opted into forgiving or not, but the case is different here, she wanted to be begged and she was appropriately treated.

### **Mothers and Wives**

The position of mothers and wives among the Yoruba cannot be overemphasized. So much so that a Yoruba *oba* (king) must have the two simultaneously, so that the saying that *aponbe osi fun oba ti'oni olori* (there is no respect for a king without a wife) comes to play.

On the other hand, there is an institutional position for the oba's mother. This shows that the Yoruba people hold in high esteem the positions of mothers and wives. However, as much as they are appreciated, there are times one could do without them. This is to say that it is not at all times these positions give an emotional satisfaction to the people that possess them. That is why the tale we are about to look into becomes important in understanding the different types of mothers and wives a man could have. The cannibal mother (Osofisan, 2001:1-30)

Once there was a certain woman, she always gave birth for her to eat up her child. She did this for a long time, until one day, she gave birth to this particular child. Then she was to kill and eat him up; one old woman came by and called him.....

The boy heeded the old woman's advice, and stole away at the middle of the night to meet her. Not long after, the boy's mother traced her son to the old woman's house to demand for him, but the old woman refused. Moreover, that was how the boy came to be living with the old woman. They lived like mother and child and the boy was named Oriyeku.

They lived together for a long time, until she died. Like a true son, he mourned her, called his friends to feasting and drinking.

"The woman," he said "was my mother. That one you see is not my mother, she would have eaten me as she did all her other children. But this old woman rescued me and raised me."

In time, Oriyeku grew up and took a wife. When he waited for some time, and the wife did not give him a child, took a second wife. This one was fertile and they lived together happily. One day, Oriyeku summoned his wives: "I am going on long journey," he told them. "My mother, as you know, rules the market in the town," and you know how she is to me. Therefore, I don't want any of you to go there at all while I am away. You are safe as long as she does not know where we stay. But if you go in my absence, you will pick up trouble, for my mother will surely follow you home....Days passed. Then the first wife became restless and wanted to go out. She gave several excuses to enable her going out. "Iyawo mi," she called the junior wife, "I have to go to the market, the oil for plaiting my hair has finished."

However, when these excuses continued pouring in every other day, the junior wife became convinced that all what her mate wanted was to go out to the market, and nobody could stop her.

The barren woman went to the market and the first person she met there was their mother-in-law.

The woman quickly sneaked out of the market without waiting for their husband's mother. However, her head-tie dropped when she was hurrying out of the market. She used this head tie in tracing the home of Oriyeku.

She touched the staff with her wand and started singing:

Gele niso o, mu mi lole, -tete niso o ma ma wehin  
Fona han mi o, ma ma sina -tete niso o, ma ma wehin  
Eni so enu, ni mo n'wa -Tete niso o, ma ma wehin  
Ona to ba gba, ni ko tele -tete niso o, ma ma wehin

(Head-tie, move on, take me home. Hurriedly move on, -do not look back, just show me the way and do not mislead me. I am looking for your owner, take me to wherever she is, the head-tie please do this hurriedly).

She traced the senior wife home and devoured her. However, the junior wife saw this and ran out but unfortunately her earring dropped.

.....(Earring, move on and take me to your owner. Trace her whereabouts quickly; go through the route she has taken.)

.....On getting to the cotton tree, she gripped one of her long teeth, which she turned to an axe.

(Axe, cut the tree and do not stop. Cut down the cotton tree by all means. Axe please do this without restraint).

... She was still cutting, when Oriyeku's wife saw a bird fly by. Taking the voice of the old witch, so, not to be heard, she adopted the witch mother's voice and began to sing:

(Bird, please save me and do not let us die. If you could just assist in locating my husband Oriyeku, any delay would result into his mother devouring us all. Please do this quickly). Oriyeku arrived on time to save his family.

That was how the witch mother came to know Oriyeku's house. The witch mother devoured the first wife, while the junior wife escaped by the help of the wall, which allowed her passed through with her children; the cotton tree which hid them on its branches; and the Eiyele bird which she sent to locate and recall back Oriyeku from his journey. However, Oriyeku got to the tree on time to destroy the witch mother with his hunter's charm.

Just like the first tale, this tale symbolizes different woman paradigms, each deliberately framed against her own counter-image. To the fearful mother-witch is opposed the benevolent old woman who saved and nurtured Oriyeku. Then in contrast to the barren woman, impetuous and reckless, is the fertile, obedient wife. We can read these tropes in a number of ways, but what I wish to emphasize however, is the apparent lesson that children go only to those who are caring and compassionate. Around such women, both nature and the inanimate world become ready allies. The above tale represents the thought of an average Yoruba person on women. For the culture to flourish, and endure, women like the old woman and the fertile woman, who are in possession of spiritual gratification, healing ability and the passion of true love, must nurture it.

The spiritual powers attributed to women make them the primary candidates for priesthoods in Yoruba society. From a male perspective, women possess the quintessential power of childbearing because of the emphasis placed on progeny. This in turn reinforced the mother and child relationship, so that in Yoruba the maternity of a child is not questionable while that of the paternity have (on several occasions) been questioned. The patrilocal residence adopted by the Yoruba people is a means of establishing and verifying their own paternity. This is reinforced by legally giving the father rights to the children (Drewal, 1992:187). The bride price theory thus gives the husband rights to the children born to the wife and sole sexual access (Lloyd, 1963:36). Yoruba believes that the sole child rearing process belongs to the woman and strong allegiances between mother and child often mean that, when children are old enough to choose, opted to be with the mother. This is perhaps the major cause of lineage segmentation. Lloyd (1962: 281) notes, "The Yoruba always state that their emotional ties with the mother are much stronger than those with the father. This sentiment is expressed in the Yoruba adage (*iya ni wura, baba ni jigi*) (ibid.157).

### **The Marriage**

Marriage is a very important institution among the Yoruba people so much so that the issue is well represented in many Yoruba folktales. These folktales often describe marriage settings, types of marriages involving more than one wife (co-wives and their antics tales) and behaviours in marriages. The tale below is chosen for the purpose of this study because it reveals the ideology involved in marriage proposal and acceptance, issues surrounding family involvement in marriages and the position of the woman in contracting marriage. There once lived a certain man and his precious daughter Semodo, whom he loved with everything he had. This girl grew to be very beautiful, to the admiration of all the young eligible men in the town [of Iwa]. All sorts of men kept pouring to the man's house to ask for the hand of this beautiful girl in marriage. However, the man insisted that his daughter was too young and that in another three years they should return for a competition. For he was going to make sure that the future husband of his daughter is tested for certain qualities, which would put his mind at rest; that at least his daughter would be getting married to a sensible and caring man that could replace her mother and himself when not there.

Out of the several suitors, two young men (Ologose and Elulu) were selected for the said competition. They were tested on seven grounds and the winner emerged the husband of Semodo. The two competitors would need the help of certain people. Elulu befriended two strong persons; the Eagle and the Vulture, this is because they were locked in a room without any food supply for seven days. Ologose on his own part befriended the Ant and the Termite. Baba kept to his promise and gave Semodo's hand in marriage to the winner Ologose. This pleased the people so much, because while Elumelu relied on the physical strength of his friends who are fast runner and great hunter respectively, not considering that the enclosure could not have been penetrated by his "big friends" the humble amiable Ologose made the "small people" his friends. This small people made it possible for him to emerge the winner, because they could easily penetrate the enclosure so that bits of food are regularly deposited for him. Opatotun (1994)

When to get married in Yorubaland becomes contextual. The age varies from one place to another, and the sentiments involved also vary. The old man thinks his daughter is too young and provisions for her need would be a big consideration in marriage. Yoruba people marry for different reasons. Moreover, the time a woman and her family choose is compelling; marriage is not determined by the man in Yorubaland. In Yoruba culture bride's family meet to give a date, terms and lists of bride's-wealth to be taken as a token for the girl's hand in marriage. This is what they referred to as the "*nkan ori* token for the bride's head (Ogunyomade, 2001).

Western scholars see this as demeaning, and an act of wife trading; as such they have argued against the bride's-wealth practice. To Matory (1994), this act accords the man superiority over his wife. Is it true then? In his contradiction, he asserts, "most Yoruba attach similar levels of value to male and female children and to male and female coded profession". (Ibid. 103).

Obviously, symbols carry different meanings in different cultures; we can assume that brides-wealth ritual represents a symbol of appreciation. The materials collected are used in prayer sessions for the couples; all these items symbolize a force that represents sweetness and joy. For instance, the salt, honey, sugar and *adun* (a kind of ground maize snacks), are invoked for such forces they represent (sweetness). The token collected are always returned to the husband family in many places in Yorubaland and/or in some instances, to the couples themselves. The other tangible items are however, shared among the wife's extended family.

It is this principle of "items exchange", which gives Yoruba marriage/family institution the strong ties. In that, the families would come to be affinally (*ana*) related, and on some occasions make decisions together. It is also the reason for stable family lives, so that divorces are not encouraged.

How a marriage is contracted in Yoruba culture is symbolized by the above tale. In pre-colonial Yoruba culture, it is mandatory for the two families to make enquiries into the family background of the intending couples. It is during this kind of investigation that certain fundamental problems such as health, bad character, and financial status of the intending spouse and his/her family becomes exposed.

The contemporary Yoruba society however, does not permit the investigation of family background any more. The urbanization of the Yoruba society, westernization and the import of foreign religions, the dislocation of the traditional people, and their band wagon effect of these on the cultural and mental spaces of the people have made it almost impossible to embark on such investigations.

Apart from the investigation mentioned above, the Yoruba people do not dabble into the marriage business in a hurry. A marriage is seen as a life-long arrangement and as such, so much emphasis is laid on its working for that long period. Moreso, a girl is betrothed to the right man, from her childhood. In such case, the girl's family would have established a long-term relationship with the man's family. For instance, the people of Ogbagi-Akoko in Ondo State make sure the man works in the girl father's farm. Not only this, they make sure he presents the girl with all the items she might need for the "*odun omidan rite*" (the rite of passage for the woman) on a yearly basis until their marriage-ceremony is performed. Taking into consideration the amount of money, time and emotion dispelled into a process of taking a wife, no man would want to be going through such a long process every now and again.

The question of **who** comes next. It is only natural for one to wonder whether the people involved have any say on the matter of their marriage, especially with the overwhelming involvement of the families. Well, from the data gathered, it is revealed that in the past, the involvements of families override that of the intending couples. This is so because Yoruba people have been able to understand the dynamics of social net-work so much so that the family represents the framework for all other social institutions. As such, they have reached a consensus that it takes so much dependency of the "inexperienced young" on the "experienced old". Based on these sets of principles, marriage institution was considered sacred and should be deliberately handled with care.

The contemporary marriage institution is now set on the standard of the western paradigms. Now, women and men get married outside their settings with little or no involvement of their family members. The result of this is that marriage institution has collapsed. A respondent Alhaji Balogun in Elekuro affirms:

Apart from the legality of either of the registry marriage; church and the Sharia marriage types, these types of marriages have only aided more divorce than could have ever been thought possible. People should just go back to their traditional ways of doing things. Now come to think of it, how many women have sued for bigamy in Nigeria? Moreover, men continued to produce "illegitimate children" before now; a child could only be a bastard but not an illegitimate child. These pretentious attitudes have only aided poverty.

The issues raised by the above respondent are pertinent to the interpretations of language codes. It obviously would not make sense to someone who cannot differentiate from being a bastard and being an illegitimate child. For instance, the concept of *omo ale* (bastard) is not always a problem of paternity, but at times a characterization of personality.

The Yoruba people are always careful with their use of language, when a child misbehaves her mother could call her a bastard, does it now mean she is calling herself a wayward woman, since a bastard is as a result of illicit affair?

This explains the uses of *oko* and *iyawo* (husband and wife), *ako* and *abo* (male and female). The dynamics of gender construct in Yoruba terminologies is reflective of moods and contexts. For instance a female at the level of attainment or on the other hand when infertile productively is referred to as *ako*, which ordinarily means -male. This is considered an insult for a woman to be called *ako ibepe* (male paw-paw) in marriage. Moreover, when such happens, the woman has no security in marriage. Likewise, when a man is referred to as an *abo*, it means he is weak or compassionate. A daughter becomes her mother's *oko* (husband) at a point she starts playing some roles. The spirituality of the female gender overrides her physical attributes. That is why prayers are rendered with invocation of the female essence: *odun ayabo* (the year will turn female), *abo* in the phrase symbolizes productivity, fruitfulness and smoothness. The argument thus, is that the gender construct of the Yoruba is entwined, that hasty interpretation becomes dangerous.

### Conclusion

The study investigates the various persons of the woman in the folklores of the Yoruba, especially their tales. In the process, the investigator unearthed the advanced sociological basis of Yoruba tradition and society.

In respect of the folktales gathered during this investigation, women were seen to have multifaceted and somewhat prismatic roles in Yoruba society, existing severally as wives, mothers, priestesses, concubines and so on. In all the latter depictions, they could be good, bad or downright evil, just as we come across depictions of men, who could be described in the same terms. It thus becomes obvious, that to the Yoruba, gender has nothing to do with character, and that though recognizing the places of men and women in society relative to each other, the culture and its instruments (for example, the stories under study) regard the sexes as equal and complimentary of each other and characteristics are attributable to the individual and not gender. This tends to disagree with the western theory of feminism to which this work is opposing, which opines that there is a great divide between such and women in indigenous cultures. The latter presumption has led to the wrong and pervasive belief that women are invariably suppressed and discriminated against in Africa. (Bourguignon, 1980: iv-6)

This work also set out to ascertain and report the diverse opinions expressed concerning gender relations in Yoruba culture, dispassionately. It also examined the gender construct of the Yoruba in traditional and contemporary times. The data presented was gathered among the contemporary Ibadan settlers, located at Apete, Elekuro, and the University of Ibadan. The findings generally brought into focus contextually the status of women in terms of gender interpretation. Obviously, this is not the first work on gender relations of the Yoruba and Africans at large. Udegbe observes that, the "literature has stressed that some elements of traditional and cultural values provide opportunities for women to be independent even within the patriarchal structures" (2003:22). Closely related to her opinion is Nnaemeka who posits that African feminism is a total departure from the western type:

First, African feminism is not radical feminism; resistance is directed toward feminism's stridency against motherhood. African feminism neither denotes/abandons motherhood nor dismisses maternal politics as non-feminist or unfeminist politics. Third, the language of feminists engagement in Africa (collaborates, negotiates, compromises) runs counter to the western feminist. Scholarship and engagement (challenge, negotiate, deconstruct, blow-apart etc)... fourth, there is resistance to western feminism's inordinate and unrelenting emphasizes on sexuality... fifth that conditions for example, the nature, tone, spectacle and modes operandi of western feminist insurgency against female circumcision in Africa and the Arab world... there are disagreements... over priorities... sixth, African feminism resists the exclusion of men from women's issues; on the contrary, it invites men as partners in problem solving and social change... finally, there is resistance to the universalization of western notions and concepts (1998:6-8)

In conclusion, therefore, it is rather unwarranted and inappropriate to base the Yoruba gender construction on western paradigms, learning essentially on cultural values and experiences, comparison of cultural phenomena on western paradigm becomes invalid.

Writing to right the woman is a phrase I learnt during a series of workshops, organized by the women writers of Nigeria (WRITA). This forum tends to lean on the western theory of feminism to which this work is opposing.

There was a lot of noise as to the woes of the African women and especially the African women writers - of literary works. The address note delivered by Professor Femi Osofisan gave birth to this research work. (2000: 130).

I am not trying to condemn that which is western. But, nevertheless, this is to ascertain the diverse opinions expressed concerning gender relations in Yoruba culture as opposed to the earlier works of this nature. I took the extra caution not to be ethnocentric and emotional about issues raised here, but also, an effort was particularly put into reporting the people's opinion. Therefore, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. The paradigm of gender equality noticed in the culture of the Yoruba, could be effectively harnessed for the resolution of conflicts.
2. The assumption that in Africa "women are often not in a position to question their partners" (Awake, September 8, 2002: 7), especially matters bothering on sexual behaviour, health matters and cultural practices are widespread. Contrary, however, study has shown that Yoruba women are quite active in decisions making, and as such dissemination of health information including contraception use, unwanted pregnancies and HIV/AIDS should be channeled through women.
3. The importance of folktales in education and socialization of the children cannot be overemphasized, and thus, adding the practice into the school curriculum, especially at preprimary and primary school levels, so that telling of tales should be encouraged. As this will go a long way in contributing to our socio-political development.
4. The study has also brought into focus the discourse of culture relativism. For every practice in a culture, there is an underlying factor for it. In this case, bride's wealth is considered important practice in in-law-relationship; while such practice among the Europeans is perceived as wife trading and as such subjugation of the woman. However, studies of cultures should be left to people who had formulated and lived within them.

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