





## When Words Come From Divination: Ifa and the Image of Women

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### ABSTRACT

Ifá is the Yoruba god of divination. It embodies Yoruba's worldview in practically every sphere of life. In this paper we examined Ifá's image of women from a feminist perspective and the conclusion is that Ifá's image of women is biased against women. We contend that this view of women in Ifá is pervasive in Yoruba society even in contemporary Yoruba society. We examined the alternative view of the African theorist Oyewumi who argues that in Yoruba society especially Old Oyo society gender did not exist. We argued that this is a sweeping generalization and that in most Yoruba societies gender features prominently and that our feminist perspective captures the realities of the male dominated society or patriarchal society of the Yoruba. Our conclusion is that Oyewumi's critique of feminist methodology as it applies to Yoruba society does not capture the epistemological reality of the Yorubas.

### INTRODUCTION

Ifá is the Yoruba god of divination. It encapsulates Yoruba world views on practically everything - social, political, and economical as well as their metaphysical views about the universe.<sup>i</sup> This is captured in the Yoruba saying: "kò sí ohun ti Ifá ko mo tán"<sup>ii</sup> (Ifá knows the answer to everything). The Yorubas believe that Ifá knows everything in the universe and that it is capable of knowing events that happened in the past as well as those that would occur in the future and those that are taking place now (presently). This claim is graphically captured in the following words:

Ifá ló lóní

Ifá ló lola;

Ifá ló lötunla pèlu è.

Orúnmilà ló ni jó méréèrin òsà dáyé.<sup>iii</sup>

(Ifá owns today

Ifá owns tomorrow

Ifá also owns the day after tomorrow

In fact, Orúnmilà owns all the four days in the week.)

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Ifá is a god that is highly revered in the Yoruba pantheon of the gods. In fact, it occupies an important position among the Yoruba. However the image of women in the vast literary corpus of Ifá shows that the god is patriarchally biased and this is reflected in the thinking of average Yoruba man about women. The sexist stereotypes of women in the Ifá seep down to the practice of most cults: women do not feature prominently in the cult as priestesses as men since men believe that they should not be allowed to know the secrets of Ifá.<sup>4</sup> In what follows we analyze the image of women as portrayed in Ifá literacy corpus. The first part of the paper focuses on the image of women as sexual attraction to men. Though the image portrayed seems good, it is nevertheless, along the sexist stereotypes that are found in any patriarchally structured culture. In the second part, the paper shows how women are demonized: women are depersonalized with demeaning representations thereby depriving them as agents of consciousness and praxis.

### I

Before turning to the analysis of Ifá it will be necessary to clarify patriarchy so as to show the bias of Ifá for the male. Patriarchy, in its broadest sense, has been characterized as the “manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general”.<sup>5</sup> Male domination is allegedly sustained through various channels such as legal and institutional mechanisms which are used to exclude women from power. Economic structures are also said to limit women’s access to society’s material resources such that they are subordinated to men in relation to the resources of the society. Linguistic convention of the society is also used to marginalize women; for instance, in most language cultures, masculine forms are used to denote humanity in general.<sup>6</sup> The subordination of women is allegedly further perpetuated by an ideology in which the perceptions of males and females are structured in such a way that “natural” sex difference is viewed within a hierarchy in which male prioritized over women. Socially constructed categories of gender are essentialized and roles and status are ascribed to members of society in terms of their “biological” differences. Women, because of their anatomical differences from men, have always been socially constructed as feminine and have always been “bound to the ‘domestic sphere’ of child – bearing and child rearing”.<sup>7</sup> The image of women in Ifá literary corpus, as we hope to show, manifests all these stereotypes.

In Ifá literary corpus, women are supposed to bear and take care of children. They are also economically dependent upon their men since they do not take any job outside the home. However, they help men in selling what they produce.

The physical attraction of women lies in their beauty which manifests itself in the complexion of women and also the pointed breasts which they possess. This aptly illustrates in one of the verses of Ifá literary corpus when

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Orúnmilà, struggled hard to marry a woman, Ilé – Oláwó because of her beauty.

“ ‘Òun lè fe e báyii’,  
Wón ni kó rúbo  
Ilé – Oláwó náà si ní,  
Èèyan pupa ni,  
Ròdòro ló rí,  
Ó je Òrúnmilà naa lójú”.<sup>8</sup>  
(Can I ever marry her  
They said he should offer sacrifice  
This woman called Ilé – Oláwó  
Is very fair in complexion  
She is radiantly beautiful  
Òrúnmilà is already dazed by her beauty).

As already adverted to above, the pointed breasts of women are qualities of beauty and the breasts not only attract men to women but also tempt them:

“Funfun niyi eyín,  
Ègùn gàgàgà niyi orùn  
Omú síkísíkísíkí niyi obinrin”.<sup>9</sup>  
(To be sparkling white is the basic essence of the teeth  
To be long is that of the neck  
Handy pointed breasts are the pride of a woman)

This is further emphasized in the following verses:

“Sònsórí omú obinrin  
Ó n gún ni lójú”.<sup>10</sup>  
(The nipples of a woman’s pointed breasts,  
Pinches men’s eyes).  
“Okùnrin tí ó n lo ní òkánkán,  
Omú ni yió máa wò”.  
(Any man who is far off will fix his gaze on the breasts).

The breasts do not only constitute the essence of beauty but the teeth must also be sparkling white before a woman is considered beautiful.<sup>11</sup>

The body has always been a site for the cultural coding of women’s body in a variety of ways – as beautiful or ugly, as normal or abnormal, self and other and so on. It has also served in sexist discourse, as we find in Ifá corpus, as the site for the natural essentialization of the difference of women. The body of women is essentially in Ifa as a site for mapping of the body of women in a variety of ways.<sup>12</sup>

As I alluded to above, the Yoruba culture is a male dominated one and Ifá literary corpus embodies the views of men on beauty – in other words the qualities which qualify any woman as being beautiful are defined by men. Those women who embody these beauty myths are sought after by men these qualities of beauty are “are imperative for women and not for men” since men in Yoruba society believe that these qualities are natural because they are “biological sexual and evolutionary”.<sup>13</sup> Yoruba men, to paraphrase Wolf, believe that these qualities of “female beauty stem from one Platonic Ideal

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Woman”<sup>14</sup>. The beauty myth in Ifa shows men’s institutions and institutional power in Yoruba society. Not only has this women’s beauty always featured in sexist discourse since the women’s body could be mapped for “consumption” if it is considered as beautiful. The centrality of beauty in sexist discourse cannot be over – emphasized since it functions in the discourse as the model of naturalized form of identity formation. Women are seen as beauty objects or, to put it in another way, as the Other, and this Other has to be approved by the superior men in order for the Other to have an identity. An Hegelian interpretation could be given to the scenario: there are two consciousnesses locked together in an agonal struggle as each consciousness tries to subdue the other threatening it with annihilation of its subjectivity by turning it into an object. In a patriarchal society, as Ifá has shown, the subjectivity of women is constituted by men by turning them into an object of beauty for consumption and “point of power.”

The idea of beauty is not the only thing that defines women in Ifá literary corpus. Another aspect of that identity is the perception of women as reproductive objects belonging to the sphere of domesticity.<sup>15</sup> Women in Ifa literary corpus are supposed to take care of the home as well as bear children. There is a story about Òrúnmilà who was so desperate to have a woman who would take care of his home that he had to rush to marry a woman (Awòrán – picture). This woman could not cope with this task and she was sent away.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the Yoruba do consider it an abomination if a woman is barren. They believe that a woman should have children. Not only this, women are forbidden to have sexual affairs with any man before marriage, though it is permitted for men to have sex before marriage, not only before marriage but also after marriage with other women. What this points up is phallic power; women have to be castrated socially in order to show the sexual power of men.

Ifá literary corpus is replete with stories of many women struggling to have children. There are two narratives in Ifá about two women (Yemese and Oya) going through some humiliations in order to have children.<sup>17</sup> Women could be told to offer sacrifices to appease some gods in order to have children, though it might not be the fault of women not to have children. It is believed in Yoruba society (which Ifá exemplifies) that it is a woman’s fault if a couple does not bear children; hence there are social pressures on women to become mothers. What Ifá exemplifies is that women are reproductive objects and hence female identity and social place are defined, as earlier adverted to, in terms of motherhood. This identity of women has been assigned to them from outside – that is to say by men; and as Ifá shows the ‘real’ woman takes on this identity without questioning this prejudice of patriarchy. As Andrienne Rich puts it:

“...a woman status as child bearer has been the test of her womanhood. Through motherhood, every woman has been defined from outside herself: mother, matriarch, matron, and spinster, barren...Even by default, motherhood has been an enforced identity for women, while the phrase “childless man” and “nonfather” sound absurd and irrelevant...”<sup>18</sup>

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Nancy Chodorow in her influential text, The Reproduction of Mothering: Psycho Analysis and the Sociology of Gender, puts the matter succinctly: the sexual and familial division of labor in which woman or mother creates a sexual division of psychic organization and orientation. It produces socially gendered women and men who enter into asymmetrical heterosexual relationships; it produces men who react to fear and act superior to women and who put most of their energies into the nonfamilial work world and do not parent. Finally, it produces women who turn their energies towards nurturing and caring for children – in turn reproducing the sexual and familial division of labor in which women mother.<sup>19</sup>

Women also perform the domestic chores: cooking, washing of clothes, etc. It is believed by an average Yoruba man that women are biologically suited for domestic chores and this belief is exemplified in Ifa literary corpus.

## II

Ifá also portrays women as evil beings. Ifá is replete with many stories about the deeds of women; in other words women are cast as evils. According to stories in Ifá women are always jealous of their husband's other wives.<sup>20</sup> They also indulge in witchcraft. They are also inquisitive: wanting to know the power of their husbands; in other words they wish to know the secrets of men's power. What the narrative exemplifies is the agonal struggle of female and male for power in the patriarchy.

There is the story of Oòsàlá who had a wife, Yemoo, who fed only on animals' blood.<sup>21</sup> In order to satisfy her, the husband made a magic gourd which he pointed to any animal he wanted to kill and the blood of the animal would be drained into the gourd. Yemoo became inquisitive about the power of her husband and on a certain day she ripped open her husband's hunting bag and poured ashes into it. The husband afterwards took this bag and without knowing the wife was following the trail of the ashes. However, he heard the sound of footsteps at his back and thought it was that of an animal. He drew out the magic gourd and pointed it towards the direction of the sound and what he heard was the voice of his wife pleading that she should be saved as her blood was draining into the magic gourd. Oòsàlá was highly surprised and had to carry the wife home hurriedly. The wife's health was restored after he had made many sacrifices to the gods in order to appease them.<sup>22</sup>

There is the narrative on Òrúnmilá who married Òròmòdimòdi a beautiful young girl.<sup>23</sup> He warned his other wives not to enter a room where he had hidden the new wife. But out of curiosity the other wives opened the room when the man went out and saw the new wife. This act infuriated the new wife and she unleashed epidemics into the house. Some of the old wives were attacked by smallpox, while others vomited blood. In this story what we encounter is the violence which men unleash on women. A beautiful young girl is kept in a room and the man constitutes her identity as a sex

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object. The young girl ironically falls victim to the ideology of patriarchy by unleashing epidemics on the other women.

There is another narrative which involves Oniwátá who met his marital obligation to his wives without his wives knowing the source and this arouse their curiosity.<sup>2iv</sup> One day when he went out one of the wives broke into a room which was always locked and saw two magic gourds. One of the gourds produced the money which he spent and the other contained bees. The wife opened the magic gourd that contained the bees and she was stung to death by the bees which filled up the sky attacking other people in the village.<sup>2v</sup>

What should be noted about the inquisitiveness of women is that women are not allowed to perform many activities that men do: they do not belong to some cults; they are not allowed in the worship of some deities and it is believed that the efficacy of some traditional medicines would be destroyed if touched by women. In other words, phallic power is protected by silencing women.

In one of Ifá's stories men are warned to desist from marrying more than one wife because if they marry many wives they would be ruined. Ifá also frowns at women's extra – marital activities, though, as we earlier adverted to, men could indulge in that.<sup>2vi</sup>

Ifá also cast women as witches and through witchcraft they could ruin not only their husband's lives but that of others in the society. Ifá narrates that the power of witches was sanctioned by God – that when these women were coming to earth their 'ori' (head) choose witchcraft when God asked them about their plans on earth. And since this is the case the only thing they could do on earth would be to indulge in evil deeds.<sup>2vii</sup>

In the story of Òrúnmilà we encounter the evil deeds of women in which Orunmila's three wives destroyed all he had acquired in life through witchcraft, and he had to offer sacrifices to appease them.<sup>2viii</sup> These stories about the evil deeds of women through witchcraft conform to the image of women by men and this representation of women "spring from fear of the "otherness" of women".<sup>2ix</sup> This "other" has to be cast as an evil in order for the male to be represented in an anti – thesis way as a good humankind, and what this "presupposes (is) that patriarchy has already been established and the male has already set himself as the human norm , the subject and referent to which the female is "other" or alien".<sup>30</sup>

The images of women which are in Ifá literary corpus are still part of the Yoruba cultural tradition, and all this tends to show that the contemporary Yoruba world is an entirely male – dominated one. These images of women suggest that women are a subordinate group. The stereotypes in Ifa exemplify and also points out that in Yoruba world, women are "inaudible", "faceless", "and invisible", to use Ralph Ellison's words. The main point about these is that they "provide a means of control over subordinate group and a rationale which justifies the inferior station of those in a lower order, 'explaining' the oppression of their lives".<sup>31</sup> In other words, women are castrated by these demeaning representations and they show that the

allocation of power within Yoruba society is loaded in favour of men. What obtains in this society is “a relationship of dominance and subordination” in terms of power relationship between men and women?<sup>32</sup>

Let us conclude this part by remarking that in spite of modernization in contemporary Yoruba society women are still the subordinate group and men still wield enormous power over them.

In a paper, “Conceptualizing Gender: Euro Centric Foundations of Feminist Concepts and the Challenge of African Epistemologies”, Oyeronke Oyewumi challenges the wholesale appropriation of western feminist discursive strategies to interpret African experiences and epistemologies in terms of women’s experience in Africa.<sup>33</sup> She argues that feminist scholars in western world have used Euro / American women’s experiences to explain women’s subordination and oppression worldwide.<sup>34</sup> According to her, they, “assume both the category ‘woman’ and her subordination as universals.”<sup>35</sup> She goes on to say that “gender is first and foremost a socio-cultural construct,”<sup>36</sup> and that the concepts western feminists deploy are rooted in the nuclear family of the western society which are not applicable to African society.<sup>37</sup> In other words, because gender is socially constructed the social category cannot be essentialized worldwide.<sup>38</sup> She points to the Yoruba society of South western Nigeria to present a different picture of family organization from that of nuclear family structure of western society.<sup>39</sup> Oyewumi’s presentation of Yoruba family structure is contrary to Ifá’s image of woman as a subordinate person to the man within the family structure as presented in this paper.

What Oyewumi is trying to deconstruct is the universalist claim of western feminist scholars. She believes that this hegemony of western feminist scholars has to be dismantled and an African discursive strategy has to be deployed to explain African women’s experiences. She discloses the ethnocentric biases in the western feminist discursive strategy. The point she makes is that the western feminist scholars because of their hegemonic power in terms of production of knowledge take the values in their culture as universally valid for all cultures.<sup>40</sup> Hence their values become a meta narrative which every culture has to revolve around. But we think what needs to be pointed out is that in any situation one must make a proper analytic discrimination and adopts a methodological approach which suits that situation, and in this specific case of Ifa’s image of women, the approach taken here is imminently suitable to interpret the Ifa’s pronouncement on women. Furthermore, Oyewumi’s demand that African womanist scholars should evolve another discursive strategy to deal with African women’s experience is a call for plurality of approaches and is also an acknowledgement of difference and this demand in a way constitute a universalist demand. It could also be argued that her demand that womanism should be the discursive strategy to interpret women’s experience in Africa is a form of relativism which results in a form of arbitrariness and nihilism.<sup>41</sup>

Her criticism of western feminist scholarship as not suitable for grappling with African women’s experience ignores the fact that the issue involved



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here is the oppression of women and this can occur in any culture. As one perspicuous commentator has put it, “privileging racial or national identity while ignoring structural inequalities between men and women in postcolonial African politics in a celebrated ‘Africanity’ can muffle and displace crucial power relations and challenges for change in the continent.”<sup>42</sup> We think enough has been said about Oyewumi’s position. But in concluding this paper, one point that has to be emphasized is that any methodological approach or discursive formation could be deployed as a discursive strategy provided that approach would disclose the wrongness of patriarchy in any society. It is erroneous to lump all African family structures together or under one methodological approach; this would be a simplification of the complicated family structures of African societies since some are male dominated societies and others are not.

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1. The Yoruba live in the South West of Nigeria and also parts of the Republics of Benin and Togo. There are many texts on Ifá. The most interesting texts are Wande Abimbola, Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1976); Bascom, Ifa Divination – Communication Between God and Men in West Africa. We have benefited from the paper of Adefioye Oyesakin, “The Image of Women in Ifá Literary Corpus”, Nigeria Magazine, 1982. However our interpretation of Ifá on women is from a feminist perspective.
  2. Adefioye Oyesakin, op. cit, p. 16.
  3. Wande Abimbola, op. cit, p.10.
  4. For this point see Oyesakin, op.cit, p. 16. See also the point made by Kate Millet that in patriarchies women are barred from ritual activities; Kate Millet, Sexual Politics, (New York: Avon Books, 1970) , p. 47.
  5. Gerda Lerner, The Creation of Patriarchy (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 239. We are aware that the concept of patriarchy has generated an intense debate amongst feminists. We shall not wish to enter this; hence we shall make do with the definition here.
  6. R. Lakoff, Language and Women’s Place (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), See E. Spelman Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988) in terms of African – American women. D. Cameron, Feminism and Linguistic Theory (London: Macmillan Press, 1992); J. Coates, Women, Men and Language (London: Longman Group Ltd, 1986); J. Swan, Girls, Boys and Language (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992).

7. Nancy Chodrow, The Reproduction of Mothering (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978).
8. Abimbola, Ìjinlè Ohùn Enu Ifá, Apá Keta, p. 104; cited in Oyesakin, op. cit, p. 17.
9. Abimbola, Ìjinlè Ohùn Enu Ifá, Apá Kinni (London: Collins, 1969), p. 59; quoted in Oyesakin, op. cit.
10. F. Agboola, Ojùlówó Èéki Ifá, Apá Kinni, quoted in Oyesakin, op. cit.
11. Agboola, op. cit. pp.113 and 114; cited in Oyesakin, op.cit.
12. For this kind of position, see Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift “Mapping the Subject” in Mapping the Subject: Geographies of Cultural Transformation in Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift (eds) (London & N. Y.: Routledge, 1993)
13. Naomi Wolf, The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women (New York: Anchor Books, 1991), p. 12.
14. Ibid.
15. For this point about women belonging to the sphere of domesticity see Betty Friedan, The Feminine Mystique (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1986); see also Wolf, op. cit.
16. For this point see W. Abimbola, Apólá Ogbè, pp.184 – 186, cited in Oyesakin, op. cit.
17. W. Abimbola, op. cit, Apá Kinni, p. 26.; cited in Oyesakin, op. cit.
18. Adrienne Rich, On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966 – 1978 (London: Virago, 1980), p. 261.
19. Chodorow, op. cit. p. 209.
20. For this point, see Oyesakin, op. cit. pp. 19 – 20.
21. Oyesakin, op. cit. p. 19.
22. Oyesakin, Ibid.
23. Oyesakin, Ibid, p. 20.
24. Oyesakin, Ibid, p.20.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Kate Millet, op. cit. p. 46.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Oyeronke Oyewumi, “Conceptualizing Gender: Eurocentric Foundations of Feminist Concepts and the Challenge of African Epistemologies” in African Gender Scholarship: Concepts, Methodologies and Paradigms (eds) S. Anfred, B. Bakare – Yusuf, et. al. (Dakar: Codesria, 2004), pp. 1 – 8, see also her text, The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1977)

34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid. p. 5.
40. Ibid.
41. For this line of argument, see Herta Nagl – Docekal, “The Feminist Critique of Reason Revisited”, Hypatia, vol. 14, No 1, 1999, p. 66.
42. Desiree Lewis, “African Gender Research and Postcoloniality: Legacies and Challenges” in African Gender Scholarship: Concepts, Methodologies and Paradigms, op. cit. p. 31.