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Feminism and Deity Personification in Yorùbá Proverbs

ABSTRACT. In Yorùbá social context, male is seen as comptroller and central in gender status because of the cultural perception that makes male hegemony a priority. If Yorùbá people by chance through their tradition could encroach the social order of the family structure by maintaining the biological dominance of male ahead of female, then it means that women have no say. In the oratory aspect of this tradition however, the construct of women acceptability in terms of their sacred features undermine the biological concept of male dominance. This is the area where Olúpònà (2011) itemised the role of female goddesses in Yorùbá religion as more of important discussion and that balancing their role with that of male, particularly in the aspect of religion, will improve the cultural variables and etiquette of the Yorùbá people. This paper however intends to look at this balancing through Yorùbá oral proverbs, which personified women symbolically from the angle of deity specific. The paper argues that Yorùbá epistemology through proverbs is a means of deconstructing the usual male hegemony in Yorùbá tradition, and further concludes that ascribing dominance to male echelons is a reflection of social inequality because “what a man can do, a woman can do better”. The paper will use semiotic analysis to portray the significant aspect of feminism in the proverbial sayings of the Yorùbá people.

KEYWORDS: feminism, women, Yorùbá, proverbs

Introduction

Within the level of African patriarchal tradition, the status of African women lies very low to that of men as corroborated in one of the Yorùbá saying: *kí ọkùnrin ó tọ àtọ̀rin, kí obìnrin ó tọ àtọ̀rin, ẹ̀nikan yóò ní omi lẹ̀yìn ẹ̀şẹ̀ ju ẹ̀nikan lọ* (Let a woman and a man walk while urinating, one of them

will have messy feet much more than the other). This proverb endorses the practical packaging of men and women through their biological structure of disposing urine, which makes man to be technically desirable in hygiene than woman. This proverb apparently makes man to be more organised and as well culturally elevated through the way its genital is configured. The underline meaning of this proverb ascertains the philosophy of gender inequality that prioritises man ahead of woman. It is worth showing that all animals are born equal, but to say one is equal than the other is an understatement that must be carefully addressed from the context of male/female relationship among the Yorùbá people. This essay is set to underline this focus in the light of Yorùbá epistemological argument for male/female dominance.

Male/female relationship is a gender issue that has attracted copious discussion under which many ideologies have been used to clarify the polemic that guided the subject matter and make it more important and as well challenging (Curtis & MacCorquodale, 1990; Wood, 2009; Cerato & Cifre, 2018; Oláh, Kotowska & Richter, 2018). The background of the male/female discussion is always directed towards arrays of principles like politics, economic, religion, norms and ethical values. The principles are otherwise structured through cultural precepts influenced by colour, race, origin, history and ancestral mythology. Be that as it may, the question of male dominance is usually engaged through patriarchal factor among the Yorùbá people. This system is a magnified cultural principle which upholds a dictatorial influence on aspects of humanity with particular reference to beliefs and social ideology. This ideology is contextualised in Bateye's "òkùnrin làdá, obinrin làgbà" (men are stronger but women are mature), where she identified men as pacesetters but women as the silent achievers that support men discreetly in their various achievements and undertakings (Bateye, 2013). Loud and clear, men are seen in this category of Yorùbá tradition as pronounced achievers due to their overbearing responsibility and favour for various categories of commitments and services. The title *ÀRÓLÉ* (heir to the family) given to the first male child as an approval of its dictatorial and dominance as against the female relevance is a proof to this. Women in Yorùbá tradition are categorised as second tier citizens and not seriously favoured at the front.

Olúpònà (1997; 2002; 2011) in some of his works identified these lapses and thus recorded that ideal and recognised preference should be extended to women, most especially in the area of socio-religious aspects. This aspect of preference as stated by Bádéjò (1998, p. 95) could be seen

in Olúpòṅà's argument in support for bilateral principle adopted in Oṅdó kingship system which recognises compensation for women's lost political power. This system identified an agreement between patrilineality and matrifocality where the social order and the descent system recognises the female power in the enthronement of a king and in some cases a female king made to head the people. In another vein, Olúpòṅà (2011) in his book *City of 201 Gods: Ilé-Ifè in Time, Space, and the Imagination*, identified why preference should also be given to women in the priesthood service. Olúpòṅà showed why male supremacy should be reconciled in line with female power.

The allusion of the above as established by Olúpòṅà is a clear indication and support to how Yorùbá proverbs in some ways clearly personified women symbolically and compliment them with a deified role. These personification and compliments aligned women in Yorùbá land with power directly and also recognised them as first among equal. This work therefore wants to resolve that women in Yorùbá land are not meant to be restricted to complementary roles on the side of male as argued by many scholars, but could also be seen as the type to be complemented by the male as the case may be.

1. Theoretical Framework

The argument of this paper is determined to be contextualised through the aid of semiotic analysis. Dáramólá (2013) described semiology as a science through which life of signs within society are studied. He also declared language as an important instrument that facilitates the exchange of this sign among users. The position of Dáramólá as regards semiotic while quoting Eco shows that the concept of sign encompasses the whole cultural life and can as well be seen as "a-extensive with the whole range of cultural phenomena". Thus, proverb as a means of description and an exchange of meaning device which is culturally inclined is therefore expressed by the use of symbolic signification with reference to the value and ideology of the people. The ideology and value of feminism that are carried in Yorùbá proverbs in a way constitute metaphor equipped with signs that are usually instituted via language description or language code. This is the reason why Yorùbá people will say *Òwe ni ẹsin ọrọ, bí ọrọ bá sọnù, ọwe làá fí wá a* (Proverb and words are both sought after through each other).

Adéòṣun (2013) with the views of Harris, identified semiotic as an approach inspired by Halliday's systemic functional linguistics, which shows the importance of context to situation and culture in reconstructing the meaning of a text. Language in this context is as well viewed as the embodiment of the social process in a society through the use of symbols and signs. It is also established that context is very important in the understanding of the symbol and sign because proverbial language is context dependent. Adéòṣun, therefore, clarifies that when making symbol and sign analysis in this way, it explains meaning-making as a social context. He further explained semiotic method as the type, which takes cognisance of shared meanings among users of the signs and decodes such signs primarily from their worldview. The perspective of this methodology will be evidence of symbolic analysis in this work because the usage of proverbs among the Yorùbá people are consistent to the analysis of sign and meaning.

2. Existing Literature and Conceptual Discourse

It is quite obvious that feminism is not a novel area in African scholarship. Without much emphasis, it is clear that copious scholars have written so well on it. In "African Feminism Mythical and Social Power of women of African Descent," Bádéjò (1998) aligned with the understanding of humanistic values of feminism that guided the principles of traditional African values where gender roles (male/female) are seen to complement each other. Bádéjò (1998) was of the opinion that African feminism recognises the role of women and men in various dimensions, with the views that power and femininity are intertwined rather than antithetical in African worldview. She critically underlined that, the philosophy of gender complementarity or male/female independence was not articulated in the western world to favour the African women in the United States of America.

With humanist feminist ideas, the female freedom and independence in Africa and Yorùbá social context, Balógun (2017) identified the scholarship of western feminist as against the backdrop. He showed that the school of thought classified the image of female gender as the type that suffers repression in the hands of its male counterpart. In his opinion, Yorùbá model is typically a negation of this structure because the same context of gender relationship favours essentially the idea of complementarity.

Olademo (2012) through theological analysis underlined three important feminist discourse. She narrated feminism as an academic method where its discussion transited from androcentric to androgynous models of humanity and language for the supreme being. She also identified feminism as a value system and social vision that view sexism and patriarchy as immoral, but proposing alternative social arrangement that foster equity. This argument opened leadership role in society to both male and female. Lastly, she raised the reason why there is the need to move from prescriptive to descriptive role for women so that they can be relevant in the society. Olademo's last two arguments will be important to this essay because the relevant proverbs that serve as working pattern in this work portray women to be symbolically relevant in the society and as well depict them to have *locus standi* when it comes to leadership role.

3. Feminism, Spirituality and Gender Discourse in Yorùbá Context

In the opinion of Haralambos et al. (2013) feminist ideologist identifies religion as an ideal instrument of patriarchy. This feminist theorist's position claim that religion has shown more recognition and interest to men at the expense of women. What this infer is that women have less benefits in some religions. But despite this assertion, they still acknowledged that men are inactive than women in the line of religious practices and services (Haralambos et al., 2013). Thus, this identifies women to be seen as vital to religion and spiritual activities than men in the level of spirituality.

The concern for women's position in Yorùbá religion however is as a result of the pattern that has been built on patriarchy system, which designate women figure to a supporting role instead of having primary responsibility. Sugirtharajah (2006) therefore acknowledged patriarchy to be critical of women's plights because they are always being victimised by the system. Olademo (2014) also argued the prescription of mutual interdependency and respect in gender relations in Yorùbá religion. She underlined the factor of human agency in the actualisation of this aim. The human agency according to her is patriarchy. Patriarchy in Yorùbá system in her opinion has acquired the garb of the normative in which women is seemed to be subjected as inferior beings.

Apart from patriarchal influence, the evidence of collectivism as against individualism cannot be overemphasised in the Yorùbá gender spirituality.

This principle according to Pobee (1976) is a means through which the identity of women in Africa is strictly affected due to the evidence of modernity, which has instigated the philosophy of “individualism”. This philosophy in his view, resulted from western type of life “foreign religion” which deregulated the immunity and right of women stipulated by African communal settings set up by their culture. Olademo (2015, pp. 304–305) showed that “culture prescribes roles and often guards the moral boundaries of the individual as well as the collective.” Here, culture in Yorùbá worldview is seen as determinant in the formation of gender roles as against individualism principle introduced by the foreign religions (Christianity and Islam), which tends to separate women from actualising distinctive role in spirituality.

Individualism in this light can be seen as an agent of identity politics emphasised by Olademo that was impacted by colonial experience, which aided male-gender power at the expense of women. The gender favouritism ascribed to male-gender power in this regard could be as a result of prescriptive role identified by Olademo in the feature of culture as seen in Yorùbá example. This otherwise could be deconstructed in descriptive manner. The descriptive representation of women in Yorùbá religion is here seen in the proverbs to be discussed as the type that carries significant aspect of feminism and as well portray women’s potential relevance to Yorùbá religion in the area of signs and meaning.

4. Deified Personification of Women in Yorùbá Proverbs

Proverb is a form of language structure among the Yorùbá people through which codes and patterns of life are investigated. It embraces the cultural oratory act and arts of the people. Olúgbàmígbé (2009, p. 454) identified this by saying that, “in many African culture every man or woman is expected to mature in the art of making speech as he or she advances in age experience”. Arágbúwà (2020, p. 4) also explained proverb among the Yorùbá people to be a conveyor of the spiritual essence of the cultures, traditions, values, beliefs, and collective knowledge systems of the people. Proverbs is a cultural tool that makes meaning out of human essence in a thought-provoking manner. Among Yorùbá people, proverb has a sociological function in which roles and activities of individual are analysed and explained. This case is a reality in the aspects of how proverb is used to describe the supremacy that ensued between male and female in Yorùbá

cultural milieu. The significant of proverb can continuously be mentioned on and on.

One important fact about proverb as mentioned by Ọ́lásùpò, Olúgbèmí and Àjùwọ̀n (2012, p. 11) is that proverb in Yorùbá culture recognises the natural dichotomy that exists between male and female. This claim has a link with the position of United Nations (UN) as enunciated by Akíntúndé (2010, p. 145) in which they embraced the strategies aimed at improving the status of women especially in Africa due to gender imbalance associated with their relationship. Ọ́lásùpò, Olúgbèmí and Àjùwọ̀n (2012) noted that though the UN gestures may be a way out for women quagmire but from time immemorial, proverbs in Yorùbá culture, demand for gender balance virtually in all spheres of human endeavour. This is what is recognised in the way certain Yorùbá proverbs personified women with the deified status to make their position more sacred and statutorily relevant in the society.

It is recognised by Awólàlú and Dòpámú (2005) that men usually use their physical power and social position to suppress women, especially in religious participation. But despite the passive role that women are subjected to, it is noted that women's position can still be recognised in certain activities that are significant. In the account of Yorùbá spirituality, it is considered that female goddesses and mediums are very prominent. Among the goddesses are Ọ̀sun, Ọ̀ya, and Ọ̀bà all of which are river goddesses (Awólàlú & Dòpámú, 2005, pp. 291–292). Only that the roles acclaimed to them are mere passive. This is corroborated in the account of oral Ifá divination of *Odù Ọ̀ṣẹ̀ tùrú* as narrated by Ọ̀lademo (2004, pp. 49–50). In this *Odù*, Ọ̀lademo narrated that:

Olódùmarè, the Supreme Being, sent seventeen primordial deities to occupy the earth, and only one of them, Ọ̀sun, was female. When they arrived on earth, the sixteen male deities operated as a team but neglected the only female in all their functions; Ọ̀sun was excluded from sacred knowledge, from covenants, and from decision making (2004, pp. 49–50).

This *Odù* identified the fact that, the voice and right of women among Yorùbá people have been subjugated from time immemorial, and this has persisted till date. Despite Ọ̀sun's counter reaction as stated below:

When Ọ̀sun could bear it no longer, she congregated the women on earth and formed the *Ìyá Mì* group, a society of powerful women. With their hitherto unusual *àṣẹ* (life force), they interfered with the plans of the male deities. Consequently, there was chaos with humans and nature.

This has not in any way change the momentum in which the right of women is derided or established among the Yorùbá people. The only weapon among the Yorùbá seen in appropriate manner that makes the voice of women to be heard in this regard are proverbs which proclaim the sacredness and freedom of women spirituality. The following proverbs will therefore show the understanding of this work as observed. The attempt is to use semiotic analysis for the emphasis.

4.1. *Òrìṣà bí iyá kò sí* (There is no deity like mother)

This proverb places woman to be deity specific. The proverb established woman as first among equal in parental role. It indicates that mother is a hero that must be recognised when it comes to prenatal and postnatal challenges that she is faced with. These periods are usually filled with serious challenges that must be endured. The prenatal is popularly considered to be motherhood experience when a woman is caged in the realm of the unknown classified as *abaramoji* (that is, an indecisive stage). The stage is recognised as the realm of life and death that cannot be waved when it comes to child birth. More importantly, the Yorùbá will say, *eni tí kò mọ̀ iyí iyá níí sọ̀ òjá nù* (one who could not recognise the sanity of his or her mother will throw off her loincloth). This situation makes women position more important than men because it is a sacred stage of human life applied to a baby and the mother. Yorùbá people believe that the stage is an actualisation of special life force (*àṣẹ*) which woman can activate both positively and negatively while she is in labour. The use of *àṣẹ* by woman is indicated by Olademo up above in this discussion. In Yorùbá context, *àṣẹ* is a life force authority considered to be the language of the *òrìṣà* (the deity).

In this manner, the Yorùbá people will say *Ìyá ni òrìṣà àkúnlẹ̀ bọ* (mother is the deity to be adored). In this proverb, a woman is symbolically seen as emblem of spirituality and personality that describe spiritual godmother and not godfather. There can be godfather in the physical and other context of human display but in rational thinking of the Yorùbá people, there is no equivalent to godmother symbol. A saying in Yorùbá that qualifies this is *iyá ni olókò tí ó wa omọ wáyé* (The mother is the means through which a child comes to the world). This categorically established godmother symbol in the family than godfather symbol. It is a pointer to the fact that a woman is a deity with symbol of authority over her home and the society she belongs in Yorùbá context.

4.2. *Òrìṣà jẹ́ kí n pé méjì obìnrin kò dénú* (“Women detest rivals”)

This is the second proverb in this rank. This proverb elaborates a syncretic ideology peculiar to religious experience and expression. The term syncretic, according to dictionary meaning applies to combining disparate elements in one system, especially in the forms of religious observance, philosophical systems, or artistic creations. This act or position in spirituality is seriously disliked by any standard to be practiced by the adherents of any religion especially in Yorùbá religion. This position is a classified term which women in Yorùbá setting have adopted to enforce their right when necessary. Though the proverb portrays women as being jealous, but it is an established position that identify respect for a would-be Yorùbá deity from any devotee or follower of any religious affiliate. This as well shows that the right of women is profoundly recognised and established by this proverb because it places women in the same position and standard of recognition like the way deities are referenced among the Yorùbá people. The Yorùbá epistemology that explains this fact is found in *odù Ifá Oyèkú Méjì* of oral *ifá* verse. The odu stated that:

| | |
|---|---|
| <i>Ọkan soso póró lobìnrin dùn mọ lówọ ọkọ,</i> | A woman is so good when a man married only one wife |
| <i>Bí wọn bá di méjì wọn a dò jòwú,</i> | When they are two, they become jealous |
| <i>Bí wọn bá di méta</i> | When they are three |
| <i>Wọn a dẹta n túlẹ,</i> | They become abusive |
| <i>Bí wọn bá di mẹrin,</i> | When they are four |
| <i>Wọn a di iwọ ni o rínmi, ni mo rín ọ,</i> | They make jest of each other |
| <i>Bí wọn bá di márùn-ún,</i> | When they are five |
| <i>Wọn a di lágbája ló run ọkọ wa sùsù</i> | They see each other as destroyer of fortune |
| <i>Bí wọn bá di mẹfa,</i> | When they are six |
| <i>Wọn a dikà,</i> | They become wicked |
| <i>Bí wọn bá di méje</i> | When they are seven |
| <i>Wọn a dàjẹ</i> | They become witches |

The context of this verse indicates that infidelity is seriously detested by women in marriage relationship as it is also disliked by the deity in Yorùbá spirituality. Women in this category are seen to carry the identity of deity in their matrimonial homes and likewise in the society where mar-

riage is regarded as sacred. The verse portrays an ideology and symbols replica to what could be proven to be the sanity as expected by any deity from their followers as Yorùbá spirituality is concerned. In Yorùbá culture, it is understood that when a man marries two women, there is the possibility of unlocking the syndrome of jealousy that may be critical to human existence. So likewise, when one is involved in syncretic practices to the deity in Yorùbá pantheon.

Conclusion

This discussion so far clearly maintained that there is a niche created by indigenous proverb for women recognition in Yorùbá society. It is understood that proverbs identify the voice and strength of women to be important in the society and thus they can never be looked down upon. Apart from the conventional rights stipulated by law for women, it is clearly stated in this write up that woman in Yorùbá society are enshrined with natural rights and human dignity supported by the acts of spirituality within their religion and belief system. This shows that women are functional, and the roles allotted to them in society are not totally passive.

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