

KETU MYTHS AND THE STATUS OF WOMEN:
A Structural Interpretation

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ABSTRACT

Modern literature on the status of Yoruba women of South Western Nigeria has corrected the view that Yoruba women were suppressed, by throwing into relief areas of their prominence. B. Awe has drawn attention to the prominent part women like Iyalode played in traditional Yoruba politics (1977, 1979). J.A. Atanda (1979) and S.O. Babayemi (1979) have stressed the significant roles of women in the palace organization of Oyo. N. Sudarka (1973) and Karanja (1980) have explored the interesting area of Yoruba market women, showing that the economic strength which such economic enterprises confer made Yoruba women not only prominent but independent. Karanja, on the other hand, accepted that although economic enterprise brought a considerable measure of strength and prominence to the Yoruba woman, her relationship with her husband may not be interpreted as one marked with complete independence. In drawing attention to the role of women as mothers and as occupiers of the innermost and sacrosanct space within Yoruba domains, H. Callaway has demonstrated the importance of Yoruba women to central features of Yoruba society (1978). In this present work I discuss some Yoruba myths in order to throw into relief the prominence of women.

RÉSUMÉ

La littérature récente concernant l'état des femmes Yoruba au sud-ouest du Niger a corrigé l'impression que les femmes Yoruba sont supprimées, en illuminant leur prééminence dans plusieurs aspects sociaux. B. Awe a démontré l'importance des femmes telle que Iyalode dans le domaine politique traditionnel (1977, 1979). J. A. Atanda et S. O. Babayemi (1979) ont souligné l'importance des rôles des femmes dans l'organisation du palais de Oyo. N. Sudarka (1973) et Karanja (1980) ont documenté les activités des femmes au marché de Yoruba, démontrant que la puissance économique parvenant de ces entreprises confère l'indépendance aux femmes Yoruba. Karanja, par contre, accepte que, malgré que l'entreprise économique augmente le pouvoir et la prééminence de la femme Yoruba, sa relation avec son mari n'est pas

nécessairement interprétée comme indépendante. En portant l'attention sur les rôles des femmes en tant que mères et d'occupantes des places privées et sacrosanctes des domaines Yoruba, H. Calloway a démontré l'importance des femmes Yoruba dans les aspects centraux de la société Yoruba (1978). Dans cet article j'évalue plusieurs mythes Yoruba afin de souligner la prééminence des femmes.

THE MYTHS OF ORIGIN

The Ketu¹ share with other Yoruba subgroups the myths which explain the origin of the Yoruba. These fall into two categories; migration myths and creation.² The myths of migration in the hamitic tradition assert that the Yoruba are not autochthonous to the Western part of Nigeria but that they migrated in two waves from the East. In his journeys, Captain Hugh Clapperton recorded a myth of this kind from the information passed to him by Mohammed Bello Sultan of Sokoto. Bello claimed that the Yoruba originated from the 'remnants of Canaan, who were of the tribe of Nimrod' expelled from Arabia (Clapperton 1822:24). A variant of this myth was recorded by Johnson who claimed that the Yoruba descended from the son of *Lamurudu*.³ Lamurudu, a king of Mecca, was deposed and expelled by Mohammedans on account of his idolatry (Johnson 1921:3-5). Some Yoruba have even worked out the number of waves of migration and their approximate time (Johnson 1921:14; Biobaku 1955; Lucas 1948; Talbot 1926:276).

The second type of myth has a metaphysical orientation. They attempt to explain how the whole world originated from the Creator *Olodumare* who chose *Ile-Ife* as the spot of creation of the universe. It is this latter category of myth, and what it says about women, that will form the focus of my attention.

The first myth of creation can be summarized very briefly. The Supreme Being (*Olodumare*) resides in the heaven with the divinities (*Orisha*). Below this spiritual universe was a great void and a great deal of water. It occurred to *Olodumare* to create another universe peopled by mankind. He gave an order to the arch-divinity *Orishanla*³ to descend and begin the work of creation: *Olodumare* gave *Orishanla* a five-toes hen, a chameleon and a small quantity of loose earth in a snail shell. The arch-divinity was also given a chain with which to descend into the void. *Orishanla* left the presence of *Olodumare*, determined to carry out this work of creation to the best of his ability. On his way, he became thirsty and helped himself to a copious amount of palm-wine. He became

intoxicated and fell into a deep sleep. When he did not return to the heavens at the appointed time, Olodumare sent down the arch-divinity's junior brother, *Oduduwa* to find out if all was well with him. *Oduduwa* came upon the drunken *Orisha-nla*, took stock of the situation, and quietly proceeded to carry out the work of creation. He descended into the void by the chain, threw the quantity of loose earth onto the water and set the five-toes hen loose on it. The hen scratched the earth and spread it to the end of the world. Then *Oduduwa* let down the chameleon to test the firmness of the earth. The chameleon had been chosen to carry out this test because of its extreme carefulness and caution. The creation that took place was called 'spreading' (*Ife*) in commemoration of the event.

Orisha-nla appeared not long after, to discover that his task had been accomplished by his junior brother who had, in so doing, usurped his right as the creator of the earth. He quarrelled with *Oduduwa* over his impertinence. The quarrel was reported to *Olodumare*, who affected a reconciliation between the two estranged brothers. In compensation, he commissioned *Orisha-nla* to perform the special duty of moulding the human physique. He confirmed *Oduduwa* as the king over the sacred city, *Ife*. *Oduduwa* later gave birth to several children who moved away from *Ife* to establish kingdoms of their own. His second child, a female, gave birth to *Alaketu* whose offspring are the *Ketu*.

A second myth was collected by Ellis (1893). It asserted that the Yoruba originated from a series of incestuous dealings among the divinities. In this myth, *Oduduwa* is presented as a female, the earth goddess. *Orisha-nla*, the arch-divinity belonged to the heavens. He married *Oduduwa* and they had two children; 'the land' (*Aganju*) and 'water' (*Yemaja*). These engaged in sibling marriage and gave birth to the 'air' (*orungan*) that is the region between the solid earth and the edge of the heavens. *Orungan* brought the incestuous relationships to a head when he ravished his mother *Yemaja*, who, in an attempt to escape further humiliation, purposely fell and burst open, whereupon a number of minor divinities emerged from her gaping body.

The third myth of *Moremi* does not fall into either category of creation or migration but confirms the structuralist analytical tenet of picking an appropriate myth that serves as a link to understand the deeper meaning of the myth already described. It also bears out a message of the myths which emphasize the important position of women in Yoruba society. This third myth recounts the great escapades of a virtuous Yoruba woman of great beauty, *Moremi*. She contrived and succeeded to free her people from the attacks of a neighbouring group called *Igbos* (these have nothing to do with the Igbo major sociolinguistic group). On previous raids, the *Ife* warriors, all male, would not defend themselves

against their attackers who dressed as if they were super-human. Moremi made a vow to the river goddess *Esinmerin* that if the goddess showed her how to overcome the attackers, she would sacrifice her dearest possession to the goddess. At the next Igbo raid she allowed herself to be captured. Being a woman of great beauty, she was given as wife to the king of the Igbos into whose favours she endeared herself. During her captivity, she discovered that the dreaded enemies were human beings who dressed in a special type of uniform made from grass so as to look like spirits. She escaped, went back to her people, and revealed the secrets about the Igbo warriors. The attackers were met at the next incursion, with lighted torches. The Ife victory was decisive. In fulfilment of her vow Moremi made great sacrifices to the river goddess who refused all and demanded Moremi's only child, *Oluorogbo*. Moremi complied and her loss was mourned by all her people. *Oluorogbo* rose up and later ascended to heaven on a rope.

STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

In the structural tradition, myths are argued to express the contradictions in the basic premises of a culture. When they do, they show the gap between what the cultural institutions try to achieve and what they succeed in achieving. Although such myths are related to empirical facts, they are not a direct reflection of reality. One must analyze such myths to identify the contradictions which they mediate if one is to get at the message they convey. It is in this light that a close look at these Yoruba myths will be made, following the example of Leach's analysis of the story of Creation in Genesis (Leach 1967).

The antinomies of 'Heaven' and 'Earth', 'God' and 'Man', 'Good' and 'Bad', 'strong' and 'weak', are built into the structure of each of these myths. In the first myth there is a clear discrimination between the deity and humans. Thus *Olodumare* in the heaven above delegated the arch-divinity to create humans below.

This introduced yet another set of antinomies; 'above' and 'below'. The link between the sets of oppositions comes in the divinities *Orishanla* and *Oduduwa*, who symbolize the opposition in their final act of separation, with one going to the heavens and the other becoming the ruler on earth. Yet *Oduduwa* on earth is heavenbound, having originated there, while the arch-divinity is earthbound, having been assigned the duty of moulding the figure of humans who inhabit the earth.

The characters of the arch-divinity and *Oduduwa* develop the theme of opposition. Thus, the 'good' and 'strong-willed' *Oduduwa* resisted the

temptation to drink and succeeded in accomplishing the task of the 'bad' and 'weak' Orisha-nla. In the second story, the 'bad' Orungan had an incestuous dealing with his 'good' mother, the accepted incest among the divinities being brother/sister and not child/parent incest. Yemaja demonstrated a considerable measure of strength by attempting to escape. In the third story, the 'good and strong' Moremi found a solution to the problem of her people, while the scared, 'weak' and cowardly Ife men failed to defend their people.

The sets of oppositions which emerge from the relationships may be rendered as

heaven: good: strong: above
 earth: bad: weak: below

When we add the set of sexual oppositions to the sets above, on the merits of the characters in the stories, we must assign women in the column of strength and man to that of weakness;

heaven: good: strong: above - women
 earth : bad: weak: below - men.

This addition anticipates the suggestion which underlies this paper, that Ketu women are powerful and that the instances of overt expression of male domination are a mechanism of male defence against the perceived power of females.

At the level of discrimination in sexual relations, the analysis offers a more interesting insight. Most societies recognize some incest taboo (in whatever way it is defined) and the marriage rule of exogamy. In the second myth, although the divinities regarded sibling incest as 'normal', they viewed child/parent incest differently. The attempted escape and death of Yemaja expressed disapproval of child/parent incest. In the story of Moremi, the marriage of the heroine to the Igbo king, no matter how brief, exemplifies the exogamous marriage of alliance as against the practice of incest such that, while the incestuous assault of Yemaja by Orungan led to the death of Jemeja, the exogamous liaison of Moremi with the Igbo chief resulted in the preservation of life of Moremi's people. This is an example of transformation where the end result of the second set is a reversal of the first. On the one hand, coercive endogamy led to death, on the other hand exogamy (albeit temporary) led to life.

In the myths about Moremi and the incestuous dealings of divinities, women play very active and positive roles. Added to the fact that there is no complete agreement on the sex of Oduduwa who is in some areas of Yorubaland, regarded as female (Idowa 1962:24-27), the imbue-ment of

women with such characteristics as strength, life, fertility and courage is clear. The same myths associate the opposing characteristics of weakness, death and lack of courage with men. There are at least three dominant themes in these myths.

1. They emphasize the insistence on marriage within the group so as to keep the blood of the group pure.
2. They speak of the consequent change necessitated by practical political considerations which suggest the wisdom in the rule of exogamy.

This confirms a major structural principle that the exchange of women between kinship groups creates a significant link between otherwise exclusive, uncooperating groups. Thus women become the currency of making political, economic and social links. A link with neighbouring groups is forged through exogamous marriages. This in essence creates a metre of effective communication devoid of the ambiguity characteristic of system language.

3. The myths speak of the powerlessness of the Yoruba men who realized that they depend on the goodwill of their females to effect these extra-group alliances. The powerlessness of the men is masked by the ideology of male dominance and by the socialization of women which encourages them to accept such dominance.

The Yoruba tradition insists that people marry within the group (not of relations) so as to keep the blood of the group pure. Although this practice created a sense of exclusivity and unity within the group in relation to others, in the Moremi affair the costly price of maintaining such exclusivity is shown. To the conservative elements within the society, the overture to relate with the neighbouring groups was construed as a complete break with tradition. The myths of Moremi and the incest of the divinities, with their end-results, provide the ideological underpinning and character for the change. In so doing, they help the ordinary Yoruba man to absorb the new practice of being traditionally ordained; thus avoiding the conflict that may accompany social change.

The compromise in tradition implied in the transfer of females had another effect on the relations between the sexes in the society. To the Yoruba man who always wanted to exude an aura of superiority over the Yoruba female, the realization that he depended on females for survival weakened his feeling of dominance. Thus, these myths portray the

contradiction inherent in the patrilineally oriented world of the Yoruba, where the male asserts his dominance over the female on whom he depends for survival. This paradox runs through the relationship between sexes.

KETU MIGRATION STORY: A CONFIRMATION

The story of the Western migration of the Ketu from Ile-Ife shows the important role played by women, both to speed the progress of Ketu migration and to effect a comfortable settlement and integration of the Ketu back to a normal cultured existence. It also supports the interpretation of the Yoruba myths of origin.

The story recorded by Crowther (1843), Parrinder (1956) and by Smith (1969), stated that the Ketu sub-group migrated from Ile-Ife under the leadership of a prince of Ife -- a grandson of Oduduwa -- named *Sopasan*. Having crossed the Ogun river, the migrants split into three divisions. The first division continued westwards under the leadership of Sopasan and his nephew *Owo*; the second went first, northwest, and then, southwards and found the cognate sub-group of Sabe. The third moved northwards and founded Aro.

The party under Sopasan settled at such temporary sites as Oke-Oyan and Aro. At Aro where Sopasan died and was succeeded by Owe, the migrants stayed longer and broke camp in the reign of the seventh king, *Ede*, who revived the westward migrations. Again, the party split into three divisions. The first division founded a village called Idofa ... The second settled at Igbob-Ora and the Ede group -- the largest of the three -- moved westwards guided by the hunter *Alalumon*.

The members of the Ede group ran out of water at a point not far from where Ketu town was founded. They were saved from dying of thirst by the kindness of a woman, a powerful, lonely old sorceress, *Ya Mepere*, who later fulfilled a promise she made to Ede by building a powerful charm to protect Ketu town. The migrants continued their westward movement until they came to the site of Ketu. On their first night they had no fire with which to cook. The hunter Alalumon went in search of fire. In remembrance of this act of service, all lights are put out at the death of a king at Ketu and Alalumon, one of the leading chiefs, goes to Panku to light a ritual fire (Parrinder 1956:20).

The main outline of this story exhibits the feature of a rite of passage; separation, transition and aggregation. The group of migrants left the larger Ife group under the leadership of Sopasan and went to found a town of their own. From the moment the migrants separated themselves

from the Ife group up to the moment they were incorporated back into the society by the symbolic gesture of the gift of fire, they lived an unclassified, marginal life of the semi-nomads. They lived in 'the wild' of the normal Yoruba society. Although they tried to keep a semblance of the civilized Yoruba cultural way of life by preserving their kinship, they did not belong to the larger Yoruba society. Contrary to the sedentary agricultural Yoruba they were on the move and lived largely by hunting. They lacked two important elements that support human survival; water and fire. Fire, in particular, is associated with culture. In asking for fire, the Ketu group was, in effect, putting a definitive end to their natural non-cultural state of existence in the transitional period.

The migrants were aided both to survive and to be integrated into the cultured society by women who, as marginal figures, mediated their transition. One was declared a sorceress who lived alone. The other was an old woman. Old women who have passed the age of menopause are regarded as potentially dangerous by the Yoruba. The sorceress gave them water to quench their thirst and a magical charm to boost their morale and enable them to gain the confidence to ask for integration into normal society. The gift of fire had both a practical and symbolic implication. It effectively ended their transitional state of nature and it also symbolized a welcoming acceptance by the group who already lived in that area.

The myths of Yemaja, Moremi and Ketu migration demonstrate instances of female power in the face of male weakness. Moremi, the heroine, volunteered to move into the unknown in order to free her people at a time when the Ife male population had lost its will to defend the people. Yemaja restrained herself from her son's incestuous dealings and preferred to die in protest. The old women, Ye Mepere and Ya Panku radiate strength. The former saved the Ketu from death and restored their confidence by boosting their morale with 'a powerful magic charm'. The latter retrieved, through her gift of fire, the Ketu from the anonymity of the marginal nature state and elevated them back to the cultural plane.

In Ketu history, women have held important political positions and they still do. Thus, there was the case of Queen Ida of the royal house of Ketu who encouraged the Ketu in exile at Abomey and its environs, to go back to the old site of Ketu and rebuild it. She was the *Chef de Canton* from 1911 to 1919. Today there is the post of *Iyalase* in every Ketu town. The *Iyalase* is the priestess of *Iyanla* and the mediator between her society and *Iyanla* -- the earth goddess who serves as the source of fertility. She wields considerable influence and is consulted in the selection of candidates for the office of king.

In summary, therefore, the myths comment on the contemporary affairs of the Ketu social and political patterns. At one level, they draw

attention to the necessity of maintaining cordial relations with contiguous ethnic communities using, among other things, the link of marriage. At another level, although patterns of relationship between the sexes within the Ketu polity suggest a strong male dominance, the myths reveal that in symbolism and ritual the position of women is preponderant and essential to the whole social and political organization. A forum is provided for the articulation of female views in a milieu of male dominance. The subtle message communicated by the myths in their structural orientation pertains to the necessity of reestablishing the balance in the relations to the sexes, so that the much needed mobilization of the efforts of the female population may aid the process of development. Contemporary realities, which dictate the harnessing of female and male efforts to survive economically, force a reprisal of the dominance/muted male-oriented structures to shift to a recognition of the fact that male efforts alone will not suffice to meet the needs of family members in contemporary society. If the dominance of the male was predicated on the economics of being the sole breadwinner for the family, it should suggest itself to the mind that in the changed circumstance of the shared economic responsibilities by the male and the female a reassessment of this pattern of relationship between the sexes is necessary. The myths draw attention to this reassessment, perhaps in a somewhat female-oriented manner. The necessity to make this shift, from one to the other sexual orientation, is the initial price that must be paid in order to arrive at that balance. In contemporary Africa, studies which stress the dominance of the female in male-oriented societies, using the folk-lore, myths and other cultural traits which served in the past to buttress male-ideology, will help to provide a reorientation from the same cultural milieu, a reorientation which will prove invaluable to mobilizing all segments, especially female, to contribute actively to the developmental process.

Hence myths not only record history, but also serve as legitimating charter for existential relations in contemporary society.

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1. The Ketu of Western Yorubaland are a subgroup of the large Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria. The Ketu are located astride the Dahomey-Nigerian Boundary. The town of Ketu, from which the subgroup derives its name, was the capital of the ancient kingdom of Ketu (Parrinder, 1956, Asiwaju, 1976) much of which now lies in the Peoples Republic of Benin (Dahomey).
2. Lloyd classified the myths of Yoruba origin into two types and creation to a third type: town myths which sanction the position of the King by creating a link between himself and Ile-Ife and its first King Oduduwa. Under this category comes the lineage myths which fixed them into the social structure of the town (Lloyd 1955:21-14).
3. Editor's note: Only the first incidence of a Ketu name (as opposed to Ketu terms) has been italicized.
4. Orisha-nla is the arch-divinity and the most important spiritual being after Olodumare. He may be conceived as the refraction of the creative power of the Supreme Being since he is said to be the Divinity assigned to mould the physique of living.
5. There is disagreement over the sex of Oduduwa. Ajisafe (1924:10) asserts that he was a man who married Omonide who gave birth, among others, to Alaketu. Parrinder (1956) recorded a Ketu tradition which claimed Oduduwa to be a female. Idowu (1962:24-7) said that the historical personality of Oduduwa, the deified ancestor of the Yoruba, was grafted onto that of the earth goddess Oduduwa, whose cults flourish at Ado and Imedo in Western Yorubaland.

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