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Culture, Gender, and Development Theories in Africa

Sophie B. Oluwole*

PHILOSOPHERS ARE CONVENTIONALLY interested in developing different principles meant to guide human existence within a particular milieu and in specifying the basic assumptions that serve to put them in place. Philosophers thus set forth theories meant to create social realities while social scientists most often derive theories from the study of existing reality. This is not to suggest that scholars in either discipline can totally avoid the study of actuality, but that conventionally philosophers are seen to be more creators of utopias than social scientists, who make conscious efforts to remain within empirically determinable frameworks. This is why philosophical analysts usually concentrate on what thinkers within a particular culture say rather than what they or other members of their societies do. Philosophers, for instance, devote themselves to the study of what Plato, Russell, Confucius or Santayana each say. Many of them know next to nothing about the actual social contexts in which each of these philosophers lived. The fact that such knowledge can enhance the critic's understanding of Plato, etc. does not make the history of such events a branch of strict philosophy.

This paper starts with the discussion of two basically different but often compared cultural world-views, each with a distinctive ideology in terms of which one particular form of sexism is seen as a rationally justified social principle of social organisation. I have chosen to compare Western and Yoruba cultures for reasons that will become obvious as we proceed. The fundamental question which the paper raises and tries to answer is what philosophy contributes and can continue to contribute to the analysis of gender as an adequate tool within the formulation of developmental theories in contemporary Africa.

At the outset it is useful to remind ourselves that most existing world-renowned theories of state development were products of political philosophers.

* Philosophy Department, University of Lagos, Nigeria.

These have, from time to time, been analysed, criticised and reformulated both by philosophers and social critics. In doing so, it has always been essential for the critic to fall back on the particular world-view which underlies such theories. But because Africa has little or no written documents of her world-views, historians, theologians, ethnographers and other social scientists have been involved in the reconstruction of ancient African world-views through the study of peoples' cultural behaviours, religious rituals and social activities, which serve as clues to African political, social, economic and religious principles in organising precolonial societies.

Social and political philosophers interested in the analysis of ancient African social principles have more or less relied on such findings in their criticism of traditional African theories of state. This paper is an attempt to incorporate Mudimbe's proposal that we go back to actual 'texts' of oral tradition instead of relying entirely on the 'inventions' of social scientists. Indeed one of the trends in the search for an authentic African philosophy of development is the view that we must pay special attention to the African context rather than blindly copy the tradition of Western Philosophy. The recommendation is that we need to create a modern forum which has an adequate knowledge of its past without completely discarding it as irrelevant myth. The call therefore is for an African Renaissance, in a critical examination of African oral literature so as to discover and promote a reliable African intellectual atmosphere based on 'narratives presented in the truth of their language and authenticity' rather than a reality distorted in the modalities of non-African languages or 'results of theoretical manipulations'[1].

The Philosophical Origin of Sexism in Western Culture

Some of the earliest Greek thinkers traditionally acknowledged as precursors of Western thought had proposed among other things that nature is made up of purely materialistic elements whose relationships can be understood in rational terms. The development of science, most especially during the Renaissance, was based almost entirely on this vision of nature by the Greeks.[2] In fact, this view

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1 V. Y. Mudimbe, on whose ideas I heavily rely here, stresses the need for scholars to pay more serious attention to the actual meanings expressed in original texts expressed in African languages. For him, this provides a more reliable basis of unveiling paradigms out there in African thought rather than the common practice of accepting what he calls the 'invention' of African *gnosis* by Western scholars and ideologists.

2 **Pandora**: *The Greek Myth underlying the Whiteman's misogyny*. In the myth of the creation of the world, the woman is the least endowed of all creatures. When she protests or someone else does on her behalf, everybody felt bad about her case. Therefore, an attempt was made to contribute from each person's possession towards her own

became the predominant faith of nearly all intellectuals in Europe when nature came to be seen as an inexhaustible source of power waiting to be exploited through the combined use of brute force and an innate intellectual competence. These two were seen as the only effective tools needed to produce adequate technologies for the conversion of nature energy to the maximum benefit of man — a term supposedly meant to imply both male and female.

Colonialism, Imperialism, Slavery, Capitalism, etc. all of which have now come to be regarded as different forms of human oppression, were justified with reference to those two principles which were then regarded as scientific and rational laws of nature based on indisputable natural truths. In the course of time, might became identified with right and the accumulation of material wealth came to be seen and used as the two most viable canons for determining the dignity and social status of men and women within society. It was within this intellectual atmosphere that it became almost inevitable that levels of societal development are assessed in terms of how much a nation owns and what amount of power it possesses. These, of course, are the two main criteria still used today in determining super powers, as well as developed and underdeveloped nations of the world.

Implicit in this understanding of nature and appropriate tools of exploiting it, is a social ideal: the more brute force and intellectual ability a human being possesses, the more valuable such a person becomes to society. The example of the great explorers is worthy of note here. But then it is desirable if not totally imperative that society puts in place adequate processes of establishing the amount of power and intellectual competence of every individual member of society. In contemporary times, one of the best ways of doing this would be to test the IQ (intelligence quotient) of every member of a society as well as measuring their energy in terms of horse power or whatever.

From the Middle Ages down to the time of the Renaissance, Western philosophers, theologians and men (sic) in the literary arts, including self-styled scientists, went on gleefully to give reasons and justifications of the view that the entirety of the female members of the species are physically and intellectually inferior to the entirety of the male members of the species. This was how sexism was born in the West and later became the principle of social

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endowment. What she gets in the end amount to little bits of different objects or qualities that are kept in her wallet (the Pandora's box). Ironically, when she decided to open it for inspection, all the little trivial things fly out into her face and spoil the general atmosphere for other people.

organisation within that culture. Different forms of international oppressions listed above were mere applications of this to other realms of human relationship.

Earlier on, Aristotle had laid the philosophical basis for this tradition when he defined justice as treating equals equally, and unequals unequally. What later intellectuals did was to claim that they had rationally and scientifically established the existence of permanent inequalities between male and female. Society is therefore justified in applying a principle which recognises this 'fact' in the organisation of social institutions, and the determining of male-female relationships in terms of these natural sexual differences.

The history of different forms of social degradation and oppression of women that resulted from the faithful applications of these two related social and evaluative principles within Western culture is so well known and adequately documented that an excursion into them here would be pedestrian. I only want to mention in passing that this traditional view of the woman in Europe and later in America, is far from being just a matter of history.

Britain for instance, is yet to have a House of Ladies as a counterpart of the House of Lords. A woman is a lady by virtue of her husband being a lord. And of the 100 members of the American Senate at the time of writing, only 6 are women. Finally, a British clergyman said recently, when the Church of England ordained 32 women as priests, 'If I have my way, those women would be burnt on the stakes because they are witches'. Needless to say, he reminds us of his predecessors in the Age of Joan of Arc and other unfortunate women under the tyranny of the Roman Catholic Church. Economic manipulation, sexual exploitation, and the religious and political marginalisation of women are still very much around in many spheres of the social setting both in Europe and in America despite the fact that many former atrocities against women are now on the decline.

Sexism in African (Yoruba) Cultural Experience

One of the fundamental problems of studying ancient African world-views and the principles that once determined institutionalised relationships between men and women within each social group is that there is hardly any written records of them. This is why social scientists have to reconstruct the African past from fables, legends, religious, and social activities, and indeed from folklore in general, including oral records of historical events. This, in the recent past, is where the interests of the social scientist and the philosopher seem to cross without actually merging.

The denial of the existence of African Philosophy, for instance, has led many philosophers in the study of ancient African thoughts on different aspects and social principles of society. Hence, apart from the relying on the reports of social scientists and historians, many philosophers have, for some time now, directly engaged themselves in the study, analysis and explication of their own indigenous cultural views and at times in those of others. And the results have been quite intriguing. But one fundamental problem has been the explicit claims of unsustainable generalisations despite the existence of several diverse cultures in Africa.

My analysis is of the Yoruba world-view and principles of social experience. This is not because I regard the Yoruba as representative of African views on the subject, but because it is the oral literature available to me as specimen of an African people's thought. Actual texts occurring in a people's language, seem to me to offer a more direct access to understanding social principles than those inferred from social norms and/or religious behaviours.

Following are a few illustrations from the several aspects of Yoruba oral literature, which I started studying about eight years ago. The project itself, which is on African philosophy in general but which touches on gender issues as these are related to an adequate understanding of social and political principles of existence, is far from being complete. The findings here presented are therefore neither exhaustive nor conclusive. I regard the entire study as an exercise in African philosophy, but not in the ethno-philosophical sense of formulating one metaphysico-epistemological theory commonly shared by all Africans. As a particular philosophical position in Yoruba thought it is African, but it should be noted that it is one of several possible philosophies that existed in pre-colonial Africa, just as any particular philosophical position may be labelled British, German or Greek, even though there are other philosophical positions in each of these countries, and each of these is also European.

It is important to state that apart from my own direct study of Yoruba oral literature through reading and interviews, I also rely on the works of historians, ethnologists, and social scientists in testing the hypotheses I propose.

The mainstream of Yoruba oral literature is the *Ifá* Corpus which is made up of an initial 256 *Odù* (Chapters) each of which can be interpolated with others in such as way that *Ifá* actually constitutes an open ended system. Although it is generally regarded as the religious book of the Yoruba, others see it as the encyclopaedia of ancient Yoruba thought and wisdom. To some philosophers *Ifá* is comparable to the Midrash — an autochthonous theoretical consciousness with commentaries on proverbs, stories and tales used within it as illustrations of social, political and religious, as well as moral themes and principles on which

different private and institutional arrangements in the society are made and the applications and dramatisations of which are directly or indirectly observable in the social behaviours and relationships of members of the society (Eze 1993).

I shall therefore present here some of those themes and principles which, to my mind, are useful in analysing and explaining the male-female relationship in different spheres of Yoruba society. In doing this I shall rely heavily on Yoruba proverbs and aphorisms, for as the people themselves say:

'Òwe l'esin òrò, bí òrò bá sonú, òwe l' a fi n wà a'
(Proverbs are the analytic tools of thought, when thought is lost, it is proverbs that are used to search for it)

Yoruba Understanding of Nature

There are many stories and aphorisms in *Ifá* oral literature expressed in proverbial forms. I shall quote only a few.

(i) *Láko lábo ni Olórun dá gbogbo nnkan.*
(Every natural existence occurs in male-female anti-thesis)

(ii) *T'ibi t'ire l'òjò n rin*
(The good and the bad are bound inseparably together)

(iii) *Eye ò lè e fi apá kan fò.*
(The bird cannot fly with a single wing)

(iv) *Àjèjé owó kan ò gb'érù d'órí*
(One hand does not lift a load to the head)

Each of these proverbs points to the belief that nature or reality is not monistic. The popular view is that every existence occurs in a complementary union with another existence. Several students of Yoruba culture have reported that even in their numerals, everything is arranged in even numbers. *Ifa* for example, has sixteen major *Odu* and two hundred and twenty four minor ones giving a total of 256. But the names of each *Odu* (Chapter) is expressed as dual in nature: *Òyèkú Méji*, *Òkanràn Méji*, etc., (*'méji* means two). What this means is that each of the *Odù* includes both the male and the female principle (McGee 1983).

Again, the number of Yoruba deities is either given as 201 or, at other times as 401. The odd number represents *Olódùmarè* the supreme Being. The number of Òrìsà, the panopoly of deities who are not gods, is therefore either 200 or 400. However, Yoruba mythology and oral literature have it that *Olódùmarè* is sometimes regarded as male and at other times as female. A decisive declaration of the Supreme Being as male is difficult to make because the third person singular pronoun 'oun' is gender-neutral. What seems to be the truth is that

different sub-societies within Yoruba culture view *Olódùmarè* differently. This is testified to by a contemporary Yoruba poet when he declared:

Baba enìkan kò r'Èlédùmarè rí,
Ló d'Ifá f'èni m bèrè Òòduà ako - mbábo.
Won ní Ifè lò j'áko, Adó ló j'ábo
Ní gbogbo ilè Èwí o, Òòdúa j'ábo.

Nobody's father has ever seen *Èlédùmarè*
Is the oracular answer to anyone who asks
If God is male or female
It is said that at Ife God is male,
But at *Adó*, God is female.
In all the Kingdom of *Èwí*, (the ruler of *Adó*),
Òòdúa is female*

* (*Òòdúa* is sometimes used as another name for *Olodumare*)

This, of course, is not to say that if one interviews Yoruba sages today, most of them will not try to convince the researcher that *Olódùmarè* in traditional thought was generally characterised as male. This most probably shows the influence of both Christianity and Islam wherein God is conceived as male: a pointer to the fact that many living traditionalists confuse authentic African beliefs with imported ones. My interest is how some ancient Yoruba thinkers actually conceptualised some of their deities.

Yoruba Symbolism of the Deities

Here we have clear distinctions made between the male and the female. *Ògún*, the deity of iron for instance, is male. So also is *Sàngo* the fire-eating deity of thunder. But *Òsun* is the deity of fertility, while *Olókun* is the deity of wealth and prosperity. (The latter has an only daughter *Ajé* — Money). Both of these deities are female. The place of abode of *Òsun* is the river while *Olókun's* home is the Ocean which she also rules. *Orúnmilà*, the deity of knowledge and wisdom, is male and the divination system generally known as *Ifá* is generally associated with him. The popular view is that the system is not supposed to be practised by women. For as the saying goes *'Obìrin kì í kó'fá'* (A woman is never ordained as an *Ifá* priest). Yet I have been reliably told by several informants that this proverb does not imply this. The meaning it conveys is that female practitioners of *Ifá* were originally not permitted to see the *Igbá Odù* — the calabash in which *Ifá* objects are kept.

However, there are women who actually practice *Ifa.* They are known as *yánífá* while their male counterparts are called *Babalawo.* But even then, of the various instruments used within the system, some are associated more with women than with men. *Ikín, Agbigba* and *Òpèlè* are used more by men than by women while *Isa* or *Èèrìndínlógún* is used more by women. This is why we have the saying: *Òle okùnrin ló dá'sà'* (Only a lazy man can divine with *Isà*). The implication is that *Isà* is simpler. But in actual fact different women use different instruments for divination. Yet one cannot ignore the implicit suggestion that most women opt for *Isà* because it is simpler — the same reason why lazy men also use it. Furthermore there is also the claim that *Ifá* oral literature, when accessed through the use of *Ikin,* is fuller and more difficult to interpret. Again, the belief is that only a few women can use it.

Yoruba Cultural Views on Knowledge

Here we have several proverbs, stories and aphorisms which make every clear statements about Yoruba belief that knowledge, like wisdom, is relative in nature. Each can therefore vary in terms of time and space as well as between persons of different sexes and ages. Here are some of them:

(i) *Ogbón odùn ní wèrè èèmí ì,*
(Wisdom this year may be folly next time).

(ii) *Báyì í là nse n'íbí, èèwò ibò mi i*
(The norm in one place is anathema in another).

(iii) *Enìkan kì í nìkan gbó tán.*
(No one is all wise).

(iv) *Obìnrin kì í fó ni l'ójú*
(Being a woman does not make a person blind)

(v) *Omodé gbón, àgbà gbón,*
Ni a 'fi d'alè Ifè
(Children are wise, elders too are wise)
[This is the primordial principle of Yoruba Society].

(vi) *Eni mò yí, kò mo t'òhùn*
Ló d'Ifá fún Òrúnmilà.
Tí yio kó Ifá lówó Ámósùn omo rè.
(She/he who knows this may not know that.
This was the oracular principle applicable to Òrúnmilà
(the deity of wisdom and knowledge),
Who had to learn *Ifa* wisdom from Amosun, his offspring).

I will now add an aphorism also from the *Ifa* literary corpus:

Omilengbe ò lákàmoye,
Ìyèrúndù ò lómúkàkà,
Mo gbón tán, mo mò tán,
Àra re nìkan ló tàn je.
Àìfòròloni,
Awo ílú àwon wèrè
Ló d'ífá fún Òrúnmìlà.
Nígbàtí baba mbe nínú àkámó.

Water is uncountable.
Powdery stuff cannot be counted
I am all wise,
I am all knowing,
Deceives no one but him/herself.
A self-conceited person,
Is regarded as a sage only among fools.
This was the operative principle applicable to *Orunmila*
When he was caught up in the midst of enemies.

Like in most *Odù Ifá*, this aphorism is followed by the story of how *Òrúnmìlà* asked his followers who were also his pupils why they made no effort to help him when he was confronted by his antagonists. The answer was that since he was the one to whom they run in times of difficulties, they believed they were incapable of helping him out. *Òrúnmìlà* then asked them: 'Why then did I teach you wisdom?' It was the disciples who in the end got him out of the problem!

In other chapters of *Ifá*, it is clearly demonstrated that even *Olódùmarè*, the Supreme (but never absolute) Being is not all knowing. She/he asks questions and acknowledges having learnt from experience. For instance, *Olódùmarè* explicitly stated this in *Odù Òyèkú Méjì* (Abimbola 1977). There are therefore the following sayings:

Olórun pàápàá ò gbón tó
(Even God is wise enough)

Ìgbàgbé se Olódùmáre,
Kò la esè pépéye
(It was *Olódùmarè's* forgetfulness
That accounts for the separation of the duck's claws)

Of course there is nothing specifically blasphemous in this since it is also said in the Bible that God regretted creating humanity. However, the Yoruba do not see God as epistemologically limited in exactly the same way as humanity is. Her/His superior capacity is illustrated in the following short aphorism:

Amóòkùn s'olè,
Bí ojú oba ayé kò rí o,
Ti oba òkè n wò ó

(You who steal under the cover of darkness
If the eyes of the earthly king do not see you,
Those of the heavenly ruler are watching).

Yoruba Conceptions of Male and Female

One strange difficulty here is the scarcity of proverbs which characterise the male, apart from a few about his official or semi-official role as father. Yet this is in no way comparable with the almost innumerable proverbs that characterise women as a particular group, and others which touch on their roles as mother, wife, daughter and concubine. One possible explanation is the claim that over 80 per cent of Yoruba proverbs and aphorisms are to be found in the *Ifá* corpus which is to a large extent dominated by men. Yet this view is faulted on the note that both men and women do practice *Ifá* divination. Therefore it is difficult to make clear a distinction between oral texts accessed through the use of different means except the claim that *ÍKín* is said to be fuller than the others. Be that as it may, I start with some proverbs and aphorisms which express Yoruba views about the woman and her various functions in the family and in society.

(i) *Bí okùnrin r'éjò tí obìnrin pa á,*
Kí ejò ó má sá a ti lo,
(If a man sights a snake and a woman kills it,
Its well so long as the snake does not escape).

(ii) *Obìnrin ò se é f'imú hàn.*
(Women cannot keep secrets).

(iii) *Obìnrin ò m'oore*
(Women are ingrates).

(iv) *Òrìsà bí ìyà kò sí,*
Ìyá l'à bá má a bo.
(There is no deity like mother,
She is the only one worthy of adoration).

(v) *Ìya nì wúrà, baba ni dígí,*
(Mother is gold, father is glass).

(vi) *Omokùnrin àrólé,*
Omobìnrin agbára.
(A male child is the pillar of the family,
A female one is a seasonal stream).

However there are a few negative proverbs about men too. We have the following:

(vii) *Okùnrin ò l'órun*
(Men have no place in heaven).

(viii) *Oko mi o súnwòn,*
Omo kan l'ó ye è
(A bad husband should be left after the first child)

(ix) *Omo eni l'oko eni*
Òtútù ni kò mo ìyà
Tí a fi nfi oko s'ejo ara
Omo eni l'oko eni
(A woman's child is her true husband
It is only because cold is unbearable
That is why you have a husband to keep you warm
A child is the true husband of her mother)

(x) *Gbédè bí ògún ìyá,*
Ogún Bàbá ní n ni omo lára.
(Peaceful as a mother's inheritance,
It is a father's legacy that creates problems for the progeny)

Ironically there is an *Ifa* aphorism which suggests that all human beings are born equal:

Erú kú n'ilé, won lo sin s'óko
Omo kú l'óko, won wá sin s.'ilé
Ìbí ó ju ìbí
Bí a se b'érú
L'ase b'ómo.
Erú ní bàbá,
Òrà lò jìn.
Má f'ìyà je mí
Nítorí mo jé àlejò,

Bí ìwo ná à bá dé ibò míràn
Àlejò nì wo ná à yí ò jé

(When a slave dies at home, she is buried at the farmstead
When the true born dies in the farm, she is brought home for burial
Yet one birth is not greater than the other
The way the slave's child is born
Is the same as the master's child is born,
The slave has a father,
Only he is far away.
Do not oppress me,
Because I am a stranger,
If you get to another country,
You too will be a stranger.

These proverbs show that the Yoruba traditionally regarded motherhood as an important social responsibility which was evaluated higher than that of fatherhood. Matrilineal relationships are also deeper and stronger than patrilineal ones even today. But perhaps the most intriguing aspect of ancient Yoruba thought is their recognition of the male and the female as partners in progress. This male-female principle is seen as so fundamental that it is nowhere denied in the organisation of society. The inseparableness of the male-female compendium forms the first axiom of understanding and of theories of society. This is beautifully recorded in a riddle among the Yoruba speaking community of *Poro* in Northern Ivory Coast. Asked how many people are in the village, the answer was: 'Two, man and woman'. The implication is, of course, a recognition that society must pay due recognition to both and not just one of the two sexes.

Yet the fundamental insight that femaleness cannot be totally ignored in the formulation of ideal principles of organising society which the Yoruba and this Ivorian people so much stress, was never a basic element of social theories in the West nor did it form the only basic axiom which Yoruba society relied upon. The first proverb in this subsection which clearly shows an acknowledgement of the empirical fact that while men may be cowards, women may be villains. But even then, the Yoruba still express preference for male children and at times makes derogatory remarks about women.

This is more explicit in principles which define the relationship between husband and wife. For example, we have the following sayings:

(i) *Oko l' olórí*
(The husband is the leader of the wife)

(ii) *Obìnrin s'òwà nù,*
Ó ní òun ò l'órí oko.
(A woman who lacks good character,
Always blames her marital problems on ill luck)

(iii) *Òkan soso pòrò l'obìnrin dùn mo*
L ówó oko
B'ó bá di méjì á òfófó
B'ó bá dí méta á di pamínkú etc.
(Monogamy is the only enjoyable material relationship
For a husband,
When (wives) are two, they become jealous,
When three, it becomes a problem of
'you must kill me today', etc.)

(iv) *Ò'òsà jé n n'éni kéjì obìnrin ò d'énú.*
(A woman's prayer for a second wife is never sincere)

(v) *Àìlóbìnrin ò se dáké,*
Bí a d'áké enu ní fi í soni.
Níní ejó àìní òràn,
Èèyàn tí ò l'óbìnrin,
Ò tó ko ká'wó l'érí,
K'ó sunkún gb' ònà ojà lo!
The wifeless cannot keep his peace,
If he does, he exposes himself to different stigmas,
Yet having one is as problematic as having none,
A wifeless man should hold his head,
And go weeping to the market place.

Now let's consider another aphorism from *Odù Ifá*:

Orí burúkú kì í wu tuulu,
A kì í da esè asiwèrè mó l'ónà,
A kì í m'orí olójà l'áwùjo,
A dí á fún Mobówú
Tí í se obìnrin Ògún.
Orí tí ó j'oba l'óla,
Enìkan kò mò.
Kí tokotaya ó mò pe'ra won

Ní wèrè mó,
Orí tí o j'oba l'óla,
Enìkan kò mò.

(Bad luck does not mean having a migraine,
No one can identify the footsteps
of the madman on the road:
You can not know the head that will wear
a crown among the multitude.
This was the oracular message to *Mobówú*
The wife of *Ògún* (the deity of iron).
Who will be made the king tomorrow,
Nobody knows.
Let not the husband or the wife call each other,
Mad or unsuccessful anymore,
The head that will wear a crown tomorrow,
Nobody knows.

Now, as the late Okot p'Bitek beautifully put it, for the Yoruba, like most other Africans, the social ideal was for a young man and woman to get marry at a ripe age, have children and settle down to a good life. It was only within Western culture that husbandlessness, wifelessness, childlessness and homelessness became virtues (p'Bitek 1983). The man as the head of the house has social responsibilities to the wife whose position was subservient to that of the husband. A woman who changes husbands from time to time should not blame it on bad luck but on her bad character. An adult male who remains unmarried is a social deviant who attracts to himself different derogatory comments: *'ọkọ́bó'* (an impotent); *'olè'* (a lazy person); *'olóríburúkú'* (a never-do-well). The only thing that befits such a man is to publicly declare himself a total failure.

However, contrary to the contemporary claim by Yoruba men that polygamy or even polygyny is a culturally accepted norm, many verses in *Ifa* oral literature clearly state that if a man wishes to have a happy home, the ideal is to have only *one* wife. The unhappy consequences of every additional wife is listed. Hence a distinction has to be made between the practice of polygyny and the claim that Yoruba thinkers see it as an ideal. The aphorism about having many wives may be seen as blaming the woman for the problems of polygyny, but it is equally possible that these were recognised as realistic practical problems of having more than *one* wife. One of the aphorisms above expresses the empirical fact that having a wife is almost as problematic as remaining a bachelor. The same apparently goes for the woman who has no husband. The final advice therefore is that since society sees marriage as inevitable, husbands and wives should

never see each other as a failure. Rather both should make concerted efforts to keep a marriage healthy.

The Place of Women in Yoruba Political, Economic and Religious Systems

Several historians, ethnologists, sociologists, anthropologists as well as other students of Yoruba culture, have testified that Yoruba women played some crucial political and economic roles in the traditional setting. There are oral records of female rulers in many of the towns and villages and the phenomenon of female chiefs is still very much around. Women held some powerful positions in the palace of *Alaàfin* — the ancient ruler of the old *Òyó* Empire.

For example, the *Alaàfin's* official mother was the feudal head of *Basorun*, the *Oyó* Generalisimo, while the *Ìyá Kéré* (the junior official mother) was the King's treasurer. She was also in charge of the royal insignia and all the paraphernalia used on state occasions. She had the power of withholding them, thus preventing any state reception, to mark her displeasure with the King when she was offended. She was the person entitled to place the crown on the King's head. She was the mother of all the *Ìlàrí* — the male and female courtiers who constitute one third of the household officials of the court. Indeed, Rev. Johnson (1921), who recorded this history, noted that although the *Íyá Kéré* comes next in rank to the official mother of the King, she wielded the greatest power in the palace. The King's pharmacist who was the one who meted punishment to erring chiefs was also a woman.

It is however interesting to note that in the economic sphere, women were in the lead in most Yoruba cultural societies. It was women who sold their husband's products. But since the woman usually practiced one or more occupations and professions in her own right, she also sold her own wares. This apparently not only gave her the advantage of owning property, but the wonderful opportunity of developing business skills. Yoruba men by tradition, do not engage in selling farm products in the market or cooked food elsewhere in the village. A recognition of the economic contribution of the woman seems to be the basis for the following aphorism:

Alanise obìnrin Òy' eni.
Obínrin tí kò ní' Se,
Aro rè ni ó tà jeun.
Ákun ojú á kun enu,
À s'àgbèrè l'ónà ojà.
(A woman without work does no honour to anybody,
A jobless woman,

Will sell herself for food.
She will paint the face, and the mouth,
And resort to prostitution on the way to the market).

The hardworking woman is therefore seen as a role model. Yoruba women were, and are still market leaders in all parts of the society today and are well known all over west and central Africa for their shrewdness in business. Again contrary to popular belief, women were involved in all the secret societies — at least there was always a female representative in each. For instance, the *Orò* cult which women are publicly forbidden to see, actually starts its nocturnal outing only after a woman has waved the whistling calabash. The *Òsugbó* society, which was the legal arm of government among the *Ègbá* and *Ìjèbú* Yoruba, had only one female representative. But she was vested with great powers as recorded in the following aphorism:

Dá 'gi ké, Dá 'gi ké,
Àáké kan ò lè e dá 'gi ké;
Dá 'gi là, Dá 'gi là,
Èè là kan ò le e dá 'gi là;
Bí Kò s'Érelú,
Òsùgbó kan ò lé e dá 'wo se
(Cutting alone, cutting alone,
The axe cannot cut alone,
Splitting alone, splitting alone;
The wedge cannot split alone;
Without the *Erelú*, (the female representative)
The *Òsùgbo* cannot operate).

But even so, one can still question to taboo that forbids the generality of women from seeing the *Orò*.

Within religion proper, female priests were commonplace. Most of those who managed the shrines, led ritual celebrations and carried out different initiations were women, even though such religious groups had many male members. The suggestion that women were given these posts because they were associated with supernatural powers cannot be dismissed with a wave of the hand. The *babaláwo* (Father of the secrets) and the *Onísègìn* (the herbalist) all pay homage to *Àwon ìyá mi Òsòrònga t'ó so ilé ayé ró* (Great Mothers who hold the pillars of the universe). Also the majority of the traditional pharmacists and birth attendants, even to date, are women.

Paradoxes and Apparent Contradictions in Yoruba Principles of Gender Relations

From the scanty information given above two contradictory principles of gender relations in ancient Yoruba society can be observed. The Yoruba understanding of nature as always made up of two inseparable characters when combined with their epistemological insight that knowledge and wisdom cannot be absolute suggest an appreciation of a natural but non-derogatory dichotomy between the male and the female. Hence there is nothing in these views which supports misogyny. The first proverb on our list explicitly denies this. Yet in their symbolism of the deities, this unsupported principle of an apparent sexual inferiority of women seems to appear. This shows that Patriarchy was in practice when men saw themselves as leaders rather than as oppressors of women.

Again in the distribution of scientific functions, men play the dominant roles. Men are the doctors while women are pharmacists and medical practitioners. This is a contemporary situation which historians may need to look into. Was there an earlier appreciation of these practitioners whether or not they were men? Or was the woman socially compelled to go into this profession because man, at a particular stage, were so engrossed in slave raiding that they had little or no time to devote to medicine? It could also be suggested that the fundamental difference in more men becoming doctors today than women was the influence of British patriarchal colonists who believed that women did not have the capacity to study medicine — a belief that was in practice then in their own educational system.

Equally, the Yoruba might have granted that women can be wise but still believed that women's wisdom as obtained through the use of *Isà* is subservient to that gained from the use of *Ikin*. This assumption, however, did not destroy the Yoruba recognition that a few women may excel in any area of study or social institution. The point is that the majority of women were seen as playing more subservient roles than those played by most men. However, the ancient Yoruba never lost sight of the possibility that a few women may be 'masculine' in achievement.

How are we then to explain the Yoruba fundamental principle that women can be as capable as men with the markedly subordinate roles assigned them — including their imbalanced representation in politics? Or, how is it possible to reconcile the subservient view of the woman and the assertive powerful roles she was allowed to play as ruler, chief and as organiser and controller of economy and extensive systems of trade? Is this not a paradox or even an involvement in self-contradiction? What becomes of their awareness that maleness and femaleness are by nature complementary?

One of the objectives of this paper is to analyse the nature of the Yoruba ideology which apparently recognised the anatomy of female power, (of course, not in the sense of Chinweizu's book with the same title!) What seems to be at the back of the mind of some Yoruba thinkers is that since natural differences between the male and female cannot be denied, nature does not by itself justify male-female absolute equality. But neither are these differences synonymous with women's total inferiority. Most apparently equality in Yoruba cultural thought is regarded as a relative principle which cannot be used as an absolute canon.

We are all too familiar with this principle in modern theories of democracy but perhaps more solidly in legal systems. Everybody, we are told, is equal before the law; yet we know that this axiom, even in cases where there are no justifiable exceptions, is hardly ever fully implemented. Equality in democratic terms exemplifies the mathematical dictum that one person cannot be equal to two persons no matter how highly placed. So every adult member of society has only one vote and also the right to vote and be voted for (under specifically laid down procedures). Beyond these theoretical realms, the common practice of a graduated salary structure in a society is enough to reduce to minimal importance the economic equality of all human beings in the same society.

May be Aristotle was right after all when he defined justice as treating equals equally, and unequals unequally. Or rather, perhaps equality should be formulated as 'treating like cases alike and unlike cases differently'. Some feminists now argue that the quest for equality has been misconceived as treating women like men. But egalitarianism, they say, demands the recognition that women have different situations from men and therefore it is necessary to cater for women's needs. For example, it is not enough to give equal job access to men and women, since women are responsible for childcare. Egalitarianism, when adequately conceived, could mean allowing mothers to start work later in the morning and finish work earlier in the day but for the same pay. The justice in this type of arrangement lies in the fact that childcare is a social function from which society as a whole benefits. The relevant issue here is how to determine appropriate areas where necessary distinctions are to be drawn between like and unlike, while at the same time putting in place adequate criteria for doing so.

The Yoruba dilemma seems to arise from the inevitable paradox in the failure to totally avoid using male-female biological differences as the criterion for determining male-female social relationships. Yoruba ancient philosophers appreciated the fact that two partners in progress may need to appoint a leader even if both of them are male or female. The only obnoxious thing to do is to determine who leads solely on the basis of sex and worse still to presuppose that

the females are by nature designed to be followers in all spheres of such a partnership while men monopolise power at all costs in all situations. The crucial point therefore is how to recognise gender differences without converting the same to a universal law of the functional classification of either of the sexes. And of course, the Yoruba, to my mind, were far ahead of Western philosophers and social scientists within this realm of thought, even though many practical experiences within Yoruba society fell short of the ideals set by the thinkers. I will try to explain what exactly I mean here.

Now, sexism according to Professor Ali Mazrui can occur at least on three different levels: benevolent, benign and malignant. The first, is a programme of giving special considerations to women with the chief purpose of improving their political, economic and consequently social conditions. Benign sexism, on the other hand, involves different acts of being nice to women primarily as members of a biologically disadvantaged group. But malignant sexism is the total condemnation of women not only as inferior in all things but also as outrightly evil (Sawere 1992).

The proverbs, aphorisms and stories discussed earlier here reveal that malignant sexism was repugnant to Yoruba thinkers; at least the first proverb clearly shows this. The Western view that women are of no use in any sphere of social organisation must have struck the ears of many Yoruba philosophers as crazy. The point then is that the Yoruba factual awareness that women are not the same as men in all things, did not prevent them from realising that several women were better than many men in many spheres of life. The theoretical problem was how to distinguish biological differences from functional inequalities. But Yoruba thinkers never used the former as an absolute canon for determining the latter. This is explicitly stated in one of their proverbs: *Nínú ìkòkò dúdú l'èko funfun ti jáde'* (From the black pot comes the white pap). Whereas blackness, in Western understanding, is always a symbol of negative qualities! The Yoruba social structure practically applied the principle that some women could excel in areas where many men could fail. In strict faithfulness to their belief in this and consequently in the principle of epistemological relativity, it is difficult to find areas of social life from which women were completely barred — not even in warfare.

The two most problematic areas appear to be those of the token role women were made to play in politics and the subservient position of the wife to that of the husband. Which aspects of Yoruba world-views justify these principles? It appears that within the Yoruba system of thought, the secondary role assigned the woman does not logically entail a claim of their sex's inferiority. The absolute pigeonholing commonly found in Western thought has no place within

Yoruba epistemological relativity. There is therefore a recognition of the justification for male and female claims to power even though there is oftentimes an unjustifiable tilt in favour of men. Both men and women are expected to marry and have children. Mutual respect is expected to be their guiding principle. The relationship between the husband and the wife was seen as one between a leader and the led rather than one between the boss and the servant.

This, of course, is not meant to deny that society still gives an edge to the husband over the wife, nor that men did not in actual practice see themselves as masters; or that women explicitly refused to accept their role which in many ways was sometimes close to slavery. Many have argued that women's failure to do this in many societies of the world was the result of an established process of cultural indoctrination. Indeed the housewife is still jokingly referred to today in her husband's family circle as 'our slave'. She is still expected to serve relations of her husband no matter her social status.

However, nothing in Yoruba world-view actually justifies this as the ideal relationship that should exist between husband and wife. The point is that Yoruba thinkers were by and large victims of the social milieu in which they operated. Like most of their counterparts in other parts of the world, they failed to see this leader-follower policy as a way of oppressing the female population and did not regard the abuse of brute force by men on women as unnatural. This complexity has always been a crucial one in social studies, both ancient and modern. Conscious efforts are usually necessary to draw clear distinctions between the biological differences that occur between the two sexes and the social principles which define the roles of both men and women in a society.

The Yoruba social ideal and the fundamental principles on which they are based clearly show deep philosophical considerations of these two conflicting aspects of human experience. No one can deny the natural differences between the male and the female, yet the notions of justice and equality do not justify sex elevation or condemnation. The crux of the matter is that women and men are *not*, scientifically speaking, different species. This is why many modern researchers justifiably see the fundamental problem of sexual evaluation as identical with the basic problems and origins of racism, ethnicity, religious persecution, etc.

Many critics have drawn specific attention to the inadequate representation of women in the ancient Yoruba political system. This is perhaps one of the reasons why the National Council of Women Societies in Nigeria (NCWS) now makes a demand that women must constitute at least one-third of members of all political institutions. If one studies the history of the political marginalisation of women in colonial and post-colonial periods in Nigeria, the achievement of this demand

will indeed mark a giant stride by Nigerian women, more so, if one accepts the official Western definition of democracy as a game of numbers. But even within this Western conception of politics, a female population of at least 50 per cent of the nation asking for only one-third representation inadvertently accepts that 50 per cent women (reduced to 33 1/3 per cent) is inferior to 50 per cent men. If our goal is to set up an ideal political structure, then women cannot ask for anything less than 50 per cent representation since they know too well that they will never get the ideal on first demand. However, they may get 35 per cent if their demand is for 50 per cent and still continue to ask for more. But if the demand is only for one-third the possibility of getting 35 per cent is very remote. This conclusion might have been the reason why Women in Nigeria (WIN) has been demanding 50 per cent for women since 1986.

The Yoruba understanding of democracy appears, on many grounds, to be at variance with Western characterisation of it. First, in the traditional setting, women's participation was a matter of right and hence was never ignored, unlike in England or Germany where women were denied even the nominal right of voting until 1928 and 1948 respectively. Since in ancient Yoruba thought politics was a game of power, which she often used to stop men from implementing unacceptable social policies. In actual fact, this power which is similar to that of the super powers at the United Nations, is used in consultation with women's organisations and councils within the Yoruba society. Yoruba political institutions were therefore more like committee set-ups than 'Houses of Representatives'. This, nonetheless, does not justify unequal male-female representation at all levels. I am only trying to find out their own possible rationalisation of some apparently unjustified policies and women's reasons for not raising objections against them.

Of course, there is abundance evidence of women organised demonstrations against men as a group. For instance, if an autocratic ruler or political institution tried to override the voice of the female member, there is usually what was known as '*Igbo sisi*', when women go out half-naked to protest against such acts of oppression. And as the popular saying goes, Yoruba men know too well that '*Ogun obìnrin sòro ójà*'. (Women's war is very difficult to fight). There is no doubt what-so-ever that the ideals of the Yoruba society were far from being perfect. Yet on the particular issue of one powerful female representative at all levels of social institution, the Yoruba social experience should catch the fancy of many Western and Eastern European scholars in whose societies women are not yet represented either at the highest ruling level or in many lower ones on an institutional basis. Policy conditions in many international and governmental establishments in contemporary time stress this ideal but its actual implementation is far from being achieved. The political story in many African

countries today is that women are not at all or very poorly represented at the highest arms of government, especially under the unique autocratic military rule.

I wish to end this section by referring to another Yoruba aphorism which seems to summarise principles which they believe should guide all political activities in society and the consequences of flouting them. Again I quote from *Ifa* oral literature.

Àjùwá Àjùwá *
Àpó eran ò jùko,
Ó un ló d'ífá Aláko léjú,
Tí ó ko won je n'ÍFE Oòdáyé.
Wón ní kí ó só 'gbó ità d' ode,
Wón ní kí ó má igbó ìgbàlè d' òjé,
Wón ní kí ó má f'igbó Osun sé'de
Njè Alákoléjú ò gbó,
Njè Alákoléjú ò gbà,
A ò fé o n ílè yí mó,
Má a lo!

(He is greater than us, he is more important than everybody else.
In him public mismanagement is not easily discoverable.
These were the principles of state management
which the greedy operated upon,
When she/he cheated in primordial Yoruba society,
S/he was told not to deal with the public as
if hunting for games in the forest.
S/he was warned against turning a political association
into a cult for deceiving the people.
S/he was cautioned against converting public funds
into private use.
But the greedy did not listen,
The greedy did not yield.
We don't want you in this society any more,
(the people say), Go away.)

(* The Word *Àjùwá* is so archaic that many *Ifá* priests are unable to translate or explain what exactly it means. However, most of them gave similar interpretations of it within the context of the entire piece).

Conclusion

What implications can this analysis have for scholars interested in formulating a culture-based developmental theory for the Yoruba society in contemporary times? The distinction between a recognition of the natural differences between the two sexes and the error of regarding this difference as a justification for seeing women as constituting a biologically disadvantaged category is a crucial conceptual classification which was absent in ancient Yoruba formulations of gender-related social principles. The recognition that male-female complementarity cannot be ignored in creating a healthy civil society is a step in the right direction. Allowing the possibility of the economic freedom of the woman (which was perhaps not intended as a way of promoting women's interests but was never officially proscribed as was done in the West) may offer some good lessons against the promotion of male domination of women which occurred during and after colonialism in Nigeria and in many other countries of the world today.

More directly relevant to women's interest perhaps is the obvious fact that there is always a wide gap between policies or the setting up of ideals and the practical implementation of them. There can be no argument that despite and in spite of these lofty ideal conceptions of femaleness, their allowance for women's economic and political freedom (ideals which were apparently formulated by some ancient Yoruba thinkers who were social critics of their societies), there were still many ways in which the woman was socially oppressed and physically brutalised. Listen to the testimony of this proverb: '*Òpá tí a fi na ìyáálé, para l ó wà tí a o fi na ìyàwó.*' (The cane with which the first wife was beaten is still in the keeping for the new wife). The problem of reconciling theory with practice in formulating developmental theories as utopias is still very much with us.

The next aspect of Yoruba traditional views about gender which I think feminist scholars can also consider for possible modification and application is Yoruba women's ability to organise themselves into pressure groups against oppressive rulers and governmental policies. What is most intriguing here is the fact that this power was actually used to fight not only for women's rights, but on many occasions these groups turned into human rights organisations which demanded the implementation of democratic principles affecting both men and women. Political cringing by individual women were frowned at and nobody was exempted once a social policy affecting women as a whole was made by such women's organisations. A relatively recent incident suffices to demonstrate this point.

In the early 1960s, women in Ede, a Yoruba town, met and decided to boycott the grinding mills because the charges were seen as exorbitant. Some days later, the wives of Timi, the traditional ruler of the town, were found coming from the mill with grated cassava. These wives were beaten up and their cassava thrown away. The ruler himself judged his wives guilty on one simple point: Are the ruler's wives no longer women just because they are relatives of a superman?[3]

The charge by many contemporary philosophers and social scientists is that the call for a return to African cultural philosophical and social views is retrogressive in nature. This wrong inference has its origin in what most advocates of cultural revivalism themselves say: 'Let us go back to traditional African communalism and humanism', most of them have proclaimed. This, of course, is a blanket proposal which offers almost an impossible option because it provides inadequate solutions to contemporary African problems of development. Every social, economic and political theory is a human construct. Those that have worked in most societies of the world are those in which conscious efforts were made to correct errors in existing orders. Plato's *Republic* is a good example.

The need to look back into traditional African philosophical ideals and the ways these affected their principles of organising society will be misplaced and consequently misleading if it is meant to be a call for a wholesale acceptance of all or even particular philosophies and cultural paradigms in ancient African societies. The need to look back is, to me, necessary so that contemporary African scholars do not, without adequate scrutiny of their own intellectual heritage, continue to accept without question the superior wisdom of Western scholars who are basically ignorant of our existing social orders which they intend to change. The renowned Nigerian economist, Dr. Pius Okigbo (1992), once warned against this danger in a public lecture. Professor Paulin J. Hountondji (1983) succinctly explains the need to revitalise African views in the following words:

> What we need is a free, rational, critical evaluation and initiative of our living heritage and not a close up of our tradition into the past as if it were something dead, esoteric or inferior.

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3 **Ede:** This story was told to me during my visit to *Iwalewa Haus* in Bayeruth, Germany, in 1993, by Professor Ulli Beier who personally witnessed this event during his stay of over 10 years in Osogbo, a distance of less than 20 kilometres from Ede.

There is today in the works of many Africanists and social scientists abundant evidence to support the fact that colonialism actually worsened the position of the African woman in many societies. The Yoruba case is undeniable. This, of course, does not imply that the entire condition of the Yoruba woman was perfectly satisfactory before the advent of colonialism. But that it went from bad to worse is a matter well established today. There is therefore no denying the fact that the awareness of gender as an important social principle in some ancient African societies was much sharper than in some ancient and even contemporary Western societies. If, for example, we adopt the popular view that,

> one of the best ways to understand the spirit of a civilisation, to appreciate its excellence and also to realise its limitations is to study the history of the position of and status of women in it (Janaki 1985),

then the inevitable conclusion we will reach is that precolonial Yoruba society was on a higher level of civilisation than most Western examples. Women in those societies have definitely come a long way in the present century. Yet there is the need to identify those positive aspects of many African cultural views which placed their thinkers higher than many European scholars as at that time. Both groups of intellectuals can, of course, learn a few things from each other even though the authentic African alternative has now been greatly polluted by Western views. However, there are still many ways in which women's liberation movements in Africa can benefit from their own cultural heritage as well as from modern Western feminist organisations and developmental theories and programmes.

Let me therefore conclude by stating the spirit in which this paper was conceived. Many African and Western philosophers who have hitherto directly or indirectly denied the existence of 'strict' philosophy in Africa before the advent of colonialism are today changing their tune. The current demand is for specimens of literary pieces which can pass muster in academic philosophy. The study here is of Yoruba views about gender relations within a stable polity. A detailed philosophical analysis of the proverbs, stories and aphorisms here presented need to be set in language familiar to the practitioners of that discipline. But that, to a very large extent, is beyond the scope of this paper. The primary concern here is to identify, explain and critically understand some of the basic principles of Yoruba autochthonous socio-political culture in the traditional setting.

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