

IS THERE NO MAN WITH PENIS IN THIS LAND? EROTICISM AND PERFORMANCE IN YORUBA NUPTIAL SONGS

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ABSTRACT This paper explores the role of African women, especially the Yoruba women, in literature by looking at the songs that form an integral part of their nuptial poetry (epithalamium). Music plays, preserves and perpetuates vital traditions among the Yoruba. Some satirical songs, mainly produced by women, are prominent during the traditional marriage ceremony among the Yoruba, but these songs are sung less and less. This paper also attempts a hermeneutical inquiry into the content of the songs: how the Yoruba women espouse erotic views during the marriage ceremony that seem repressed in ordinary life. The study shows that women's voice could be better heard in their lore, as they use these songs as manifestations of their collective and dynamic group consciousness.

Key Words: Yoruba; Women; Nuptial songs; Performance.

INTRODUCTION

The institution of marriage is important among the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria. To this end, many activities have been constructed to celebrate the beginning of the institution. Among these activities is the singing of nuptial songs and chanting of bridal poetry, otherwise christened epithalamiums that vary by area of performance.⁽¹⁾ This performance, which involves songs in some parts of Yoruba land, is mainly marked with poetry in other parts. For example, the performance is a mixture of songs, chants and recitations among the Yoruba people of Oyo and its environs, while among others including Ondo, Ekiti, Akoko, Ilaje and Ijesa, songs are dominant. Due to variation in style and mode of performance, there are differences in the names given to these activities in various localities. But the fact remains that they are all used to serve the same purpose. Yoruba land is vast and it will be impossible in this paper to cover the whole area. Therefore, I will draw most of the examples from the Oyo Yoruba and Ibolo Yoruba speaking areas. There are two major reasons for concentrating on these two areas. First, there is no literature on Yoruba nuptial poetry in the Oyo and Ibolo dialects (Abimbola, 1995; Barber, 1991; 1994; Ladele & Faniyi, 1979; Faniyi, 1975) that mentioned songs as part of nuptial poetry. It may be that these songs were treated as forbidden in the public until a certain time, but it has been noted that there is a similar genre among the Yoruba called *l̥jálá*, it is mainly performed by men of any age, and it contains more vulgar and erotic words than nuptial songs. Yet, there are no restrictions on its performance in public. Secondly, the researcher is familiar with these areas and has collected much data on the poetry in almost every dialect of Yoruba people, to the extent

of realising that these nuptial songs are very distinct.

Among the Oyo Yoruba people, nuptial poetry is called *Ekún Ìyàwó*, and called *Ràrà Ìyàwó* among the Ibolu Yoruba speakers.⁽²⁾ The performer of nuptial poetry is the bride accompanied by her friends, which takes place a day before leaving for the husband's house. In reality, we can say that the bride is just one of the performers, because this nuptial poetry is a form of group performance during which the friends of the bride ricochet and also chant and sing. Barber (1994: 151) set forth that:

On the day before the girl moves into her husband's house, she makes a ceremonial tour around the town, starting with her own compound, saying farewell to her kin and announcing her impending change of state. *Ràrà Ìyàwó* are valedictory oríkì chants she performs as she goes round. Almost all girls learn these chants, beginning from an early age. On the day of her outing, the bride is escorted by a party of younger girls from her compound. As the bride chants her laments and farewells, the girls provide a sympathetic chorus chanting in unison. Their role can be quite substantial; sometimes the performance develops into a dialogue where the chorus has almost as much to say as the bride.

The focus of this paper is not on the body of the chants and recitals in the poetry, but on the plethora of erotic and satirical songs in it. The contents will be analysed to bring out the socio-cultural views of Yoruba women about kinship, and the importance of children to the Yoruba among many elements. The Yoruba epithalamium forms an integral component of African women's legacy. The contributions of Yoruba women to African literature have not been limited to the modern period; they are the core performers of orature in the society. Also, the women as oral artists have been known to voice their society's experiences as a whole (Brown, 1981: 14).

Songs are an important component of the folklore of many African groups. Singing of marriage songs by women and girls is not limited to the Yoruba ethnic group. It is a common phenomenon among African women. Similar practice could be found among the Hausa ethnic group (Bichi, 1985: 93-94; Smith, 1954). Wedding songs could also be found in some tribes of Africa, and the functions differ slightly from one culture to another. Among the Thonga people wedding songs are used to teach the newly wed the ethics of marriage (Junod, 1962: 197-200). Zulu housewives and bridesmaids perform marriage songs to tell the groom to adequately care for the wife and the bride not to reveal the secrets of her family to the people in her husband's house (Krige, 1950: 336-344; 1968: 173-198). Nuptial songs also teach the new couple how to manage the affairs of their family among the Gabon Pygmies of Central Africa (Bowra, 1962). It has been pointed out that marriage songs among the Ngoni

people of South Africa are used didactically to warn the new brides of jealousy and unhealthy rivalry among co-wives (Read, 1937). Wedding songs reveal the societal norms and practices among the Baganda people of East Africa (Sempebwa, 1948), and among the Asu people of East Africa (Bull, 1933). The Tsonga wedding songs have been pointed out to be an instrument of conflict resolution among the co-wives (Johnston, 1975; 1978). Wedding songs are sung among the Kalenjin people of Kenya by the guests at the wedding ceremony, particularly by the relatives of the bride reminding the groom to respect his in-laws, castigating parents who commercialise their daughters, and showing the importance of parents in relation to wedding (Chesaina, 1991: 122-131). Also, the Embu and Mbeere people of eastern Kenya use wedding songs to reveal their world-view about marriage in their society (Chesaina, 1997: 138-145). The list above shows that many wedding songs exist in Africa societies and that “African singing occurs in ritualistic occasions, celebrations of rites of passage, and meetings of voluntary associations...there are songs which are distinctively related to women and others which are associated with men” (Ben-Amos, 1977: 25). This is in consonance with the view that African women are not voiceless, but do we fail to look for their voices where we may find them, in the sites and forms in which these voices are uttered? We must look for the African women’s voices in women’s spaces such as in ceremonies and work songs (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994: 11).

Therefore, this paper examines the nuptial songs among the Yoruba people of southern Nigeria.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF YORUBA NUPTIAL SONGS

Of all cultural institutions among the Yoruba, there are three that are highly significant. These are the institutions of naming, marriage and burial. The first two are closely related, because childbearing is a great necessity to the Yoruba people, and the most vital reason for entering into marriage. Likewise, the issue of marriage is of much concern to them. This is why they say, “Àíníyàwó kò sé dáké, bí a bá dáké lásán ẹnu ní yọni – A man cannot just keep quiet without a wife, keeping quiet about it only results in a problem.” This and many other proverbs not only show the importance of women in men’s lives but they show the value the Yoruba place on the institution of marriage (Fig. 1).

All over the Yoruba land, the issue of marriage is very important regardless of varying socio-cultural practices associated with it in various places. Marriage to the Yoruba has occasioned various activities associated with their traditions. Beginning from the choice of wife and husband to the time of the marriage ceremony and even after the ceremony, the cultural protocols must be observed.

In most cases, after the two families have been duly informed about this relationship, the next stage is to prepare for the day of marriage, *Ọjó Ìgbéyàwó*. In preparation, the groom’s family will be given the list of the dowry (*Èrù Ìyàwó*) that will include the bride price (*Owó Ori Ìyàwó*). This depends so



Fig. 1 Performer of the Nuptial Poetry during Performance

much on two major factors, namely the tradition of the bride's family and the financial strength of the intending groom's family. There is even a saying along this line that, "Ohun tí à ó bá gbà là ó so, ẹnikan kii yan àna rè lódi – You will state whatever (the dowry) you want to take, no one grudges against his in-laws." The presentation of these materials usually comes under the program called *Ìdána*. It is usually a big program that takes place at the house of the family head of the lady, where the presentation of the bride price and dowry takes place. This is the so-called engagement in contemporary society, which is now a fusion of request (*Ìtoṣoṣo*), and engagement (*Ìdána*). After this comes the marriage ceremony, usually preceded by the "Bride's Eve (*Àìsìn Ìyàwó*)" or "Bride's Enjoyment (*Fàáji Ìyàwó*)" (Barber 1991; 1994). This is the major context of performance of the nuptial poetry (*Ewì Ajemóyáwó*). The Bride's Eve usually lasted for eight days in many places in the past. In Ekosin, a community in Odo-Otin Local Government Area, the friends of the wife will stay with the wife for seven days up to the day of marriage ceremony, and daily perform nuptial poetry around the town. It is usually done at night for some hours on the first six days. On the last day, it will be performed from evening to dawn. The bride performs the poetry from her father's house until she gets to her husband's house.

Meanwhile, the housewives (*Ìyàwó ilé*) of her prospective husband will be waiting to receive her into their union, singing various nuptial songs, too. On this last day of performance of the nuptial poetry, the bride will be accompanied by her family housewives who will hand over the bride to the groom's family only after they have been satisfied by the performance of the latter's housewives with regards to the content of their nuptial songs and presentation of gifts to them. It is worthy to mention here that the groom's housewives must

prove to be satisfactory by revealing in their songs that they will take adequate care of the new bride, that she will not suffer, and that they will not pose any problem to her as the senior wives in the family.

The performance of the nuptial songs in Yoruba society is by the bride, her friends (*Òré Ìyàwó*), and the housewives of the groom. There are changes in the contemporary performance of epithalamium among the Yoruba people. The celebrants of marriage usually hire some experts who are versatile in the performance of this genre to preside in their marriage engagements. These experts are called chairpersons (*Alága*). A leader will lead the songs. In most cases, they make use of the old nuptial songs with adaptation and recreation to suit the contemporary situations and circumstances. They are the major performers of epithalamium now, instead of the brides that used to be the sole performers. Further, the housewives are also taking a more active role in the performance of epithalamium these days. This nexus of activities associated with marriage in Yoruba land shows that marriage continues to be a crucial institution in the cultural milieu of the Yoruba people.

WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL YORUBA SOCIETY

In the traditional Yoruba society women are of great importance. The position of women can never be overemphasised, even though the society is superficially patriarchal. Yoruba men and women are not seen as opposites at all, but as complementary. There is an adage that goes, “*Bí okùnrin bá rí ejò bí obìnrin bá pa á, kí ejò sá ti má lo ni* – If a man sees a snake and a woman kills it, it must be accepted that what matters is that the snake does not escape.” This and many other related proverbs point to the binary complementarities between the Yoruba men and women in their relationship.

Childbearing is one of the three principal things that the Yoruba people consider as the attributes of their vitality in life. Others are wealth and longevity. Therefore, they do not treat marriage with flippancy because of the importance that they attach to childbearing. There is even a Yoruba proverb that says, “*Fòròforo imú iyàwó sànjù yàrá òfifò lo* – A wife with a warped nose is better than an empty room.” This equally corroborates the fact that women occupy an important space in the Yoruba society, especially in the life of a man. That is why they also say “*Ànìnyàwó kò sé dáké lásán, bí a bá dáké enu ní yoni* – A mature man without a wife cannot just keep quiet, if he folds his arms, it results in a problem.” Due to this prominent space that women occupy in the society, they are usually given much regard and prominence in the marriage ceremony. And, because the ceremony marks the transition of the ladies from their father’s house to their husband’s, the roles women play outnumber those of men. It is now widely held that women play multiple roles in the society. The literature on women and national development also reveals that women make their own contributions to national development through their activities in the economic, social and political arena, which mostly go unrecognised

(Oyekanmi, 1994: 34). In the society, women use oral literature to advance their opinions and thus effect a change. It has been pointed out that certain kinds of poetry are typically delivered or sung by women (particularly dirges, lullabies, mocking verses and songs to accompany women's ceremonies or work), and each culture is likely to have certain genres considered especially suitable for women (Finnegan, 1976: 98). Therefore, among the Yoruba, the position of women in poetry in general is crucial.⁽³⁾ That is why in almost every ceremony, whether religious or secular, the women take the lead. This now leads the paper to a discussion of nuptial songs among the Yoruba, to explicate the ways whereby women serve as the vectors and carriers of the cultural and social heritage embedded in this veritable genre.

EXPRESSION OF EROTICISM IN THE YORUBA NUPTIAL POETRY

The traditional Yoruba community, the issue of love is treated with secrecy in most cases. Even among married couples, their love is not to be seen by the other people. Also, the issue of erotic words is usually limited to the elderly people who are married, and the younger ones are somehow forbidden to talk about sexual relationships, especially in public. This could be likened to a kind of repression or depression. But human beings are basically social animals with feelings, emotions, and moods towards our surroundings. The Yoruba themselves will say in their proverb "Ara kí se òkúta – Our body is not a stone." This adage corroborates the fact that the Yoruba are sensitive and alive, that they can respond to the world around them. I have noted in the course of my research that repressed emotional feelings that border on the sexual is reserved until the time of marriage, during which the women have the poetic license to express their sexual desires and emotional feelings. They can mention the sexual organs of both male and female without any restriction. They can also talk about sexual intercourse without any form of social sanction. The following samples are such songs:

- (a) Isan lokó – The penis is a nerve
- Òrá lobo – The vagina is elastic
- Jàwàjávà lepòn – The scrotum is soft flesh
- Ike nido – The clitoris is plastic.

This song may be funny and amusing, and it is deliberately so. One can be in a erotic mood when listening to this song. This song conjures both male and female reproductive organs ready for sexual intercourse. This can stimulate the new wife to be into getting ready for the conjugal rites. This song is usually sung when the bride and her friends dance around the town usually a day before the marriage ceremony. They usually sing it when they notice the presence of males around them. They do not limit themselves to mere description of the reproductive organs, but go further to depict sexual acts between men and women. One such song is cited below:

- (b) Olórí burúkú⁽⁴⁾ lokó – The penis is a heady person

Adígbèsè⁽⁵⁾ lepòn – The scrotum is a criminal
 Àfi tó bá wonú òbò sin-sin-sin – It will not desist until it penetrates
 the vagina “forcefully.”

This song is about sexual intercourse, which in ordinary life will not be spoken of by the younger people. “Forcefully” here refers to nothing else than the emotional struggle that exists during the sexual intercourse. The song intimates turgidity, erectness and of what happens to the penis in reaching orgasm. Many Yoruba people do not utter vulgar language in ordinary life, and due to this, such language is repressed. But such language erupts during the preparation for the marriage ceremony. The young ladies also seize this rare opportunity to express their minds and sing about men and women. Nature in reality dictates that men and women are to complement each other. In one of their songs that I categorise as erotic such view is clearly expressed. The song goes thus:

(c) Kò jọ n sólókó nílè yìí ní? – Is there nobody with penis in this
 community?

Òbò n se bí àwókù àlàpà – Vagina is just roaming about like dilapi-
 dated walls.

This song not only suggests that the ladies advertise eligibility, but also that men and women complement one another. This is meant to prompt the friends of the bride to prepare the new bride for the conjugal obligations of which the sexual life is vital. The next examples of songs express combining hard work with sexual life. The songs are as follows:

(d) Aládùké toko igi dé o – Aládùké has returned from the farm
 Òbò rè yanu o gbokó o – Let her vagina open to receive penis

And

(e) Àdùké, O dáké sílé – Àdùké, you are inside the room
 Àkàsù epòn yóò ré lù ó pì – A bundle of scrotum will fall on you
 heavily

Olókó, sòbò lálejò – The one-with-penis, entertain the vagina.

The above songs show the component of a fulfilled marriage. For the new wife, just entering the husband’s house, it is a way of imparting sex education. The singers encourage the new wife to be industrious and satisfy her husband sexually at the same time.

FERTILITY, VITALITY AND PROCREATION IN YORUBA NUPTIAL SONGS

It has been said that music and dance as means of communication are not free from the constructions of reality that predominate in different societies (Blacking, 1977: 22). The issue of childbearing is of great significance to the Yoruba people. This is why any married woman without a child is highly detested. To this end, it is the prayers of the bride, her friends and her parents that she will have children through marriage. Songs could be used to express joy, resentment, sadness, aspirations, fears, hatred, respect, love, and emotions, depending on the mood of the singer. In one of the nuptial songs collected, the

friends of the bride sang to pray for the bride after she had received parental blessings thus:

(f) Kórí Ìyá re o b̀ùn ọ́ lómọ́ – May your mother’s head give you children

(Repeat)

Èsúrú kíí yàgàn o – The trifoliate yam is never barren

(Repeat)

Aṣọ àrà ọ̀r̀ùn re – The beautiful dress on your body

Omọ́ niwọ́ yó fí gbé – You will use it to carry children

Kórí Ìyá re o b̀ùn ọ́ lómọ́ – May your mother’s head give you children

Èsúrú kíí yàgàn o – The trifoliate yam is never barren.

The above nuptial song is cryptic. The “head (*orí*)” above refers to personal destiny and not the physical head of a person. In Yoruba philosophy, it is believed that an individual possesses two heads. The first one is the skull, the outer head that encases the second that is the inner head, which is also known as destiny. To the Yoruba, the destiny of a person plays an unparalleled role in what a person becomes in life. That is why they appeal to the personal head of the bride’s mother to provide her with children. This is because, at least, the mother has given birth to the bride. Therefore, the vital force (*Àṣe*) in her own productiveness will now be transferred to the bride. This song shows the women as the agency of fertility and procreation. Why is the personal head of the mother appealed to and not that of the father? Likewise, the song reveals the cultural belief of the Yoruba in personal destiny (*Orí*). The song is in a form of incantation, drawing the power in nature to make things happen. The trifoliate yam by nature produces many tubers whether the soil is fertile or infertile. Therefore, metaphorically, the bride is now “the yam” and the power of fertility and procreation in the yam is prayed upon to transfer to the bride so that she will never become barren. The song shows that it is not the wish of the women to remain childless. This is also why they are willing to use the best of their clothes to carry the child given to them. To the Yoruba, the cloth is very important because it covers one’s nakedness. An adage goes, “Aṣọ lèdìdì ènìyàn, bí kò bá sí èwù, onírúurú ìdí là bá rí – Cloth is the covering of human beings; without clothes, different types of buttocks would have been exposed.” This adage emphasises how crucial cloth is to the people. As crucial as a piece of cloth may be, the women are ready to sacrifice their clothes for their children, because, the children are more valuable to them. It is even a belief that the children are the covering of a person. They convey this thought in another proverb: “Omo eni laṣo eni – One’s child is one’s cloth/dress.”

Another song reveals the significance of childbearing among the Yoruba:

(g) Omọ́ ni n ó rà o! – I will buy children

(Repeat)

Níjọ́ mo bá kú laṣo ṣ̀ègbé – The cloth will perish on the day that I die

Omọ́ ni n ó rà o! – It is the child that I will buy.

“Buying” in the context above means procuring or getting. To acquire something may make one to expend him or her. There are many things that the Yoruba women do in their efforts to become pregnant when they perceive

themselves to be suffering from infertility,⁽⁶⁾ since they bear the bulk of the blame for infertility.

In the nuptial song of the Ekiti Yoruba, the importance of children is also emphasised. They say that a child to a human being is as important as cloth is to somebody who is feeling cold:

- (h) Omọ oni laṣọ oni – One's child is one's dress/cloth
 Ètítù⁽⁷⁾ lí mú yà – The person who is feeling cold
 Kàn án máṣọ ṣẹye ora o – Cannot but put on a dress/cloth
 Omọ oni laṣọ oni – One's child is one's dress/cloth.

We can understand why the Yoruba women make much sacrifice for their children. During the marriage ceremony among the Yoruba, at the time of introduction of the bride and the groom's parents, the groom's parents are expected to show a kind of veneration to the bride's parents. The mother will kneel down while the father will prostrate. The groom's parents must do this because their son is marrying the girl.

This kind of sacrifice is also revealed in a nuptial song:

- (i) Torí omo mo ṣe wá – I have come because of my child
 (Repeat)
 Omọ dára – Child is good
 Omọ dára léyìn obinrin – Child is good on the back of a woman
 Torí omọ mò ṣe wá – I have come because of my child.

This song above reveals a cultural habit of the Yoruba women in taking adequate care of their children. The women wrap their children with a cloth wrapper and tie it again with a sash emblematic of a sure protection from dropping the babies and a provision of warmth especially in times of cold. Apart from this, it is culturally vital for mothers to have a child on their backs, because it is good for them as an agent of procreation and vitality. This is because children are considered very vital in human existence among the Yoruba.

KINSHIP ISSUES IN THE YORUBA NUPTIAL SONGS

Various issues of kinship and social ties are of great concern to the Yoruba, and that is why it is a prominent subject in their nuptial songs. In various relationships and social ties, the role of women cannot be underestimated, hence they emphasise it in the oral genre of which they are the chief architects. It has been noted, "people producing oral literature are not just mere commentators but are often also involved in relationships of power themselves, in terms of supporting or subverting those in power. The forms with which they work are themselves invested with power; that is to say, the words, the texts, have the ability to provoke, to move, to direct, to prevent, to overturn and recast social reality" (Graham & Gunner, 1995: 1). There is power in orature. Among the Yoruba, the issue of polygyny is not a foreign idea, and the women know how to live in and make the best out of it. One of the coping mechanisms for women in this situation is that they express togetherness in their nuptial songs

so as to foster love, oneness, and unity among the wives in the same family. One such song goes:

(j) Ìyálé Aládùké f'Àdùké⁽⁸⁾ móra – The senior wife to Àdùké, draw
Àdùké to yourself

Torí iwo lagbà o! – Because, you are the senior

Taa ni kò mò nílè yí – Who is the person in this community

Pé iwo ló kókó wolé – That you are the first wife

(Repeat)

Ìyálé Aládùké f'Àdùké móra – The senior wife to Àdùké, draw
Àdùké to yourself

Torí iwo lagbà o – Because, you are the senior.

The ladies are using this song to appeal to the senior wives to cooperate with the junior ones. It is observed that the Yoruba women usually and officially have a single sexual partner but men can have many wives. So, seniority is conceded to the first wife to be married, but she should in no way victimise the junior one. Culturally, there is no room for polyandry. Man uses the sexual act as a source of wealth, power and prestige to marry more than one wife. For women, the situation is reversed. A woman is expected to enjoy sexual intercourse, but she is expected to confine her attention to one man, her husband, and even within marriage she will be moderate in her demands (Buckley, 1985: 172). The women use this song to preach to themselves that if the culture acts against them, there is no time for them to be acting against one another. Through cooperation and mutual agreement, all wives will enjoy their marital home.

Yet another nuptial song shows that the Yoruba women just adapt into the situation in which the culture has placed them. It is not that they enjoy the polygamous institution, but they just accept it as part of the culture where they have found themselves. The song below is an example:

(k) Ta ló bá torogún wáyé? – Who has come to be a co-wife in life?

(Repeat)

Èmi ò bá torogún wáyé – I have not come to be a co-wife in life

(Repeat)

E má fejó mi lo iká – Don't discuss my affairs with a wicked person

E má fejó mi lo èké – Don't discuss my affairs with a liar

E má fejó mi lo eni tí ò bá fèràn mi – Don't discuss my affairs with

the person who does not like me

Èmi ó bá torogún wáyé – I have not come to be a co-wife in life.

This song is an indication that Yoruba women themselves do not like polygamy. It is a message they pass along so that there could be a change. A proverb in Yoruba even says, “Òrìṣà jé n pé méji obinrin kò dénú – God, let my husband have two wives is a lip service.” This, I think, is a patriarchal presentation of the Yoruba in order to claim superiority over the women. I believe this signifies that the women do air their views about the existing cultural institutions in various ways of which the nuptial songs is one. In polygamy, there is bound to be rivalry, hatred, envy, jealousy and other difficulties among the

wives.

Yoruba women also do things together, especially those from the same compound or lineage called “*obinrin ilé* (women of the house).” They have seen themselves as members of their husbands’ house/family. Therefore they use songs to appeal to the newly married wives during the marriage ceremony to be true family members of their husbands’ family. This song is an example:

(l) *Jé bí lóódodo* – Be a true family member

(Repeat)

Owó tẹ̀yàwó o – We have received our wife

Jé bí lóódodo – Be a true family member.

Owó t’Àbíké⁽⁹⁾ o! – We have received Àbíké

Jé bí lóódodo – Be a true family member.

The senior wives in the family of the bride’s husband usually render this song to tell the new wife that they as the senior wives are loyal to their husband’s family. Therefore, the new wife is enjoined in the loyal membership of the family.

In addition, they sing to assure this new wife and her natal family that there is no problem for her in this new home. Below is another example:

(m) *Omi n bẹ́ lágbàlá wa* – There is water in our courtyard

Ìyàwò ò rodò mó o! – The wife will no longer go to the river
to fetch water

Ilé e wa dùn – Our Family is sweet

Oko ní n ponmi – It is the husband who fetches water

Ilé e wa dùn – Our Family is sweet

Oko ní n lota – It is the husband who grinds the pepper

Ilé e wa dùn – Our Family is sweet

Oko ní n foşo – It is the husband who washes the cloth.

It is sarcastic that all duties mentioned above are actually the things that the new wife should expect to do in the family. Another salient point is that the songs show that the wife is not forcing herself upon them. Integration into the new family is not limited to the bride, but also applies to the groom. During the engagement ceremony, when the groom meets the bride’s family, he must greet them by prostrating for them. Before he is asked to do this, the women who are presiding over the ceremony on behalf of the bride’s family will sing for him thus:

(n) *Ilé è yíí o* – This family

Ilé Bàbá à re ni – It is your father’s house

Ilé è yíí o – This family

Ilé Ìyá à re ni – It is your mother’s house

Bí o bá wobè – Whenever you enter there

Gbogbo ilé ni o kí – You must greet every member of the family

Ilé è yíí o – This family

Ilé òbí ì re ni – It is your parent’s family.

The women not only remind the man that he has been integrated into a new family but that his relationship does not end with the wife. The membership is

a vital tool that links him with lineages.⁽¹⁰⁾ Therefore, there is need for maintenance of a subtle balance between his family and that of his wife. In essence, he is now married to her wife's parents as well. He is regarded as part of the bride's family as a son-in-law (*àna*). And, he must be taking part in many activities in this new extended family.

MARRIAGE SANCTITY IN THE YORUBA NUPTIAL SONGS

Marital sanctity and pre-marital sanctity have much value among the Yoruba. Therefore, it is their glory and pride for the unmarried ladies to keep their virginity until the time of marriage. The Yoruba women, as vectors of the Yoruba cultural values sing a lot of songs during and after the marriage in order to portray the cultural premium placed on marriage sanctity. They believe that it is the right thing for an unmarried man to work hard to mature economically so as to take care of his family after marriage, and not flirt around to satisfy their sexual desires. During the eve of the marriage ceremony, as the bride and her friends sing and dance in town whenever they see some boys in their company or vicinity, they sing to educate them of the cultural etiquette of marriage. This following is an example of such songs, meant for men to discipline their minds and follow the cultural protocol of marriage in order to live a befitting life:

(o) Àwé, pawó re pò – Man/boy gather your money together

(Repeat)

Kó fi romoge – And use it to buy/get a girl

(Repeat)

Má dègbé òbò bí e n dègbée tinkó – Stop chasing vagina as if you
are chasing animal

Àwé, pawó re pò – Man/boy, gather your money together

Kó fi romoge – And use it to buy/get a girl.

Three major issues are raised in this song. First, there is the advice that boys should work hard in order to become financially empowered. They are also enjoined to stop flirting around. In addition, they are called upon to marry decently and normally in accordance to the cultural protocol. This is an indication that the women know what they are doing and that they are not ready for any act of promiscuity that will tarnish their image and prestige in the society. The song also reveals that men do pay some bride price and present the dowry before the bride can be released. Anyone who has no money cannot then go and marry, unless such a man publicly wants to cut corners. So, they are duly advised and warned by the ladies to go and work very hard and use their money judiciously. In fact, there is even a song, which is becoming interestingly popular during the engagement ceremony to portray this idea. At the time of presentation of the dowry, they sing to show that any groom who has brought all required dowry will be rejoicing. The song goes:

(p) Fèré ní ó máa yò – He will be rejoicing very well

(Repeat)

Oko iyàwó térú ré bá pé o – The groom who has brought a
complete dowry

Fèrè ní ó máa yò – He will be rejoicing very well.

It is not only the men that they use their songs to address, but they also use it to address themselves. This is because loss of virginity even in marriage was usually a traumatic experience for the Yoruba women in the past. Therefore, they sing songs to praise themselves if they have the assurance that their friend, the bride, kept her virginity to the time of marriage.

For example:

- (q) O yege – You have passed
Mobólájí,⁽¹¹⁾ o yege – Mobólájí, you have passed
Şolá rí o lómoge – Şolá has seen you as a virgin
Ó si gbé o níyàwó – And has taken you as his wife
Mobólájí, o yege – Mobólájí, you have passed.

But in case they discovered only after marriage that their friend had lost her virginity before the marriage, they may also sing to abuse and mock her for the loss of her virginity. This they do to correct and also warn others who are yet to marry to keep their virginity until marriage:

- (r) Ìbálé kíí fò – Virginity does not fly
Kín lo mú tie şe? – What have you done with your own?

Or

- (s) Dókodóko abòbò petie – A promiscuous girl with a loose vagina
Ó dóko lójà – She had sexual intercourse in the market
Ó dóko nídíí òro – She had sexual intercourse under the bush mango tree
Òro ò so mó o! – The bush mango tree is no longer bearing fruit!

The songs show that Yoruba women detest promiscuity and believe in a social sanction for being promiscuous. When these of songs are rendered onto somebody, it is quite shameful, and it repudiates the dignity of a wife in her husband's house after marriage. The song uses "market" to symbolise the open and a public place. On the other hand, the "bush mango tree" suggests a secret place. In essence, what they are saying is that that the lady is so promiscuous to the point that she can have sexual intercourse at any time and at any place. Whether this is realistic or not, the women use the songs to mock the promiscuous girl so that she will feel sad and at the same time warn others to desist from sexual escapades.

CONCLUSION

This paper on the role of Yoruba nuptial songs has shown that they sustain a dynamic discourse on relationships between individuals and groups. It shows that the Yoruba women are the vectors that illuminate many things about the society. Also, it has shown that the Yoruba women can be better heard in their lore in formal spheres. This was an attempt to decipher the perception of Yoruba women about themselves, about others and about the society. I have

shown that Yoruba nuptial songs have various thematic areas, such as: those that talk about eroticism, fertility and procreation, kinship matters and those that talk about the sanctity of marriage in the Yoruba worldview. This exploration shows that there should be more rigorous research on the impact of Yoruba women in the oral genre. Moreover, most of the women's views, especially those that deal with sexuality and the sanctity of marriage should be taken into consideration as a cultural means of waging war against HIV/AIDS. This will go a long way in preventing the infection and the spread of that killer disease. Most of these songs are sung at various marriage engagement ceremonies not only to show the bride as a chaste lady but to also inculcate moral values that prevent promiscuity. I therefore suggest that the performance of nuptial songs should be encouraged as a cultural way of preventing HIV/AIDS.

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NOTES

- (1) I divided poetry into three groups: songs, chants and recitations. This has to do with the performance modes and techniques. Therefore, I regard poetry as the umbrella under which others are subsumed.
- (2) There are various names given to this genre in different areas of Yoruba land. It is called *Obitun* in Ondo; *Òsàré Ìyàwó* in Ile-Ife; *Èkà Ìyàwó* among the people of Sao and the Bálá in Kwara State; *Olele Ìyàwó* in Ijesa, *Alámò Ìyàwó* in Ekiti, etc.
- (3) It is rare in Yoruba land to see any oral literature without women among the producers, even in various religious cults that are proclaimed forbidden to women, superficially.
- (4) *Olóriburikú* literally means the one with a bad or ill luck. But from my hermeneutical survey, it most likely means that the penis is heady by nature whenever it is ready for sexual intercourse. One of my respondents even made a funny remark to buttress the point that "Okó róbò tú wònrànwòn (The penis sees the vagina and becomes turgid forcefully)."
- (5) Literally, the word, *Adìgbèsè*, means a debtor. But I found that it was used contextually to illustrate the outcome of mating of a man and a woman, the pregnancy.
- (6) In Yoruba land, if any married woman experiences any kind of infertility, the traditional healers will be consulted for proper medical attention. Even today, many women who want to conceive still consult them up to the pregnancy regardless of the available modern medical care.
- (7) This diction is rendered *Òtútù* in the Yoruba orthography.
- (8) *Àdùkè* is a female personal *oriki*, a Yoruba descriptive praise name. Any name can be used here.
- (9) Any name could be used here.
- (10) Lineages here refers to all lineages of the wife.
- (11) This name is just used as a reference. Any other name could be used instead of this name. I was permitted to use the name from the marriage songs of Mr. and Mrs. Olu-solabolaji Ajibade. The marriage took place on October 8, 1994 at Ekosin in Odo-Otin Local Government, Osun State, Nigeria.

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