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Compilations of Yoruba History, Culture and Tradition

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A Social-Cultural Analysis of Celibacy among the Yoruba: Oyo Alafin’s Servants as a Case Study

The Yoruba people, who occupy the southwest of Nigeria, are a highly researched ethnic group in Africa. The people can boast of a rich cultural heritage, manifested in their history, sociology, and philosophy. The Yoruba are bound together by a common progenitor called Oduduwa, a common language, and a rich spirituality. Yoruba value procreation highly because of the desire to perpetuate continuity in the family. In other words, both personal and collective immortality are salient ambitions that are pursued vigorously by the Yoruba, through bearing children, especially sons.

The Oyo people in Yorubaland occupy a prominent place politically, economically, and religiously. The ancient Oyo settlement (Oyo-Ile) founded around 1400 CE was the most politically important Yoruba settlement from the mid-seventeenth century to the late eighteenth century. The Oyo Empire at this time held sway not only over other Yoruba states but also over the Fon kingdom of Dahomey (now in the Republic of Benin). After the disintegration of old Oyo (Oyo-Ile) around 1796, the capital was moved to the present site of Oyo-Alafin, founded around 1835. Oyo town is primarily a farming town, but other products include textiles, leather goods, and different utensils and decorative items carved from shells and calabashes.

The political stature of the kings, called Alafin, in Yoruba historiography was large. The Yoruba describe their kings as alase ekeji orisa, meaning “the one with authority, second only to the orisa” (spirits); the Alafin lived this dictum by wielding tremendous powers. There were, however, traditional provisions for checks and balances within Yoruba social structures; for example the king ruled in consonance with a council of male and female chiefs. The palace of the Alafin was and is an empire within an empire that comprised freeborn, servants, and slaves. The practice of celibacy was found among specific groups of slaves and servants of the Alafin. It seems apparent that the practice of
celibacy in any form within a culture that prioritizes procreation as the Yoruba do cannot be separated from issues of class and consequently power.

Celibacy has been described as “a state of being unmarried, especially as a result of a religious promise.” Celibacy could be undertaken for religious or secular purposes, and its scope could cover the entirety of a person’s life or part of a lifetime; it could also involve castration, or not.

The agenda of this chapter is twofold: to explicate the practice of celibacy among the servants of the Oyo Alafin and to offer a sociocultural analysis of the practice with its implications for the contemporary Yoruba setting. The methodology for the work includes interviews and the use of secondary sources such as books, journal articles, and the internet.

Theoretical Framework

On the grounds of both fact and reason, it has been postulated that it is necessary and expedient that some people should rule and others be ruled. Consequently, class stratification is an unavoidable component of social structure in human sociology, though the various modalities for its implementation remain debatable. Usually, class stratification operates with stated and assumed obligations and responsibilities for both the ruled and the ruler. These prescribed obligation and responsibility may or may not be documented, but they are agreed charters by member of the society and are informed by a people’s philosophy, mores, and values.

Slavery is a poignant phenomenon that has elicited diverse reactions from different people over the centuries. Aristotle holds that slavery is natural, in other words, some people are naturally slaves whereas others are masters. He identifies a correlation between a weak mind and a strong body for a natural slave. Such individuals he likens to beasts of burden except that, unlike beasts, human slaves recognize that they need to be ruled. Another dimension of the issue of slavery is the perception that
slavery is conventional and legitimate through its link to war. Accordingly, it has been argued that all prisoners of war could be legitimately enslaved irrespective of whether the war is “just” or “unjust”. Consequently, “if you lose the battle and are captured, you may be enslaved legitimately”. This position thus postulates that “might is right,” though opposition to this stance abounds.

Slavery was one of the means of control and regulation in African communities before the advent of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Theoretically, the trans-Atlantic slave trade is to be differentiated from slavery among African ethnic groups because the two phenomena differ in modalities of operation as well as in purpose. Slavery among African ethnic groups was usually informed and guided by principles that are derived from the people’s worldview and belief system, but the trans-Atlantic slave trade was conducted to exploit and displace the Africans for the furtherance of capitalism in the Americas and Europe.

Celibacy: Religious and Secular Purposes

One of the earliest manifestations of celibacy occurred in the institution of monasticism, which is based on the dualistic philosophy that regards matter as evil and low, whereas the spirit is good and high. Some have opined that celibacy is a practice based on guilt founded on false religious teachings that are developed to control people. They argue further that celibacy is physically unnatural and could give rise to health problems. The Roman Catholic Church is known for the practice of celibacy in Christendom, whereas examples of secular celibacy may be located in some political structures such as the Yoruba Oyo-Alafin’s palace.

This writer has addressed the practice of celibacy in the Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria in an earlier work, but some points therein are worthy of being reiterated. First, the distinction is made in some quarters between chastity and celibacy. Oftentimes, the vow of celibacy includes the vow of chastity, but not always. According to the canon law, the vow of chastity is broken if the priest marries
but not if he engages in sexual relations. He could obtain pardon for sexual relations by confessing to a fellow priest. Second, participation in the practice of celibacy in the Roman Catholic Church is not compelled; it is voluntary. Moreover, the participants are not castrated but function with their normal sexual feelings and facilities. Consequently, a great deal of self-control is imperative for these celibates. Whereas human sexual feelings are recognized by the Roman Catholic Church, the aim is to control them, and not the other way round. Celibacy in the church is a lifetime experience, because the celibate enters the convent or monastery at an early age and normally remains there for life. The stated objectives are rejection of all distractions ad total concentration of all energies on the worship of God and service to humanity. There are no biblical injunctions that prescribe celibacy for Christians, however. Third, celibacy as practiced in the Roman Catholic Church is at variance with cultures in Nigeria, where the individual’s sense of fulfillment is intertwined with the ability to marry and produce children; hence tension is unavoidable. Again, celibacy is absent in African religions, the nearest being occasional abstinence from sex spanning few days before specific rituals.

The secular practice of celibacy is always connected with issues of power and class. Celibacy could serve as a mark of class distinction among a people or in a group. Also, this type of celibacy is often closely tied with the philosophy and worldview of a people who practice it. Invariably, a people’s conceptualization of power structure, power legitimacy, and power accountability could be discerned from their practices of nonreligious celibacy. For instance, nonreligious celibacy is seldom found among rulers or leaders but is present among servants and people of lower class. This sheds some light on the purpose of the practice, which is to control. The ability of an individual of a higher class to control the lives of others who are of a lower class is integral to the practice of nonreligious celibacy. In addition, secular celibacy places a high premium on loyalty in the area of sexuality; hence the loyalty of the celibate to the ruler must be uncompromising.
Bother religious and nonreligious celibacy accrue some benefits to the celibate. Financial comfort is often guaranteed by the church and the ruler, respectively. The celibate also receives care because of the utilitarian purposes toward which the services of the celibate are directed. Some level of immunity also accrues to the celibate, which may include political clout, privileges and delegated authority in different settings.

**Sexuality among the Yoruba**

Yoruba sexuality is geared toward one goal, which is procreation, to achieve continuity of the human race. Marriage is the prescribed setting for the exercise of human sexuality among the Yoruba. Though certain situations may necessitate other measures, such as concubinage. Therefore, marriage is a duty expected of all adult male and female members of Yoruba society. Marriage is one of the characteristics of a mature person, because to be unmarried is perceived as a feature of childhood, irrespective of the individual’s age. Marriage conveys a status of responsibility, which may not be true of an unmarried person. This status at marriage is manifested at different levels for the male as well as the female. For the Yoruba woman, marriage is an indication of her maturity because she is able to change residence from her father’s house to that of her husband. In addition, it shows her ability to manage both human and natural resources. Also, it bestows on her the privilege to belong to the league of mothers. Marriage for the man is an indication of maturity because he now becomes a provider and guardian of others in the family. Consequently, depending on the level of success of the man as a husband and provider, responsibilities in the larger society may be assigned to him. Again, the status that marriage bestows on both male and female in Yorubaland transcends this life into the hereafter because on it hinges the phenomenon of the ancestors. Marriage is a rhythm of life in which everyone must participate: the ancestors, the living, and the yet unborn.
Having children is essential in Yoruba marriages. Children are the glory of marriages, and the more there are of them the greater the glory\textsuperscript{12}. The significance of having children is frequently recorded in Yoruba oral genres including songs, stories, proverbs, dictums, and dirges. Examples of some sayings on the importance of procreation in Yoruba oral genres are: *omo niyi, omo nide, omo l’aso, omo ni i wo ‘le de ni l’ojo ale*, meaning “children guarantee prestige,” “children are as brass,” “children are cloths (because they shield parents from shame),” “children take care of the house (concerns) for parents in old age and after death.” Others include: *ina ku ‘fi eeru b’aju, ogede ku ‘fi omo re ropo, ojo a ba ku, omo eni ni wo ‘le de ni*, meaning “when the fire is out, ashes replace it, when the banana tree dies, its child (young one) replaces it, when one dies, it is the children who replaces one,” another example says *omo omo oosin, omo l’afe aye*, meaning “children are worthy to be revered because they constitute the essence of life.” Consequently, marriage and procreation are closely tied together among this people.

To die without having children is the greatest calamity that could befall any individual among the Yoruba. A popular Yoruba song aptly sums it up: *ori mi ma je njo ‘fo omo lere aye*, meaning “may my destiny not let me be a loser, for children are the gains of living.” This explains why Yoruba people, especially females, go to great lengths to ensure that they produce children; to die without children is to become disconnected, to become an outcast, and to lose all links to the human race after death. To produce no children is to be erased and forgotten totally in the memories of one’s family members and community. The proper use of sex therefore is to produce children. Women bear the larger part of the task of procreation through pregnancy and childbirth; hence the Yoruba prescribe more regulations in the form of ritual observance or prohibitions (taboo) for women’s sexuality. Sex is recognized as a gift from the creator to both men and women, but its use is monitored to avoid abuse. The Yoruba to not attach any form of guilt to sexual feelings except where they are not properly utilized, such as in
incestuous relationships or when they violate specific religious values such as sex on the bare ground or
in the afternoon.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Celibacy among the Yoruba}

Celibacy (abstaining from sex) as a practice in Yoruba religion is seldom total or final. Cultic
functionaries may be required to abstain from sexual relations for the immediate period before
officiating at a religious occasion. Because these priestesses and priests often serve also as
intermediaries between the Supreme Being and the worshippers, they may be required to shun sex
before mediating between these two parties. Again, examples of elderly men and women who are
dedicated to some religious deities in Yorubaland may be cited. These elderly people are usually past
childbearing age, but have probably been married and had children before this period of dedication. In
addition, examples of votary maids in Yoruba religion may be construed as another example of celibacy.
Young girls between ten and eleven years old are dedicated to goddesses and required to abstain from
sexual relations and marriage until the end of their tenure. Indeed, for some the very day of marriage
marks the end of the restrictions from sex as they proceed straight to their marital residence from the
last assignment as a votary maid.\textsuperscript{14} it is worth noting that such requirements as demanded of votary
maids are rarely found among young men in Yoruba religion, and this may be due to the link between
women’s sexuality and procreation.

Secular celibacy is often found among the lower-class populace in Yoruba society, such as
servants and slaves. Victims who are captured due to defeat in war provide the bulk of this population.
Such slaves and servants may render services in homes of the rich or in the palace of the ruler. Duties
assigned to this class of people range from the domestic to the diplomatic. In specific cases, slaves and
servants may be required to practice celibacy, and such celibate status is neither optional nor voluntary.
Because these slaves and servants are perceived as properties of their owners, little cognizance is paid to their individual preferences in life; it is the wish of the masters that dictates their lives.

A specific example of the practice of celibacy among the Yoruba is that of some slaves and servants in the Alafin Oyo’s palace. Whereas the slaves were known as iwefa, the servants were called ilari, grown men who served the Alafin. The existence of these classes of servants has been traced to the old Oyo kingdom. The Ilari were recognized by a special hairdo that divided the hair into three parts (aaso-meta). They were messengers to the Alafin and usually went in front of him at any occasion of sacrifice. On ritual occasions, the ilari’s apparel was a white wrapper tied on the chest, but on regular days they were usually clad in loose trousers and a gown, known as atu and gbariye. At any point in time, the ilari was armed with a cutlass, just in case there was need to defend the ruler. The Alafin delegated some authority to the ilari because they were highly trusted. For example, they collected tributes (isakole) from districts, each covering a specified area of jurisdiction. This privileged position granted to the ilari was an avenue to exercise power and accumulate wealth and often they displayed unsanctioned influence in the community.

Ilari practiced celibacy by compulsion. The rationale for this was the imperative to be loyal to the ruler. Treachery was deemed to be sabotage, and the penalty was death. These men (usually married men with sons) were castrated (te loda) to ensure that their sexual organs ceased to function, as opposed to relying on self-control to curtail sexual activities. Mention should be made that since these servants lived within the vicinity of the palace grounds, and the ruler often had numerous wives, a major concern was the need to ensure the total absence of any possibility of sexual interaction between the ruler’s wives (olori) and the slaves or servants. The ilari were succeeded by their first son or the son agreed upon by the family to continue the line of service within the palace.
Presently, *ilari* do not practice celibacy, but they do continue to serve in the palace of the Alafin. Once chosen, an *ilari* is required to change residence to the palace of the Alafin, and he may not return to his family compound again except in emergencies, and even then such visits should be brief. The leader of the *ilari* is known as the Kudefu (that is, *iku Alafin de fufu*, meaning “the death of the Alafin is turned to thin air or erased”). He stays at the entrance of the palace, hence he is the first to contact anything or anybody positive or negative-entering the palace ground. Consequently, he is the first contract for any danger meant for the Alafin.

The Yoruba have a vibrant philosophy of the potency of unseen influences in human endeavour, and so dangerous influences are daily occurrences among the people. Therefore, the Kudefu is usually a strong medicine man (*onisegun ponbele*) because he needs to harness all support to ward off danger on the life of the Alafin. In addition, any gift or tribute brought to the Alafin must of necessity make a first stop with the Kudefu. It is after he has taken his pleasure of such gifts that the remainder goes to the palace. He exercises authority on judicial matters in the Oyo kingdom, and may exercise significant influence on the Alafin on any issue, no matter how serious. The current Kudefu of Oyo-Alafin is Baba ‘Laniyi of Ile-Modarikan, Oyo.\(^1\)

*Iwefa*, slaves, are the second class of celibates in the place of the Alafin Oyo. These were people captured at war and conscripted into service, mainly at the domestic level of the palace administration. *Iwefa* were of three classes: Ona-Efa, Otun-Efa, and the Osi-Efa. The Ona-Efa and Otun-Efa were slaves charged with the duties of blessing the ruler by reciting his praise-names, the past heroic deeds of the ruler’s ancestors, and the exploits of the ruler—all in a bid to boast the ruler’s self-esteem. Further, these two classes of slaves praised the chiefs-in-council who administered the community with the ruler, also these slaves acted as interpreters (*ogbifo*) for the rulers when visitors called. This was because of the Yoruba belief that the ruler as the representative of the gods should not communicate with people
directly. Presently the Ona-Efa and Otun-Efas’ successors still perform the same duties in the palace, though they no longer practice celibacy. They bless and praise the Alafin and chiefs, they help in adjusting his flowing gown and attend to his minute-by-minute needs. The mode of dressing for the *iwefa* is the same as that of the *ilari*.

The third class of *iwefa* was the Osi-Efa. They were the ones directly in charge of the ruler’s wives (*olori*), hence they were usually castrated and celibate. Because they were castrated, they could move freely among the many wives of the ruler. They were highly trusted and favored by the ruler. They enjoyed tremendous privileges, and the care they received in terms of material blessings and gifts were enormous. All these were geared toward compensating the Osi-Efa for the sacrifice of his sexuality. The last Osi-Efa that was castrated in Oyo-Alafin served the Alafin in the 1960s. According to one informant who knew this particular Osi-Efa in the 1960s, the Osi-Efa was called Baba Busari and was very fat.\(^{17}\) The current Osi-Efa was installed in 1972; he is Amusa Labintan. Amuza Labintan is neither castrated nor is a celibate, so access to the ruler’s wives is restricted.

**A Sociocultural Analysis**

A comprehensive look at celibacy among the Yoruba shows that it is a practice based on class rather than religion. The Yoruba preference for procreation and marriage buttresses the above assertion. The need to guarantee loyalty is a paramount concern in the practice of celibacy in Yorubaland. This is because as powerful as the Alafin was and is, any act of disloyalty by slaves and servants could endanger his life and that of his family members. This is especially true of the Kudenu and Osi-Efa. Furthermore, any act of sexual impropriety in the palace could lead to bearing bastard children who could infiltrate and consequently contaminate the royal blood. If in the future such an “illegitimate” child were to ascend the throne as Alafin, the ritual repercussions would be enormous for
the lineage and the community.\textsuperscript{18} Hence, the Osi-Efa’s role has implications for the present and future preservation of the sanctity and integrity of the kingship institution in Oyo-Alafin.

The Yoruba philosophy of largeness and pluralism is reflected in the practice of celibacy. The Yoruba say \textit{Karin kapo, yiye ni i ye ni}, meaning “when we walk together in groups, it bestows honor on us all.” This implies that individualism in all its ramifications is to be avoided by the people. The retinue of slaves and servants in the Alafin’s palace constitute a component of the honor accorded the ruler anywhere within and outside the community. This entourage of slaves and servants symbolizes the largeness of the person and office of the ruler as well as the largeness of the ruler’s resources. In plural terms, this retinue of slaves and servants suggests collective ownership of the ruler by the servants. The ruler is the father of everyone in the community and the chief celebrant of any religious festival or ritual, irrespective of his personal religious affiliations.

The practice of celibacy among the Yoruba presents a glimpse into the people’s social structure of governance. Aristotle rejected the theory that postulates that “might is right,” but the Yoruba uphold the theory, as reflected in their enslavement of captives of war. The parameters to determine whether a war is just or not are complex and dynamic and attended by multifarious factors within and outside each community. Therefore, a war conceived as being just in one community may be termed unjust in another. For the Yoruba any captive of war may be enslaved.

This chapter has attempted to explicate the practice of celibacy among the Yoruba, a people who value procreation and marriage highly. It interrogated the coexistence of celibacy with a high premium accorded procreation. It revealed that secular celibacy among the Yoruba was a case of class stratification and power. In sum, it may be asserted that celibacy among the Yoruba could be described as an exception to the rule. It served a purpose among the people and has now been obliterated because there is no need for the practice any more.
NOTES


7. www.cfp.org/


10. Olajubu, “Celibacy in Christianity,” 9

11. Ibid., 10.

12. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, 142

13. Having sexual relations on bare ground is believed to pollute the earth and may result in a poor harvest. Again, having sexual relations in the afternoon is construed as a sign of laziness because that is the time individuals are expected to be at work earning their living; Yoruba belief is that such sexual relations produce albino children.