

# **The Place of Women in the Socio-religious, Economic and Political Development of Ife Kingdom in Yorubaland**

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## **Abstract**

In most cultures of the world, women are perceived as servile, domestic, and socially inferior to men. Perceiving women in this manner suggests that there is little, if any, knowledge about women in society. In line with this, women in some Yoruba kingdoms and empires were known to be major drivers and active contributors to the socio-religious, economic, and political development of the society. Women in the Ife kingdom in Yorubaland are known for their vibrant traditions and have contributed significantly to the kingdom's socio-religious, economic, and political development over the years. This paper examines the significance of women's involvement in the social, political, religious, and economic development of the Ife kingdom in Yorubaland. Utilising historical, exegetical and descriptive methods in analysing the contributions of Ife kingdom women to the growth and development of Ife kingdom. The result revealed the heroic deeds and contributions of Ife women, which are legendary in shaping the social development of culture, religion, and indigenous political processes in the Ife kingdom. The result also showed that Ife women wielded significant influence and served as a coordinated agency in the development of trade and commerce, hospitality, aesthetics, and the improvement of family structure among the Ife people. The paper concludes that women's influence is crucial for community development and the sustenance of peaceful coexistence.

**Keywords:** Ife-Ife, Culture, Economics, Politics, Religion, Women and Yoruba.

## **Introduction**

The city of Ile-Ife is one of the most important ancient cities and is acclaimed as the cradle of the Yoruba race in Southwestern Nigeria (Parrinder, 1988:74). Ile-Ife is an autonomous traditional kingdom in Yorubaland with its unique historic myth of creation, which *Odùduwà*, the forebear of the Yoruba people, performed through the divine commands of the *Olódùmarè*, the Supreme being. The physical and spiritual foundations of the ancient city of Ile-Ife as one of the ancestral homes of Yoruba race is undauntedly preserved over the years through various deities known as *Irúnmolè*

(ancestral Spirits) and through the efforts of the prominent traditional rulers and the women in Ife kingdom (Salami, 2023:73). Of course, different people see women as special species of human race because women are givers of life through child bearing and unique power as well as the ability to procreate in fulfilling the existence. Through the process of childbearing and procreation, women are keepers of posterity, populating society and consciously nurturing social sustenance processes and their system.

Women are regarded as the source through which kinship and succession are determined (Imasogie, 1985:32). However, sometimes women are considered chattel of men, whose purpose and primary responsibilities are to bear children and nurture them into social consciousness, and to instil moral instincts in their wards. Often, women are socially and culturally treated as either inferior or the less privileged class of people, whose only duties are to manufacture children and tend their husbands' houses. Nevertheless, the roles and responsibilities of Yoruba women in all aspects of cultural life and of the entire Yoruba sociocultural system intrinsically inform the importance of Yoruba women in building a human society. Despite the debilitating situations in which some women have found themselves, the traditions of the Ife kingdom in Yorubaland placed a higher premium on womenfolk and their feminist roles in the kingdom's religious beliefs, socio-economic, political, and cultural development. Admittedly, culture is a melting pot of innumerable ideas that have been nurtured and preserved for several centuries before becoming the cherished value systems of society (Adesoji, 2012:237).

### **Women and Cultural Subjugation**

It is apposite to examine the position of culture, as well as the relationships and perceptions regarding the status of women in Yoruba society, vis-à-vis women in the Ife traditional kingdom. Culture is a variegated phenomenon with a wide range of meaning and application. Culture is also regarded as the totality of a people's way of life, passed down from one generation to the next. Taylor defined culture as the complex whole that includes knowledge, belief, law, morality, arts, customs, traditions, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society in a particular environment (Taylor, 1920: 12). Culture has both material and non-material components. The non-material aspect comprises inner behaviour, attributes, ideas, desires, values, and norms, which are expressed through customs, traditions, and folklore. The non-material components of culture tend to dictate many of the social arrangements, including gender roles and ideologies (Mbiti, 1993:69). This presupposes that culture is an intrinsic aspect of every society. Obviously, Yoruba culture places many obstacles at the doorsteps of women. These undoubtedly hinder them in achieving their desired goals and personal ambitions. In the first place, many of the

women's activities seem to be subordinate to those of the men's folk. This is because of the patrilineal nature of the Yoruba societies. The Patriarchal nature of Yoruba society accorded women subordinate roles, and this social order has persisted in many Yoruba communities. In an attempt to explain this chauvinistic cultural view, Gray states; ...a cultural worldview that is slanted so that men are valued a lot, and women are at the lowest ebb or conscientiously lesser in values, and in which men's prestige is up, and women's prestige is down. A system of social stratification and differentiation based on sex, which provides material advantages to males while simultaneously placing severe constraints on the roles and activities of females (Gray, 2019:13).

This excerpt emphasises male dominance at the expense of the female folk, who could be given out in marriage at will. The supreme authority at home rests permanently with husbands, who are responsible for all family decisions. The women are to abide by their husbands' decisions without equivocation. Thus, the inequality of men and women is clearly stressed. Hence, for women to claim the same equality with men is seen as an aberration and uncultured for such women. In Yoruba society, there is a preference for male children over female children. This is due to cultural biases that regard male children as heirs to the father's property (Akinwowo, 1983:39). In addition, men in Yoruba traditions are regarded as the agents through whom the family's name will be perpetuated and remembered for posterity. This makes the Yoruba society undoubtedly patriarchal in nature. Nevertheless, the roles of women in building a wholesome human environment cannot be overemphasised. Ife women have demonstrated this in various ways in the social development and cultural revamping of the Ife kingdom.

In the traditional value system, female children seem to be undervalued in terms of their gender classification for some cultural reasons, which place men over and above women. For instance, in Yoruba culture, a girl child is permitted to stay at home and help her mother with household chores. Unlike male children, who would go to the farm with their father to help cultivate the farmland to feed the family. Male children are generally brave and go on hunting expeditions (Falola, 1991:65). During the war, male children often serve as foot soldiers, protecting their people against external aggression. Customarily, Yoruba men are accustomed to fortifying their male children and ensuring that all the required rites of passage and sacrifices are performed on their sons (Abubakar, 1991: 128). Whereas, such spiritual caring and customary fortifications for the female children are minimal, if at all there are. This is because female children are seen as mere tenants in their fathers' house pending the time of their marriage. This perception suggests that once female children reached the age of maturity and marriageability, they would definitely leave their father's house, abandon their father's name and consequently join another family with their traditions and

customary practices (Badejo, 1991:83). This accounts for a peculiar disdain with which women are treated in some cultural milieu.

Female children are occasionally given the barest formal education, while their male counterparts receive the best. Therefore, in the Ife kingdom as well as in Yorubaland, giving birth to a male child is a sign of social fulfillment on the part of men. At the same time, the woman sees it as a sign of satisfaction and social security in their husband's home and family. However, a woman who has yet to give birth to a male child but has consecutively given birth to female children is yet to be fulfilled in terms of procreation. Moreover, such a woman is yet to secure a protective habitation in her husband's family. This may even lead to the rejection of such a woman; anxiety would set in for her, and, consequently, this would be a shame, humiliation, and family reproach in her place of honour as a mother who could not raise her heir for her husband. The place and position of a mother who often gives birth to only female children in her husband's house will be threatened and undervalued. Without prior notice, her husband can bring in another woman to replace her because she failed to give birth to male children. Of course, that husband could not understand the biological explanations of how men's genetic factors determine sex chromosomes, but not those of women's biological structure.

Furthermore, in the Ife kingdom and other parts of Yorubaland, women have no right to the family inheritance. She is considered property to be shared and inherited upon her husband's death. There are cultural taboos and traditional superstitions that such a woman needs to observe on behalf of her late husband to ward off sudden and untimely death in the family. She may be asked to eat certain indigenous meals prepared from animals and plants for a period while she is still mourning her late husband (Eluyemi, 2023). The required mourning period usually lasts 40 to 90 days, depending on the age and circumstances surrounding the husband's death (Awominure, 2023). In the Ife kingdom, this practice is usually called "*ekún òórò*," meaning ritual crying for the dead person. Men usually prove their dominance and superiority over women by marrying multiple wives, which serves as social confirmation of their status, wealth, and societal responsibility. Arguably, the number of wives and children a man has is an indication of his success in life. More so, having many children is evidence and an enduring assurance of support in old age (Ogundipe, 2007: 62). Considering this stance, Olusanya, in his opinion, argues that polygyny in Yoruba culture is purely exploitative of women and social enslavement of the females (Olusanya, 1990:32).

In addition, during the festivals of *Eid al-Fitr* and *Eid al-Adha*, it is customary for women to be forbidden from coming out. They are to remain indoors. This informs that the song's rhymes go thus:

*Awo Egúngún ni Obìrin le se*  
*Awo Gèlèdé ni Obìrin le mò*  
*Bí Obìrin bá fì Ojú kan Orò, Orò a gbe*  
*Etí ni Obìrin fì ngbó ohùn Orò* (Ogundipe: 2007:65)

Women can only participate in the Masquerades cult  
Women can be involved in the Gèlèdé seclusion cult  
When women see Oro, the deity will proscribe her  
Women can only listen to the voice of the Oro cult

The above rhymes of native song cum wise sayings suggest that some traditional restrictions and taboos are placed on women because of the belief that women are not able to keep secrets. Over time, women are seen as weaker human beings whose existence is heavily dependent on men's bravery and protective care within the social and cosmic order. Apparently, this does not mean there were no females among the divinities and gods in Yorubaland.

Contrarily, there are some women in the Ife kingdom whose valiant roles could not be ignored as heroines; despite all cultural restrictions and indigenous traditions, they could not be stopped from making exploits in their locality. They defied all cultural superstitions, taboos, and social barriers to perform heroic deeds in the course of the establishment of the Ife kingdom. Some of these women are later deified as goddesses in Ile-Ife and across Yorubaland.

### **Women Heroines in the Ife Kingdom**

The story of the Ife Kingdom is incomplete in the traditional annals of Yoruba empires and kingdoms without the heroic deeds of legendary *Móremí Ajàsorò*. It is said that Moremi lived in the twelfth century and hailed from Offa in present-day Kwara State. She was the daughter of a diviner and brave hunter named Lukugba, of the Olunbe compound in Offa. She married Òrànmiyàn, the heir to the Odùduwà, the first king of the Ife kingdom. Eluyemi (2019) opines that Moremi Ajàsorò was a rare woman who questioned social injustice and stood up for the oppressed, no matter who they were or where they came from, in her determination to protect her people. The marriage of Móremí and Òrànmiyàn produced a son named Olúorogbo. When the child was born, Òrúnmilà, Elérií Ìpín, was consulted to determine the baby's fate and destiny. The oracle affirmed that Olúorogbo's destiny is to serve her mother, Moremi. During that time, there was an inter-tribal war when the Ugbo people would come, fight the Ife people, and destroy their settlements. Moremi offered herself to be captured and spied on the enemy's land to learn the secrets of the Ugbo warriors. Hence, before embarking on her mission, it was said that she sacrificed her only son to the river divinity known as Èsìnmiirìn, taking an oath of allegiance that her missions would be

successful among the enemies and that she would return valiantly. Later, Moremi learned the secret power of the Ugbo warriors; she ran back to her people and informed them of the Ugbo warriors' weakness. This valiant deed showed a total sense of patriotism, commitment, and loyalty by a woman that no man could do at that time. Moremi performed a similar function with the Biblical Israelite woman Deborah, who led her people to victory during the war between the Israelites and the Philistines (Judges 4:1-40). Today, Moremi is a heroine in Yorubaland who fought for the liberation of the Yoruba kingdom of Ife from the neighbouring Ugbo kingdom.

Furthermore, the reign of *Lúùwó Gbàgídá*, the twenty-first *Òònì* of Ife, who ruled the Ife kingdom after *Òònì Geisi* and was the only female traditional ruler in the Ife kingdom to wear the revered Ife traditional beaded crown known as *Adé-arè*, (ritual crown) could not be ignored in the *Ọbaship* institution of the Ife kingdom. *Lúùwó* was a woman but became a substantive traditional title holder of the *Òònì* stool of Ile-Ife. The history has it that *Lúùwó* was a woman, but a warrior and brave hunter in the Ife kingdom, who demonstrated her exceptional heroic power and valiant attitudes beyond the customary roles that confined Yoruba women to their husbands' houses. *Òònì Luwo* was the female traditional ruler who institutionalised the traditional *Olójó* festival as the traditional religio-cultural hegemony and made the women the prime determinant of the day on which the *Olójó* would be celebrated through the traditional publicity known as *Gbàjúre*. She made pottery and sculpture popular through different aesthetic pavements, which later became a museum and remains so today. *Òònì Luwo* was a beautiful and fearless traditional leader who was determined to assert justice and equity for both sons and enslaved people in her kingdom. It should be noted that the son of *Òònì Lúùwó*, *Adekola Telu*, was the great progenitor and founder of the Iwo kingdom in Yorubaland.

### **Women's Economic, Religious and Political Status in the Ife Kingdom**

Most people are unaware that women actively contribute to the economy in the Ife kingdom and Yoruba societies. The dominant occupation in Yorubaland is farming. Most towns and villages are agrarian communities, with both men and women actively participating in farming. The women often engage in plucking, packing, and staking of cultivated crops. Of course, modernity has not changed the centrality of the Yoruba women in economic well-being. Nevertheless, after a whole day of farming activities, it is the sole duty of women to cook for the whole family. Also, the housework is always done by the women, such as sweeping, fetching water, washing clothes, caring for children, and providing moral education, which are the sole responsibilities of women in the family.

Furthermore, in religious worship, the roles of women could not be overemphasised because of the population of women, which usually outnumbered the number of men. Women are always seen as the pillars and embracers of religious worship, sacrifice, and other spiritual activities. They are the ones who sing praises to the Supreme Being. They are also chanting and singing to the gods. Women are proficient in drum beating, dancing and often possessed by the spirit in ecstasy realms due to their emotional state of mind. A respondent opines that, while women are in a spiritual frenzy, they often have the spiritual power to see beyond the physical environment and commune with ancestral spirits through telepathy (Awominure, 2023). Moreover, Ilesanmi (2021) argued that if women withdraw their services and commitments from religious worship and spiritual functions, then religion becomes sterile. This is because women are emotional and many of them are used to embracing religious activities rather than men. Although few women are given leadership roles to function as priests, except those who are naturally endowed and customarily designated for such functions (Ilesanmi, 2021:56). For instance, women are very prolific in chanting ancestral eulogies, which the Yoruba people refer to as ‘Oríki’, meaning eulogy.

It is the oral praise poetry of the indigenous Yoruba communities, clans and kingdoms. Women are accustomed to learning the eulogy to praise and celebrate the eminent deeds of leaders in the community, such as kings, chiefs, warriors, heroes, and the aristocratic class (Barber, 1990:313-337). According to a respondent, Madam Elutilo, the most common purpose of traditional chanting is to use poetic language to eulogize the good qualities, virtues, and bravery of someone who has served the community and built a good name. Women chanting eulogies demonstrate that they often have a strong memory and can recall a range of cultural and religious legends. Interestingly, women sing and chant to make others happy and to collect money from those they praise. Chanting is common among Yoruba women during religious and cultural festivals, marriage celebrations, chieftaincy coronations, and the celebration of victories and life achievements, as well as during the death and mourning of loved ones. Though the category of the praise song is different from that of the mourning death, people are called dirge (Basu, 2005: 67).

Moreover, in politics, women are the most active supporters of the leaders. They sing the praises of their leaders and give their candidate maximum publicity. In Yorubaland, elders know that women are gifted, and their approach to social issues usually brings progress, unity, and equity. This is one of the reasons in Yorubaland why women are often installed with traditional chieftaincy titles such as Ìyálóde (Community leader), Ìyálòjá (Market leader) and Erelú (woman warrior) (Ilesanmi, 2021:56). These traditional chieftaincy titles depend on the roles and contributions that such women have made in the society. In fact, they are honoured for their social, economic, and

spiritual accomplishments in finance, entrepreneurship, marketing, midwifery, design, planning, arts and design, and motherhood (Eluyemi, 2024).

Furthermore, women are generally known to be peaceful and usually avoid war and conflict. This is not because they are cowardly but because of the devastation, its attendant calamities, and effects of war, as well as the absence of peace in the community. Yoruba women, particularly those from Ife, are less prone to war than their male counterparts. This is because women see all men as their children whom they conceived for nine months, breastfed for not less than fifteen months, and guided until they attained maturity. Women know that they suffer a lot to bring men to life. Hence, they are less disposed to losing them on the battlefield. Except in a very desperate situation, no woman would want to lose her son in any war. By implication, before the war broke out, women were always issuing perennial warnings to their community through songs, proverbs, and special messages called *Àrokò* in the Yoruba language. Just as the women sing the praises of the men's valour, they also condemn the destruction that accompanies war.

Moreover, during every annual ritual, women mostly pray for peace, development, and prosperity in the community, as well as for the unity of purpose among their family members and the community as a whole. Sometimes a woman may offer themselves as a negative step to be taken away to spy on the secret of the enemy. This is an act of using a marital treaty as a cover-up to spy on the military power of the opponent's people. This is how Moremi knew the secret of the Ugbo people, arch-enemies of the Ife people. As well, women know how and when to make their feelings known to their menfolk to achieve the desired results. Of course, this is not to paint women as impetuous; rather, it is a way of adopting and using feminine approaches that can melt the heart of stone and rock in dealing with men. The feminine approaches hardly fail. It is the brutish use of power; the confidence reposed in the physical energy that inevitably fails when it is backed by good reasoning and feminine psychological feelings and support.

### **Conclusion**

This paper interrogates the contributions of women to the development of the Ife kingdom in Yorubaland. The findings of this paper revealed that, in Yoruba societies, particularly in the Ife kingdom, women's activities are multifaceted, ranging from domestic activities to social, religious, and political ones. In most cases, these activities are wrapped in cultural, religious, social, and indigenous practices and value systems. Women in the Ife kingdom are valued and considered bearers of cultural identity, opinion leaders, and influential voices in religious beliefs. Yoruba historical and cultural dynamics, grounded in a gendered perspective on women's heroic deeds, provided a robust platform for the study of women in the Ife Kingdom. So far, this paper has tenaciously argued that the place and position of women in positive construction and reshaping

society have direct, proportional roles in women's physical, social, and spiritual involvement in society, especially in their roles in building the Ife kingdom in Yorubaland. The paper discussed the influence of women on indigenous beliefs and the political development of the Ife kingdom. The heroic contributions of some valiant women revealed the nature of the women's selfless contributions to the social, economic, and political development of the Ife kingdom in Yorubaland. The paper discussed the heroic deeds of Moremi Ajàsorò and Òdònì Lúùwó, eminent women of the Ife kingdom, who dexterously wielded their fame power and prowess to protect, preserve, and redefine the Ife people and the kingdom. These valiant women have set the pace for contemporary womenfolk to be patriotic and to rebuild their homelands in their own ways. In essence, the paper has consciously discussed the place, position, and roles of women in the Ife kingdom in Yorubaland, without necessarily delving into the feminine and womanist debates, but carefully exploring the importance of women's contributions to the Yoruba community in the local context.

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