

Compound Wives (Olóbìnrin-Ilé) in Oyan, Southwest Nigeria

By

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Abstract

This study is an investigation into the lives of married women (*Olóbìnrin-Ilé*) in Òyán Town, Osun State, Nigeria. As in other parts of Yorùbáland, the women married into a particular compound or family by the sons, grandsons, great-grandsons, uncles and nephews of the same lineage, are considered an important corporate group. The thesis focuses on the double belonging of women both as daughters of their natal compound and as wives of their marital compound and explores the institution of the compound wives (*Olóbìnrin-Ilé*), wives of the compound who are women of diverse origin and whose admission into the group is strictly by marriage.

The data for this study was collected through participant observation as well as through focus group discussions and individual interviews with married women from nine compounds in Òyán, most of whom were active participants of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*. Data was analyzed using interpretive analysis, focusing on the way in which the women represent and support the husband's compound in their outings and how they are compensated for it.

Dedication

This project is dedicated to God the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost for preparing the way for me and also to my parents, Mr. Moses Adebisi Olojede & Mrs. Abigail Olajiire Olojede.

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Contents

ABSTRACT	II
DEDICATION	III
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	IV
1 CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH PROBLEM	1
1.2 RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY	8
1.3 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS	12
2 CHAPTER TWO: THE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL STRUCTURES OF ỌYÁN	15
2.1 AN INTRODUCTION TO ỌYÁN	15
2.2 ỌYÁN’S COMPOUND STRUCTURE	19
2.3 CHANGES TO COMPOUND LIFE TODAY	21
3 CHAPTER THREE: DISCUSSING GENDER AMONG THE YORÙBÁ	26
3.1 VIEWS ON WOMEN IN YORÙBÁ SOCIETY	26
3.2 GENDER AND STATUS IN YORÙBÁ HISTORY	28
3.3 GENDER AND MARRIAGE IN IN YORÙBÁ SOCIETY	30
3.4 GENDER AND RELIGION IN YORÙBÁ SOCIETY	34
3.5 WOMEN’S DUAL ROLES AS WIVES AND DAUGHTERS	38
4 CHAPTER FOUR: MARRIAGE AND THE <i>OLÓBÌNRIN-ILÉ</i>	41

4.1	THE ORGANISATION OF THE <i>OLÓBÌNRIN-ILÉ</i>	41
4.2	BECOMING A MEMBER OF THE <i>OLÓBÌNRIN-ILÉ</i>	45
4.3	THE ROLE OF THE <i>OLÓBÌNRIN-ILÉ</i> IN SUPPORTING AND FACILITATING MARITAL LIFE	50
4.4	THE ROLE OF THE <i>OLÓBÌNRIN-ILÉ</i> IN RESOLVING MARITAL PROBLEMS AND RIVALRY	53
5	CHAPTER FIVE: PERFORMANCES OF THE <i>OLÓBÌNRIN-ILÉ</i>	59
5.1	THE <i>OLÓBÌNRIN-ILÉ</i> GET READY TO DANCE	60
5.2	SONGS AND PERFORMANCES OF THE <i>OLÓBÌNRIN-ILÉ'</i>	63
5.3	6.1.3 THE <i>OLÓBÌNRIN-ILÉ</i> AFTER THE PERFORMANCE	67
5.4	PARTICIPATION DURING CEREMONIES IN THE COMPOUND	70
5.5	BUYING AND MAINTENANCE OF UNIFORMS	72
5.6	DISCIPLINE AMONG THE <i>OLÓBÌNRIN-ILÉ</i>	73
5.7	THE IMPACT OF MODERNIZATION ON THE ACTIVITIES OF THE <i>OLÓBÌNRIN-ILÉ</i>	77
6	CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION	80
6.1	RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH	81
7	BIBLIOGRAPHY	82
7.1	WEBSITES	85
7.2	FORMAL INTERVIEWS	86
8	APPENDIX	87

1 Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Background to the Research Problem

The Yorùbá of southwest Nigeria have a unique way of establishing a family. As in other cultures all over the world, the idea of family among the Yorùbá is basically that of an extended family. If economically possible, the nuclear family of father, mother (or mothers) and their children often live together with uncles, nephews, nieces and cousins. However, the Yorùbá family embraces more than members who are related by blood or marriage; and often a stranger who shares the family's residence may eventually become a member of that family. The basis of a family's residence is the compound, often a group of rooms or houses facing a shared open space (or spaces) whose male residents are usually related by descent, forming "a patrilineal core group" (LeVine, Klein and Owen 1967:52).¹ In a normal compound, there are often three or more generations living together and the most elderly male in the compound takes charge of all family affairs as the head of the family. The historical importance of this practice has been documented by Akintoye, who observed that each of the earliest *agbo-ilé* (lineage compounds) in Yorùbáland "consists of many dwelling units in one single building. Each building developed as a number of courtyards around which the dwelling units were arranged" (Akintoye 2010:20). The spatial dimensions of family compounds will be discussed in detail in chapters three and four. Although this type of family setting is often modified or even abandoned in modern urban settings, it remains

¹ Not all Yorùbá communities have a very strong patrilineal system, and in the Ondo and Ijebu areas, some scholars have even spoken of cognatic descent (see Lloyd 1966). However, this is not relevant for our study (or the majority of the area).

constitutive of the social life in smaller Yorùbá towns. Important elements of compound life, and especially its inclusivity, however continue to shape even more nuclear families in the urban environment. While many families consist of the husband and wife with their children, they usually also include at least two or three relatives, or even acquaintances, from either side of the couple who stay with them as part of their extended family.

The compound system in Yorùbá society is the foundation of the understanding of compound or “family” wives, called *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*, who are the topic of this dissertation. As the compound’s core lineage consists of those related on the paternal side, and as marriage within extended families is frowned upon, the wives of the men who belong to a compound are by necessity born to another lineage. While all women belong to their father’s compound by birth, they join their marital families as outsiders. It is these women who are married into a compound, and who therefore belong to it by marriage rather than by descent, who constitute an important group within the compound called the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*. While this group is obviously more important in settings where the compound system still operates, even smaller families in urban settings recognize the wives who married into the family as a category that is distinct from the daughters of the family. As a result, the social relations that shape married women’s lives throughout Yorùbáland reflect important aspects of the institution of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*.

Research exploring the role of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* addresses important questions in the literature on Yorùbá women, and family and gender relations more generally. Historically it reflects the importance of marriage and reproduction for women, but also the significance of polygyny for male success and achievement. Sudarkasa comments that, “African extended families, which are the normal co-residential form of family in indigenous pre-colonial African societies, are built around consanguineal relationships” (Sudarkasa 1986:97). While this dissertation emphasizes that Yorùbá families are not limited to consanguineal

relationships, the importance of a core group related by descent for the Yorùbá compound system illustrates this point. However, achievement rested on the ability of a compound leader to draw in additional people, and one way of doing this was by marriage, i.e. the extension of the family through affinal bonds. In the past, polygamy was an advantage for those (often older) men who could afford it because in addition to increasing the size of a family through bearing children, all wives would work, either in the household and on the farm, to feed the growing family and to expand its control over cultivated land (Caldwell et al 1991:234-235). This logic meant that many Yorùbá speakers believed that the number of wives determined the wealth and influence of a man and his family. A man with many wives could have a large family under his control, and with a large compound he would be able to play a leading role in town politics and become famous.

Describing compounds from the female point of view, Pearce defines an extended lineage compound as a place where a woman lives with her husband's parents, his siblings and their wives, as well as co-wives of her husband, and which is controlled by the older members of the patrilineage, both male and female (Pearce 1995:198). Oftentimes, parents would pressure their male children to have more than one wife, simply in order to have many children (or grandchildren), which were seen as the basis for wealth and influence. Thus compounds with many male descendants could include over a hundred wives or *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*, which form a group with a distinct social identity within the compound. Especially in northern Yorùbáland, which is the location of the research for this dissertation, there are still some very large functioning compounds, and the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* often play important social roles during ceremonies such as burials, marriages or even festivals to provide entertainment and to give moral or financial support to their marital compound.

In the compound, the women who have married into the family, irrespective of whether they were in monogamous or polygamous marriages, may be addressed as 'our wife' by all

relatives on their husband's side, including women. This address does not imply a sexual relationship of any kind, and it does not suggest that female members of a Yorùbá lineage are comparable to the 'female husbands' described by Amadiume for Igbo society. What Amadiume describes is a form of marriage in which daughters can (or could) act as social sons for their lineages by marrying other women, whose children were then considered their offspring in the male line (Amadiume 1987). In Yorùbá compounds, the address of a wife that has married into a compound as 'our wife' by male and female members (by birth) of that compound simply acknowledges the fact that she is a 'wife of the compound'. Her rights and duties within the compound are shaped by the fact that she belongs by marriage rather than descent.

The difference between women who belong to the compound by descent and those who belong to it by marriage illustrates the complex way in which gender intersects with seniority within Yorùbáland. Scholars have disagreed over the way in which women's social seniority is or was attained. Crucially, Oyewumi (1997, 1998, 2002) has suggested that in the past, individuals were distinguished from each other by biological age alone, with older women always senior to younger men. According to her, presently existing gender differences were only a colonial introduction to Yorùbá society. Oyewumi is right that the importance of seniority by age among siblings is often independent of gender. However, as Peel (2002) has pointed out, the importance of parenthood and the patrilocal nature of marriage meant that women were nonetheless disadvantaged in attaining seniority after marriage, because a new wife's seniority in her husband's compound was reckoned by the day she joined it. As a result, a wife's age within her marital compound depends on the date of her marriage – she is

considered younger than the baby who was born on the day before her wedding (Fadipe, 1970:14). As a result, the distinction between those women who belong to a compound by birth and those who belong due to marriage is reflected in real differences in authority.² This is also illustrated by the fact that daughters and wives of the compound form distinct groups within the compound.

As fellow wives of a compound, or co-wives, women of different backgrounds, and indeed sometimes different ethnicities, form a group that is tasked with supporting the compound in various ways, including the provision of manual and emotional labour and the birth and raising of children. Ideally, the wives of a compound are expected to share such tasks in ways that benefit the compound's cohesion, for example by emphasizing the shared paternal roots of the compound's children rather than their diverse maternal origins. For this activity they are recognized and rewarded.

This ideal form of wifely behaviour is however threatened by rivalry and competition between wives, and especially between wives married to the same husband. In large compounds, the compliance of individual wives with such values, and the general sense that wives must contribute to the greatness and cohesion of a compound, is ensured by the corporate organization of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* under one or several leaders from among them.

But despite the importance of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* for the social lives of Yorùbá compounds, and, given the importance of marriage and reproduction (the social experiences of most adult women), studies of this group are extremely scarce. Akintoye recognizes the importance of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* with regard to important decisions on matters such as weddings, and in

² For a further discussion of the intersection between gender, marriage and seniority, see Matory 1974; Sudarkasa 1986; Desola 2001; Fisher 2001.

some festivals, but although he ascertained that women may play leadership roles in the compound, he refers to the group only in passing and does not give details of the types of leadership provided by female descendants or the compound wives (Akintoye 2010:128). In contrast, Fadipe notes that the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* are a recognized group of people to which admission is by marriage into the compound. He also comments on the women's mechanisms for gaining a footing in their husband's compound (Fadipe, 1970:116). However, he does not examine the hierarchies and activities of that group in greater detail. Karin Barber has pointed out that little attention has been paid to women's performance in the considerable body of academic work on Yorùbá oral literature (Barber, 1991:12).

Overall, it seems as if the activities and the cultural relevance of wives in their husband's compounds have been taken for granted. This overlooks the fact that as wives, Yorùbá women make important contributions to their husband's compound or family, both as individuals and through the collective agency and power of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*. However, it should be noted that the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* exist as a closely organized group primarily in the rural areas. As urban living conditions encourage life in smaller sections or even in nuclear families, some *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* in the urban centres do not come together as a group often, and some families' wives may only have a superficial relationship with each other. Even so, during major family events, such as naming ceremonies, weddings and especially funerals, the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* of urbanised families are usually responsible for aspects of the celebration as a group. Thus the lives of women even in very Westernised families continue to be shaped by the historical roles of *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*.

In order to understand the particular role played by the wives of a family in its affairs, it is therefore pertinent to explore the role of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* in the setting of one of southwest Nigeria's smaller and medium-sized towns, where compound life is still the dominant form of residential and political organisation. Research in a smaller town can offer a clear insight into

ideas about women, gender, and wifely roles that remain widely shared even if they are not practiced as openly or to the same degree. This thesis focuses on the small town of Òyán in Òsun State, Nigeria, the public life of which remains dominated by its large compounds. As I have family ties to Òyán through marriage myself, my belonging enabled me to draw on existing networks of trust and shared experiences in order to gather observations and experiences. Despite the growing importance of Christianity and Islam in Òyán, traditional practices and celebrations associated with the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* remain widely accepted, enabling me to discuss some practices openly with my interlocutors which might be kept from outsiders in more westernised localities.

Overall, my research in Òyán meant that I could observe and participate in the activities of *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* as a group on an everyday basis. I had good access to local debates and practices, as well as material that further illuminated my research topic, such as video recordings. However, my positionality also meant that I was not as much at liberty as I originally thought to present my interlocutors in this thesis, because they are also relatives, family friends and, last but not least, personal friends. I therefore draw on my data in a mostly indirect way unless I have explicit permission to use material directly.

While the practices surrounding the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* vary between urbanised areas and smaller towns, and from one region of Yorùbáland to another, the findings from Òyán will illustrate important practices and attitudes concerning women that are shared throughout Yorùbáland. Erinoshó argues that despite civilization and industrialization, the basic functions of the family unit within the Yorùbá social structure have not been altered. Extended family ties are still strong today. The family compound still retains its importance for rituals and various social activities among its members, and loyalty to kin has not disappeared (Erinoshó, 1978:5). This is evident in Òyán, the town under study, where many nuclear families come together as a compound on special occasions.

Based on research in Òyán, as well as a careful reading of existing literature, this dissertation will also address the question of women's belonging. It has been argued that women's agency is primarily shaped by their membership of their own patrilineages, implying that their activities as wives and mothers are not relevant to their success. At the same time, it has been implied that women are subsumed into the identity of their marital compounds, arguments which are discussed in more detail below. This dissertation will illustrate that unlike men, (married) women belong to two compounds – once as daughters and once as wives. It is as wives that women make many important, and indeed fundamental, contributions to their husbands' compounds.

The dissertation is divided into six chapters, which explore following topics:

What roles are played by women in the political and social structure of Òyán?

What are the gendered roles of Yorùbá women and especially wives?

In what ways do Yorùbá women experience marriage?

What are the roles of the compound women (*Olóbìnrin-Ilé*)?

1.2 Research Approach and Methodology

In addition to a close engagement with the relevant literature, this thesis is based on qualitative ethnographic research in Òyán, where I spent three months doing field work. Ethnographic methodologies vary and some ethnologists advocate the use of structural observation schedules by which one could observe behaviors or cultural activities for the purpose of later statistical analysis (Leedy & Ormrod 2000:147). This did not work in the context of a small Yorùbá town, because it would have been rude for me to withdraw from social activities according to my own schedule. Instead of following my own schedule, I

participated in activities whenever I was called or invited by the usually senior women who supported my research by sharing their thoughts and experiences with me.

A commitment to participation and the respect of local female hierarchies meant that I had to be available when others were calling on me. While many people appreciated the importance of my research on married women, the nature of my fieldwork meant that my own status during fieldwork was shaped by my own achievements as a wife to my husband's family – and as a mother to his children – rather than my own academic achievements or ambitions. As a result, I was not always able to ask all the questions I would have liked to ask, because it was difficult for me to challenge some of my social seniors. Indeed, under their control I had little privacy and a number of duties, which meant that I was not always able to take field notes with the degree of detail I might have liked. But at the same time, I was able to observe, and draw my own conclusions on, practices which would not have been obvious to, or even shared with, a cultural or social outsider.

In addition to my participant observation in the life of married women in Ọyán I carried out formal interviews and focus group discussions with wives and daughters at nine of Ọyán's 72 compounds.³ All of my interviews were carried out in Yorùbá, both among older and younger women. Apart from the fact that there are often no directly appropriate terms in English for the activities discussed here, most of my informants had a low degree of education, as one would expect in a small Nigerian town, and thus did not speak (much) English. While there were a few women who were only literate to the degree of writing their names, most of my

³ Focus group discussions are group interviews in which a moderator guides the interview while a small group discusses the topics that the interviewer raises. The comments of the participants during discussion are the essential data for a focus group. There can be 6-8 participants who come from similar backgrounds (Morgan, 1998:1-2).

interlocutors had either completed primary school or junior secondary school and could read or write, if sometimes only to the degree that would support their economic activities. While most young women, and especially those with small children, were primarily housewives who depended on their husbands' incomes, many older women were established traders.

The majority of the women with whom I interacted were indigenes of Òyán, while some were from other Yorùbá towns and cities. I particularly encouraged those women who were natives of Òyán, and who could therefore maintain close relations with their families of birth, to relate their experiences in their affinal compounds to that of their patrilineages. While my fieldwork and interviews were very illuminative, I did experience a few problems. One was that many people who were known to be versed in the oral tradition of both the town and the wives' groups were too old to be interviewed in any formal way. Whenever I was lucky enough to interact with someone in that category, I simply tried to learn as much as I could from a few small exchanges and close observation of their language and expressions, and to note it in my field diary later.

Another problem was that I was aware that my own relative seniority at the time of the fieldwork might have intimidated younger women. I tried to encourage all informants and respondents to express their views freely. However, due to the importance of respect for seniority in Yorùbá culture, some of the younger women might not have been able to express themselves in public or they might not have felt free to reveal the truth or argue out a point with an older person. Sometimes such embarrassments could be resolved in private conversations or individual interviews, but it is still possible that not all my young respondents were comfortable enough with me not to hold back. In such delicate interview situations I usually did not record conversations and simply added my insights and reflections to my field notes later.

All interviews and focus group discussions covered the same topics, though the nature of the interview varied depending on the seniority or personality of the interviewee. In all interviews I asked for my interlocutors' personal background information, even if I felt I knew it, because it was important to me to see how my respondents defined themselves. I encouraged all female respondents to tell me both about the nature of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* in their husbands' families and to reflect on their experiences as wives and member of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*. When discussing abstract rules and ideas, I also always asked for an example of how such rules and ideas were enforced, and of whether they had ever been violated.

Many of my interview partners agreed to have their interviews recorded with an MP3 recorder, and recorded interviews were later transcribed and translated into English. With the relevant permissions I also recorded a good number of social events and outings that involved the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* of various compounds, and transcribed and translated aspects of these events as well.

Another way in which I collected fieldwork materials was the watching and copying of existing cassettes, DVDs and CDs on which people had recorded activities of the town's *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*. Most families record the big events and celebrations at which the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* perform, and watching such recording together with other women was often both informative, as I learnt from their comments, and enjoyable, as they involved songs and happy memories. Where I was allowed to copy such recordings for the purposes of this study, I could also make a note of practices or songs that I would not have encountered otherwise, and often I was able to obtain explanations from the original owners of the recording. This was particularly useful as part of my research period fell into a period in which social activities were limited (see below).

In order to ensure that my interpretation of the practices of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* in Òyán were not skewed by my own more Westernised life style and educational ambitions, I identified a confidante among my respondents who had a strong interest in intellectual engagement. In order to check and reflect on my own ideas and prejudices, I discussed many of my findings and insights with her. Considering her as a key informant as well as a fellow intellectual, I accepted her corrections of my views on several occasions. However, I did not do so on all occasions she disagreed with me, and I also made sure not to rely on her comments and views exclusively. Both my confidante and those women who agreed to formal interviews were given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

The timing of the fieldwork was a small problem because it included the Muslim fasting period of Ramadan. During Ramadan some women (and men) were less willing to speak to me than normally because they were tired from fasting or because they felt that Ramadan was not the time to discuss some of the traditional practices I was interested in. Also, I was unable to interview the *Oba*, or traditional ruler, of the town because he had travelled to Saudi Arabia to observe his fasting there. When he came back, his first wife had died, and he remained unavailable for interview as he observed a mourning period for her.

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

This study is sub-divided into six chapters. The present Chapter One gives a brief introduction to the study and explains the methods and approaches that were adopted for this research.

Chapter Two introduces the reader to the town of Òyán, located in the northern part of Òsun State. After a short historical overview, this chapter examines the political structures of the

town, which are relevant for most Yorùbá settlements outside of the mega-cities of Lagos and Ibadan, in so far as they are relevant to this thesis.

Chapter Three discusses various views about women, that is, the gender ideologies predominant in Yorùbá society. A review of the social status of women in Yorùbá society, especially in relation to marriage and religion, will shed light on their roles. While most of the debate has focused on the possibilities for women to hold positions of power, many aspects of the debate also support the notion that women belong to both their natal and their marital compounds.

Chapter Four will report on the married women in Yorùbá household, their organization and relationships with one another. The chapter will also focus on the importance of the compound wives or *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* in women's marital lives and the overall importance of wifely discipline, especially in the case of physical conflict between co-wives. This is important to enable the wives to support and celebrate their husbands' families.

Chapter Five will focus on detailed activities of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*, their participation in ceremonies, their role as entertainers and the organization of their meetings. The leadership will be discussed in relation to their activities, including both performances in and outside their compound and the maintenance of discipline. The effect of contemporary social change on this group will also be examined in order to determine how it has affected the household women as an institution.

Chapter Six offers a short conclusion that reiterates the importance of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*, and its implications for the belonging of women. The chapter also makes a few recommendations for future research.

After the Bibliography, a series of Appendices contains songs which could not be included in the main thesis because they were too long.

2 Chapter Two: The political and social structures of Òyán

Throughout southwestern Nigeria, Yorùbá-speakers share an essentially urban form of settlement which is ruled by a king, or *Ọba*, who rules in close interaction with other local leaders, often chiefs installed by him. Lloyd suggests that while Yorùbá people are divided into many sub-groups, they nonetheless share a wide range of practices, including a mutually intelligible language, the names of deities, titles of chiefs and their installation ceremonies, political structures and even individuals' names (Lloyd 1955:235).

Indeed, Yorùbá people share similar beliefs and practices, such as greetings, respect for seniors, modes of dressing, naming ceremonies, marriages, burials and so on. The origin and behaviour of many things in their environment and daily life are often explained through myth (Oso 1977: 367). This chapter will introduce us to those practices and beliefs that are relevant to marriage and marital life. Like in other societies, marriage reflects wider social practices and institutions, and the lives of married women – the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* that are the focus of this thesis – unfold not in privacy but in close engagement with these structures.

2.1 An introduction to Òyán

Òyán is one of the biggest towns in Odo-Otin Local Government Area of Òsun State. It is located at a distance of roughly 50 kilometers from Osogbo, the state capital, and it is surrounded by many villages within and outside the state. Òyán is also clearly identified as a Yorùbá town. While there are some Yorùbá towns in Benin and Togo, the majority of the Yorùbá people lives in the south-western part of Nigeria (Bascom 1951:490; Lloyd 1955:235; Mabogunje 1962:56; Eades 1980: 1; Watts 1983:683; Smith 1988:3).

However, it is perhaps pertinent here to explain that the Yorùbá identity is the result of a particular historical development. Constituted by a wide range of urban-based kingdoms and alliances, including the powerful Oyo Empire, all Yorùbá-speakers share similar social and economic institutions, but they are not likely to have ever been politically united. The modern Yorùbá identity is a result of cultural and political processes of the late 19th and 20th century.

In fact, there are some controversies over the origin of the word “Yorùbá” for reference to all speakers of the language (Eades 1980; Abimbola 2006; Adegoke 2005, Law 1976). Eades (1980: 6-7, citing Law 1977:5) opines that the word “Yorùbá” was introduced by the missionaries and linguists in the middle of 19th century to refer to the whole area where people speak Yoruba. According to Abimbola (2006: 30) the word “Yorùbá” today refers to the people, their culture, their languages and their religion. However, the fact remains that the word “Yorùbá” can be used both to describe the people, their language and their religion as a whole, but also to differentiate between those who were part of the Oyo Empire and those who were not.⁴

One belief widely shared among Yorùbá-speakers today is the centrality of Ile-Ife, a historically important Yoruba town. It is often believed to have been the first town, from which other towns were formed as colonies. However, some Yorùbá groups, such as the Ijebus, claim that they originated from other places than Ile-Ife.⁵ This illustrates that existing myths of origin are not entirely consistent, and that ideas about Yorùbá origins and identity remain contested (Akintoye 2010:3).

⁴ It is believed by some communities (in Òyó) that those that came from Òyó are the ‘real’ Yorùbá who can claim descent from Òdùduwà, and that other sub-groups are inferior to them.

⁵ The Ijèbú people believed that they had an ancestor who was called ALÁRÈ. He was a neighbour to ÒDÙDUWÀ, Òdùduwà was the first to settle at Ile-Ife, then Alare left Wadai through the wilderness of Nubia to Ile-Ife. See Onanuga (1981:3).

Like many Yorùbá settlements, Òyán was founded by a cultural hero linked to Ile-Ife. There are various accounts of the origin of Òyán which I cannot explore here.⁶ However, there is an agreement on the following facts: Òyán's founder, Epe, was one of the sons of Òdùduwà, recognized in myth as the legendary father of the Yorùbás in most parts of Yorùbáland. Epe was a prince who had migrated from the town of Ile-Ife, where Òdùduwà reigned, to Òyán. The name of the town Òyán was derived from the nickname given to Epe, who was also called Òyánnu, meaning someone who is prone to hunger (Adegoke, 2005:13).

The descendants of Epe, the town's founder, constitute the royal family. It is from the members of the royal family that the rulers, or *Obas*, of the town are chosen. Before the arrival of colonial rule, Òyán's traditional ruler was regarded as the representative of God on earth and the executive of his domain, although he had to rule with the consent of the *Ìgbimó*, or council of chiefs. Peter Lloyd argues that in the past, *Obas* did not appear to their people frequently (Lloyd 1960:221). Yorùbá *Obas* only left the palace during the town festival that took place once a year. Because justice was executed by the *Oba* or in his name, it was said that whoever sees the king twice must be a criminal. According to Lloyd, the hidden nature of *Obaship* illustrates its power and sacredness.⁷

But the power of the *Oba* is also shaped by its interaction with, and support of, other families within the town, who are settled together in large compounds. The *Oba*'s chiefs, or advisers, were usually drawn from the compound system. The founding father of Òyán, Epe, installed the leaders of some of the immigrants who joined the town later as chiefs. He also ensured

⁶ For more information see Adegoke 2005. Òyán: The domain of Epe.

⁷ Lloyd also confirms the changing roles of the king from having important ritual functions to equating him with chiefs whose roles are primarily legislative. However, it should be noted Lloyd failed to differentiate between posts. All kings in Yorùbáland have a highly specific role to play which cannot be taken or swapped to another. Those kings who have important ritual functions still exist.

that the compounds of all the chiefs so installed were very close to his own compound.⁸ Many later immigrants came to Òyán during the Fulani invasion of the Igbomina and Offa areas of Yorùbáland in the 1820s, which forced people from these areas to flee to Òyán in order to escape conflict. As in their hometowns, the immigrants settled in compounds. The descendants of those migrants – as well as of course those of Òyán’s earlier settlers – still refer to their families as being originally from Ile-Ife, Ekitiland, Ijebuland, Oyo and Igbominaland. Some of them became influential and hold important chieftaincy titles.

Each of Òyán’s family compounds is made up of family houses that belong to brothers, uncles and (paternal) cousins. Lloyd (1974:30) explains that the core descent groups that make up the compounds are the antithesis of the nuclear family upon which industrial society is often based. As pointed out above, among the Yorùbá, descent is predominately agnatic, i.e. through the father (Comhaire-Sylvain 1950:234). But that does not necessarily mean that women are only members of the compounds of their birth: as wives, women are important members of their marital compounds.

Many compounds in Òyán have more than a hundred (or several hundred) members. Today the town has 72 compounds, each of which has its own land and a distinct cognomen or appellation. Many compounds hold a chieftaincy title. The holder of such a title is installed by the ruler and expected to advise him. In this way, the *Oba* has access to the important socio-political institutions of his town, and the town’s important families/ compounds share in local decision-making.

⁸ See Adegoke, 2005: 22

2.2 Ọ̀yán's compound structure

Sudarkasa (1986:95) observes three categories of kin groups in West Africa, namely corporate unilateral descent group or lineages; domiciled extended families made up of certain lineage members, their spouses and dependent children; and conjugally based family units which are subdivisions of the extended family and within which procreation takes place and primary responsibilities for socialization are held. Oyewumi (1997:81) states that among Yorùbá, it is the lineage that was regarded as the family. The lineage is a consanguinally-based family system built around men and women descended from the same ancestor. In Ọ̀yán as in other Yorùbá towns, lineages shaped by paternal descent are at the core of the compound system. However, as marriage was exogamous, no compound could reproduce itself by relying on its core lineage or lineages. Upon marriage, couples did therefore not normally establish separate households, but joined the compound of either the groom.

But if the Yorùbá concept of family is shaped by the descent group or lineage, family is also defined by the importance of shared residence and activity within the compound (Barber 1990: 146). Paternally related husbands and their wives were not the only adults living in the compound, and other related adults, distant relatives and even acquaintances with a challenging life situation might live with them. Extended families were often very large (Kolade 1999). Often a lineage outgrew its compound in a few generations (Marris 1961:13), or rifts between compound members undermined the compound. In that case a new compound was usually founded by one or two sections of the family, who would usually settle nearby.

Traditional compounds are made up of long chains of rooms, often between thirty and forty, which are arranged around a central courtyard or courtyards. Lloyd, citing Stone, describes a Yorùbá compound in the following way:

... a compound is an enclosed space (generally in the form of a square) bounded by a wall about seven feet high, there is but one entrance to this enclosed space...., against this wall, the rooms are built... the compound of the chiefs are very large sometimes covering several acres of ground' (Lloyd 1955:236).

This observation is slightly flawed as in most compounds, only the main entrance is visible to visitors, but there are always two or more entrances known to the inhabitants who serve as a way of escape when enemies invade. This form of settlement clearly reflects the widespread violence of the 19th century, but it also points to the importance of living together as a basis of for the production of a corporate identity. The fact that the residents of a compound often had a hereditary occupation or specialization (LeVine, Klein, & Owen 1967:22) also points to the importance of shared practice in the constitution of identity.

Like the *Oba*, the head of a compound, or *Baálé*, had wide disciplinary responsibilities. The *Baálé* was usually the compound's oldest male. Disrespect to elders, theft, disturbing the peace or sexual impropriety were usually punishable by flogging and warnings against recurrence (Fadipe 1970, 108-109). Among the women, there was a partly parallel administration. The *Ìyáálé*, the oldest wife married into the compound, adjudicated women's crimes and misdemeanors. However, if a case was beyond her authority, she reported to the *Baálé*. A complex system of further authorities ensured that any problem that could not be resolved successfully was eventually reported to the *Oba*'s palace.⁹

⁹ Palace meetings are held on scheduled dates and on an emergency basis. On a meeting day, all the chiefs would assemble in the *Èsà*'s palace to first have a preliminary meeting and draw up their agenda for the palace meeting; they would all proceed to the *Oba*'s palace. The meeting usually centres on [the] settlement of family, communal and land disputes; divorce and marital cases.

Historically, polygamy is closely linked to compound life. A large number of wives would be able both to bear children and work hard, thus increasing the numbers of a patrilineage. A man with many wives and children would be able to preside over a powerful section of his compound, and would empower his compound to play an important role in town politics. As a result, wives were valued both as workers who contributed to the compound's productivity and as bearers of children who increased the compound's size.

2.3 Changes to compound life today

The advent of colonial rule and especially the growing influence of Christianity and Islam has led to significant social change (Adegoke, 2005:3). For example, it has affected the choice of the ruler in Òyán because it has become widely accepted to install a literate or learned person as a town's *Oba*. This is in contrast to earlier practices when people were installed because they had been selected by their deities or the local *Ifá* oracle. The current ruler, *Oba* Kilani Adekeye from *Elémọ* Ruling house, ascended the throne in 1999 as the 24th *Olóyan*. The ongoing importance of marriage for *Obaship* is illustrated by the fact that the *Oba* can be represented at any occasion by his wife, who must however be accompanied by his *Ìkólàbà*¹⁰ and one of his chiefs or accompanied by the staff of office.

Compound life has also changed. In Òyán, there are still a sizeable number of old compounds that are surrounded by a wall. It is interesting to see that in some cases, modern houses are also being built in form of old traditional compounds albeit with additional modern facilities. No matter how modernized (or not), the compound is the place where everybody will gather during celebrations. Even if a person has his/ her own personal house; s/he will go to his

¹⁰ This refers to the *Oba*'s attendant.

family compound with his family member for a whole day or more if there is something to celebrate.

However, not all members of a family live in its compound today. Adegoke (2005:70) notes that the housing custom of Òyán town is typical of any other ancient Yorùbá town, where brothers and sometimes uncles come together to build a single house with many rooms to house their families jointly. Some descendants of the town's old compounds have built houses elsewhere in the town in order to live a more nuclear family life or to be further away from family interference. If in the past, paternal relations used to build their houses in the same area, nowadays the trend is for individuals to build their houses in different parts of the town. Other members of the town's compounds have left Òyán for towns and cities where they could pursue their education more successfully. However, it should be noted that the physical distance between family members often has little or no effect on family ties in the long run.

Usually, even those 'outside' members of the compounds share in the resources controlled by the extended families, and in the practices associated with the merging of important family occasions. Also, if a family no longer meets at its compound, the house of the oldest or most respected family member stands as a place of meeting to deliberate upon issues concerning their family's welfare, landed property and so on. Often successful business or educated people suddenly find themselves in this position of a de-facto head of compound.

Similarly, marriage continues to be shaped by the importance of extended kinship ties even in modern settings. This is expressed in the notion that *ìyàwó burúkú se é fẹ́, ana burúkú ni ò dára*, meaning "one can marry a bad wife but it is not good to have a bad in-laws". This indicates the mutual involvement of the spouses' families after marriage. In-laws and indeed the whole family have a role to play in offering advice and guidance to both spouses

whenever there are conflicts or quarrels, and they are also expected to felicitate and assist each other. Traditional marriage involves the union of two families rather than two individuals (Ware 1979:191).

For this reason, even in urban environments, parents' involvement in most marriages exists in a manner very similar to the past. Thus, the couple may now have the privilege of choosing whom to marry rather than having to marry a spouse chosen for them by their parents. But it is still compulsory for the parents to give their consent and blessing to their wards before marriage, and also to stand as a caution to both husband and wife. That is why some families do not hand over their daughters to the husband but only to the family: it is still the family that marries the wife for their son.

In his study on the practice of polygyny in Ife Division, Driesen (1972:54) looked at the number of family heads and their wives over two periods and concluded that polygyny had also declined, both in absolute proportion and in degree. This is confirmed by an even greater decline of the practice in more recent decades, especially in urban environments, where the cost of children limits their number.

Nonetheless, polygyny continues to exist.¹¹ For a man, the desire to avoid extra-marital affairs might precipitate him to look for a second wife. This might be due to different types of sexual abstinence within the marriage that are considered to be mandatory in Yorùbá culture (Caldwell et al. 1977, 1991; Ademola et al. 1993; Adeokun, 1982; Bamikale, 2010). For

¹¹ According to Caldwell et al (1991), there are some inherent problems of polygyny in Yorùbá culture as it allows more polygynous married women in the rural area to have sexual relations outside their marriage more easily than monogamous married women. There are various reasons attached to this behaviour which cannot be expatiated upon here, because it is not directly related to the topic in focus. This is corroborated by Ajibade (2005:108) who argues that nuptial songs show that the Yorùbá women are not enjoying the polygamous institution, but that they just accept it as part of their culture.

example, a man is not expected to have sexual relation with his wife during pregnancy and until the child is weaned.

Sometimes polygamous arrangements arise because the first wife is childless. It is sometimes believed that when the husband marries another wife who starts having children the senior wife may be blessed with children too, hence the saying, *orí ọmọ ní ń p'ọmọ wáyé* – one child may bring luck to have another. Sometimes the practice works, and when the second wife falls pregnant the senior wife gets pregnant too.

In other cases, polygyny may be the result of parental pressure especially by the man's mother. When a woman has only one child and it is a son, the belief is that the son should marry and have as many children as possible in order to fill the gap of not having siblings. Apart from such personal concerns, some men still consider a multiplicity of wives as a symbol of wealth and status. The historical prestige associated with a larger number of wives and children is so highly valued among some people that it is often sufficient to overcome even the strictest religious admonitions.

Finally, it is also not uncommon for a man to take another wife in old age, especially when all the children from an earlier marriage are married and in need of the help of their mother in child care. A wife's frequent absence may make a man lonely, and the children, wife or the man himself will look for a young lady to be his companion.

Even so, marriage is not taken lightly because people believe that when one marries a bad wife, she might be dangerous not only to the person involved but to the whole family. This is expressed in the adage, *“tí ará ilé ẹni bá ń jẹ kòkòrò kí kòkòrò, ẹrẹ huru re ò ní jẹ ará ilé ó sùn”*, meaning “if one's family member eats a bad insect, the disturbance [arising from his or her digestion problems] will not allow others to sleep”.

Irrespective of the form of marriage practiced, the ongoing importance of family and kinship ties is reflected in the proverb, “*Òré kítíkítí, iyèkan kàtàkàtà, ojó t’órè é kítíkítí bá bàjé tán, iyèkan kàtàkàtà ní í kù*”, meaning “Close friends, scattered family, when close friendship (breaks), a person will be left with the scattered family”. This proverb is meant to encourage good relationships among members of the same family by implying that unlike friendship, family ties do not break. If one privileges friendship at the expense of family ties, one may be left with very little.

Family members are enjoined to live and work together in unity. Co-operation and family membership are closely linked to each other. This is expressed in another saying, “*Okùn ebí yí*”, “family ties are hard”. Because a lazy or dishonest child will be seen to reflect badly on her or his parents, indolence and laziness are discouraged first within the family. Older members direct individual behaviour and interaction by outlining the rights and obligations of every member. But they are also supposed to live a life that is worthy of emulation so that at least some of the younger ones are likely to copy them.

3 Chapter Three: Discussing Gender among the Yorùbá

This chapter looks at relevant debates about gender in Yorùbá society in order to draw out the beliefs and practices that shape the experiences of women. In Yorùbá culture a woman can occupy different and even contradictory positions at the same time, and for the duration of women's married lives, they both remain daughters of their own compounds of patrilineages and act as wives (and mothers) in their marital compounds and patrilineages. The importance of women's dual identities, and dual forms of belonging, is illustrated by a short preview on my field work in Òyán at the end of the chapter.

3.1 Views on women in Yorùbá society

Familusi (2012: 299-313) argues that like many other African societies, Yorùbá society is essentially patriarchal. Women are usually relegated to the background, and socially, politically, economically and religiously men tend to dominate decision-making. Oduyoye (2001:3) assumes that African culture is replete with language that enables the community to diminish the humanity of women, while Akintunde (1999:74) asserts that African culture has been a long tale of discrimination and injustices to women. Familusi (2012:302) explains that there are some Yorùbá proverbs that are used to portray women as unimportant and immoral.

However, much more ambivalently, Daramola (2007) notes that when it comes to the realm of spiritual powers women are regarded and esteemed as the owners of the world, the "*iyá alaye*". This is because of the belief that women possess superior clairvoyant and spiritual powers, and obligations, to men. For this reason Ajibade (2005:99, 103) suggests that although Yorùbá society is patriarchal, women have extremely important roles to play. He argues that Yorùbá men and women are not seen as opposites, but as complementing each other.

Abimbola (1975: 400) examines the status of women in the *Ifá* literary corpus and notes that woman often symbolize character. In Yorùbá folklore, according to him, women represent the opposite poles of emotional involvement. They are symbols of love, care, devotion, tenderness and beauty. At the same time, they are, especially as witches, the symbols of wickedness, callousness, deceit and disloyalty. Sometimes, women may be regarded as witches and difficult to deal with. This depiction suggests that both the positive and the negative aspects of female power are rooted in intimate relationships.

Makinde (2004:165) observes that motherhood carries the highest value among the Yorùbá people, which is reflected in the proverb which describes mothers as very precious; “*iyá ni wúrà*”, mother is gold.¹² He also notes that women are considered to be very important in Yorùbá culture because the preservation of individual patrilineages and compounds depends on them. Because of their power to produce children (for others), women are regarded as the most valuable gift any man or his extended family can receive. This is confirmed in the saying that “*eni tí ó fún ni lómọ ti parí oore*”, i.e. he/she who gives one his/her child as wife has given the best gift.

Makinde explains this further that even the mother of a male child believes that a successful male life cannot really start until her son has a wife or wives. It is generally believed that a man must take care of his character the same way he takes care of his wife. To the Yorùbá, the equivalence is that a man’s good character brings success in life, just as success rewards a man who treats his wife or wives with kindness and affection. Indeed, a man without a wife cannot be made king or occupy a position of religious leadership in the society. This is

¹² The second line of this proverb, ‘*baba ni díjí*’, father is a mirror, ostensibly refers to the fact that children are primarily seen as descendants of their fathers, from whom they will inherit most traits.

reflected in a Yorùbá adage that says “*Àpónlé ò sí fún Ọba tí ò l’Ólori*” meaning there is no respect or honour for a king without a wife.

In traditional Yorùbá society, women are seen in every aspect of life. While wives are perceived to elevate the status of a man, female roles of authority are associated with motherhood. In the Yorùbá traditional political sphere, women acted as “Iyalode”, the mother of the town, and “Iyalaje”, the mother of the market, because of their wealth, influence and wisdom. In traditional religious practice, a woman famous for her devotion to her deity, or *òrìṣà*, would be called “Iya Olorisa.”

However, especially when it comes to high office, the roles of wife and mother blend into one another. In her discussion of gender and colonialism in the Yorùbá kingdom of Kétu, Semley suggests that whether powerful women were primarily seen as mothers or wives often depended on context. As both offices were often entwined, for example as the wives of rulers became “public mothers”, the symbolic distinction became ambiguous in the 19th century (2011:49).

Overall, the association of motherhood with the generation above points to the importance of age in mediating gender relations (Isike 2012:21). Certainly older women, just like older men, are privileged over younger male or female members of society because status and recognition from others reflect age as well as gender. For this reason it is pertinent to explore what forms of age and seniority are open to Yorùbá women.

3.2 Gender and status in Yorùbá history

The position of Yorùbá women today remains shaped by the fact that gender relations in pre-colonial Yorùbá society were very different from those in Europe. A variety of traditions and historical sources suggests that before British rule, women had economic, political and ritual

agency in areas ranging from trade, agriculture and politics to religion and education. In the nineteenth century, women held greater domestic responsibilities than men, but they also expected to work, to earn money and to be responsible for their own finances irrespective of their marital status. In several pre-colonial Yorùbá polities, female *Obas* existed at some stage in the past, and women held a variety of high political offices (Denzer 1994:7-11).

While the gendered expectations embedded in the colonial and Christian (and Islamic) institutions that took hold during the twentieth century often disadvantaged them, many women maintained a high degree of personal agency throughout the colonial period. However, while their relative independence enabled women to support a wide range of organisations from churches to the independence movement, their relative disadvantage vis-à-vis men especially in the modern political realm is illustrated by their low numbers in elected office during the 1950s (MacIntosh 2009). The ambivalent position of women today has been discussed above.

This trajectory has generated lively debates about the importance of gender as a category of social difference in Yorùbá communities before colonial rule. Several authors have noted that the ascription of gender was creative and often subject to contextual multiplicity, in which compound and lineage identity played an important role in shaping notions of ‘husbandly’ or ‘wifely’ obligations. Importantly, and as pointed out in Chapter One, these ascriptions were primarily relational and not sexual. Thus, as sisters and aunts, all women were ‘husbands’ to the wives who had married into their lineages or compounds. But equally, within the Oyo Empire, men acting on behalf of the kingdom’s ruler, and supporting his power through their privileged trading activities, were called his ‘wives’. Illustrating the notion of husbandly authority and wifely subjugation and support in the realm of the spiritual, both male and female devotees of the deity *ẚàngó*, which possessed its followers and thus made them carry out its wishes, were (and are) called *ẚàngó*’s wives (Matory 1994a, 1994b).

Oyewumi draws on these historical facts to argue that gender in the sense in which it is used today was only introduced to Yorùbáland by European rule. She suggests that social difference in the pre-colonial period did not reflect biological sex but only seniority within a lineage or compound, with lineage insiders being designated “husbands” and those joining and supporting the lineage from outside being considered “wives”. Following her argument, women’s activities as wives and mothers in their husbands’ lineages were incidental: women attained power and influence primarily as daughters and descendants of their own patrilineages (Oyewumi 1997).

But while it is important to recognize that the categories of husband and wife complicate local notions of gender – and remain important to women’s agency – Oyewumi’s argument takes the malleability of gender too far (see also Matory 2003). There were, in almost all Yorùbá communities, important ritual practices from which women are largely excluded, such as the *Agemọ* celebration in Ijebu-Ode, the *Èlúkú* masquerade, and the *Orò* festival. Neither of these must be seen by women at pain of punishment or death. While the ritual importance of this exclusion also allowed women to challenge proceedings in dramatic ways (Nolte 2009:45-52), the important point here is the exclusion of women on the basis of their sex. Clearly biologically based notions of gender co-existed with those shaped by age and lineage identity.

3.3 Gender and marriage in in Yorùbá society

Despite the importance of individuals’ lineage or compound of origin, the overwhelming pressure on men and women to reproduce means that marriage was and is the norm and not

the exception for both men and women. However, marriage also complicates relations of seniority otherwise shaped by biological age.¹³ Respect is one of the cultural values in Yorùbá society and it is expedient to respect one's senior even if it is by a minute. The saying that “*Ó mu omi ayé sáájú ẹ*”, meaning “S/he drank the earthly water before you” is usually enough argument to comply. But as explained earlier, in marriage, the rule is that seniority in the compound is determined by the date of joining the family, not by the actual age. Thus the woman assumes a very low status among members of her husband's extended family which can only be elevated by time and through her reproductive capacity (Jegede and Odumosu, 2003:66). Being junior even to a child born the day before her marriage, a wife had and has no right to discipline or send any of her husband's younger siblings on errands.

As a woman's children normally belong to their father's lineage, a married woman has to stay in her husband's family (or even compound) to maintain close relations with them. Today as in the past, motherhood – one of the most widely recognized ways of female self-realization – cannot normally be achieved without becoming a wife (see Peel 2002). But this also means that it women's wifely identities cannot be considered as incidental.

The importance of motherhood and, by extension, of being a wife to another lineage, is further illustrated by the institution of levirate marriage. To ensure that a woman would be able to stay with her young children – and confirming her belonging to her husband's family – wife inheritance by a brother was usually arranged for widows of reproductive age in the

¹³ The only exceptions to this are twins. This is indicated in the twins' customary names. The first twin is named *Táiwò*, meaning *Tọ ayé wò*, one who has a taste of the world, which indicates that he/she was sent to go first and have a taste of the world by the other twin. If the world is good, *Táiwò* will invite his brother/sister to come and join him/her. With this invitation his/her brother or sister, who is called *Kẹhìndé*, is then born. So even though *Kẹhìndé* is born later, the name means *Ọmọ Kẹhìndé gb'ẹgbọn*, the child that comes last to take the senior position.

past (Denzer 1994). While this practice is today rejected strongly by many urban and educated Yorùbá-speakers, it nonetheless continues to be practiced in some remote and rural towns of Yorùbáland. Even today, a wife who has a child or children and divorces or loses her husband will be expected to perform together with other family wives during any function or celebration.

Akintoye (2010:21) explains that when a woman is married into another lineage, she becomes a member of her husband's group, and she could never revert to membership of her father's group. According to her, a wife's body had to be buried in the compound of her husband's family. It is however not clear to what degree this applies to all of Yorùbáland as burial practices of women differ by region, and remain subject to negotiation. To support her case, Akintoye quotes the Yorùbá proverb that "after parents have given their daughter in marriage, the appropriate thing to do is to remove her favourite childhood seat from their home and burn it" (Akintoye 2010: 22).¹⁴ This is certainly widespread, and challenges Oyewumi's argument that women are primarily members of their patrilineage.

Also, women's status is almost always lower than that of their husbands. Akintoye (2010: 28) states that the head of the house is the husband while the wife submits to the authority of the husband. The same submission is also expected of women by Christianity and Islam. This seems to confirm the views of David Noble (2013:6) that;

Proponents of the concept of patriarchy emphasise continuity in history rather than change, to demonstrate the persistent power of men over women. Certainly female subordination is a recurring fact of human history ... within this overarching

¹⁴ The original proverb is: B'á a bá m'ómọ f'ókọ, à ní jó`òtà rẹ ni.

patriarchal pattern of gender relations, there have been significant variations of experience, variations that have shaped particular cultures and lives

Having reviewed the work of some writers on the status of women, Sudarkasa concludes that, some of the writers perceived women in African societies as “jural minors” for most of their lives, falling under the guardianship of their father and then later of their husband (1986: 91). This notion does not apply to Yorùbá women generally, but it is useful in relation to their husbands. The man is referred to as the head of the family whether he is capable of fulfilling his responsibilities or not. Nowadays many women are found in the position of bread winners or occupying a socio-political office higher than their husbands and they are nonetheless subject to their husbands’ authority because cultural and religious norms continue to privilege their husbands. In many, even wealthy and elderly woman who prefer to live independently of their husbands nonetheless build their houses in their husbands’ communities, both so as not to appear like a “divorced” woman and to ensure that, due to their behaviour, their children are not seen as strangers in their father’s house.

However, marriage also produces opportunities for women beyond childbearing. Barnes points out that as an outsider to her husbands’ community, a woman had an “automatic opportunity to act as a bridge between her husband’s community (or descent group) and her own” (1990:252). Barnes also provides examples of resourceful women who took advantage of the link between the two corporate groups to set up trade in the 18th century. In the 19th century, many powerful women in Yorùbáland also made their fortunes through trade networks initially or partly based on personal links (Denzer 1994:10-14). This form of opportunity is reflected today in the ongoing importance of trade for most Yorùbá women’s livelihoods.

In conclusion, as Yorùbá notions of gender and seniority shaped the possibilities of female agency, women were sometimes able to attain great power and recognition. While such power sometimes drew strongly on the privileges associated with women's natal lineages, it could also reflect their successful integration into, and membership of, their marital lineages. But as seniority itself was a reflection of gender, women as a group were rarely able to attain the same kinds of power as men.

That this still holds true today is illustrated by my research in Òyán. While my research focuses primarily on the role of women in their marital compounds rather than on their roles in society as a whole, the corporate organization of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*, which exists both in contrast and complementarity to the (male and female) family members by descent, illustrates that women's ability to draw on lineage support is both broadened and divided by their membership of two families.

3.4 Gender and religion in Yorùbá society

As indicated by the reference to the gendered practices associated with the deity *Şàngó*, gender is also closely interwoven with, and structured by, religious practice. As Olajubu points out, daughters took an active part in the prevailing religious practices in their natal compounds as well as their personal deity or *òrìşà* (2003: 32). In the past, devotion to an *òrìşà* was often inherited matrilocally, potentially challenging or subverting paternal lines of authority (Matory 1994b).

Numerous family histories explain the arrival of a new deity in their compound through marriage alliances, when a woman would move her *òrìşà* from her natal home to her marital compound. In some cases, the husband was even expected to take on the expenses of worship on behalf of his wife (Olajubu 2003: 32). Indeed, some men had to agree to be initiated into

Ifá divination after marriage to a woman from a particular family. But even without such prescriptions, popular, powerful and wealthy women, or even the wives of powerful men, often attracted other followers to their *òrìṣà*. The ability of women to stay true to their childhood deity certainly suggests their enduring link to their natal family.

Part of the social logic underlying this practice was the widespread understanding that it was a woman's duty to protect her husband and children. This was illustrated by their responsibility for the worship of the *orí*, or head, of their husbands and children (Olajubu 2003: 33). The head is understood as the seat of a person's destiny or essence, and indicates success or failure in life. Given the spiritual powers of a patrilineage's wives over its member's wellbeing, any compulsion in the area of religion would have been considered unwise. Even in urban environments, this attitude is today reflected in the relatively high degree of religious intermarriage.

At the same time, it is however expected that a woman supports the ritual and religious activities in her husband's compound or house, and that she ensures that his children are brought up in his, or his family's, religion. In the past, this might have included the worship of her husband's family's *òrìṣà*, and today it often also includes other religious obligations, such as help with the celebration of important festivals etc. This expectation of female spiritual support for her husband is reflected in many proverbs, including “*Èṣin ọkọ l'èsin ìyàwó*”, meaning “The husband's religion is the wife's religion.”

In response to this expectation, a Muslim wife fasting during Ramadan will nonetheless cook for her Christian husband during normal times, and she may even attend church with him if he has a role to play. A Muslim wife will participate in the celebration of her husband's family deity, and she may even cook pork if that is required (though she may refuse to eat it). Many wives are therefore familiar with the practices, texts and beliefs of more than one

spiritual or religious tradition, at least at a superficial level. Arising from their belonging to both their natal and their marital family, such women are not just links between families but between religions (Nolte and Akinjobi forthcoming).¹⁵

While most women (and men) these days are Muslims or Christians, many families nonetheless continue to worship the traditional deities with whom they are associated, at least during their major festivals, as it is often believed that such worship contributes to the overall wellbeing of the compound or lineage. As suggested above, married women are expected to support the worship and celebration of their husbands' deities.

Women are also more frequently (and sometimes irrespective of their formal religion) subject to possession than men. But such possession is rarely linked to specifically wifely concerns. Unlike in other parts of Africa, however, female spirit possession among the Yorùbá is not usually linked to the articulation of gendered grievances (see Lewis 1979). Instead, possession simply privileges women in “the articulation of the shared interests of extended, rural-based, and centrally important communities of men and women, rich and poor.” (Matory 1994b: 495). Reflecting this general pattern, the expectation would normally be that if a family deity takes possession of its worshippers, it chooses descendants, and especially daughters of the family.

But during my fieldwork it was confirmed to me on several occasions that married women can be possessed by their husband's family's deities. I also observed a burial ceremony which involved dancing, rituals, and praise singing for a deity, at the end of which a wife of the compound was possessed by the deity she had praised. I believe this is an indication that

¹⁵ I am grateful to Insa Nolte for sharing her research findings on this matter with me.

wives can also act as full spiritual members of their marital families, whose possession is associated with the articulation of spiritual truths linked to the family's wellbeing.

However, a wife's possession by her husband's family deity is perhaps much more directly linked to her role as a custodian of the family's oral texts. As wife, a woman who masters her husband's *oríkì* may often also master the *oríkì* of his lineage's deity. As she chants the deity's *oríkì*, she opens the channels of utterance through which powers flow between different kinds of beings (Barber 1990:227). In this way, she opens herself to possession by the deity. This implies that women are possessed also because of their acquisition of oral skills linked to the husbands' lineage. Illustrating the fluidity of family boundaries and the importance of oral texts in constituting them, this example also points to the importance and power ascribed to the oral skills of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*, discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

As suggested earlier, the possession of humans by a deity has been symbolically likened to the possession of women by their husbands by some observers (Matory 1994a, 1994b). One could argue that a woman who, along with her fellow *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*, helps her husband's family to celebrate the family's deity and participates actively in its worship may therefore become a 'wife' of her husband's family's deity just as she became a wife to his extended family.

However, the fact that such a possessed woman then speaks as if she was a descendant points to the limits of this understanding. Empowering a woman to speak as wife and descendant at the same time, possession by her husband's family deity illustrates that women not only occupy a space belonging to two lineages, but sometimes indeed a (spiritual) in-between space. While this kind of extra-ordinary event does not influence everyday life in great detail, it illustrates the importance of my argument for wider perceptions of wives' identity.

3.5 Women's dual roles as wives and daughters

The different forms of authority associated today and historically with Yorùbá women as lineage members in both their natal and their marital compounds illustrate the importance of contextual status for the understanding of gender. Adepoju has put this slightly differently by explaining that a woman's status is largely a derived status; she is someone's wife, the mother of a son and daughter of a father (2005:5). What is important for the understanding of contextual status is that this is not only produced but also recognized and acknowledged in Yorùbá society.

Caldwell (1991, 236) notes that in Yorùbáland women retain their links with their family of origin and can easily return there. I agree that women retain their links with their families of origin. As daughters they can return to their father's house to seek support in times of trouble, but also to participate in the decision-making of her lineage. While a young woman living in her father's house, or even visiting her father's house too frequently (rather than living in her husband's house) will be subject to admonitions, women are exhorted not to forget their origin. They also remain subject to demands by members of their natal families for their support when necessary. According to Sudarkasa (1986:99);

African women have some rights, obligations and responsibilities they perform towards their kinsmen and kinswomen within their lineages, it is expected of them to help their brothers and sisters with material assistance, and they also contribute their own quota at any important occasions such as naming ceremony, funeral and marriages. Also women as father's sisters, sisters and daughters within a patrilineage do not hold formal leadership positions, though they take part in most discussions on lineage affairs; age gives them opportunity to influence some decisions.

As daughters in their patrilineage, Denzer (2004:5-3) notes that

Yorùbá women had important legal rights in their natal homes. These included access to land, the use of their father's houses, and share in the profits from their father's farms and participation in the ancestral and *òrìsà* cults of their paternal lineage.

But these responsibilities have to be balanced. A married woman is expected to stay and embrace her husband's home without distractions. It is especially important that those who are originally from a famous or wealthy family and who have married into a less privileged family never appear to look down on their marital family. As wives, it is expected of them to contribute to the wellbeing of their husbands' families, not to diminish it. Women who are unable to do this may find themselves severely disciplined or even ostracised, as illustrated in part in the following chapters.

Yorùbá women are not only expected to play important social roles both as wives and as daughters, but they must play both roles differentially. As daughters who have married "out", married women are recognized as *Ọmọ-Osú* in their father's house. They are welcome back whenever there are celebrations or deliberations. They are expected stay there as long as the celebration lasts so as to fulfill their own obligations as members of their lineage. As insiders who now also belong to outside lineages, they are however a different group from the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*, born as lineage outsiders who have now joined the lineage.

As pointed out above, a daughter of her patrilineage considers the wives of her brothers and cousins, i.e. the women who married into her own family, as her wives in the sense that they help to build up the name of her own lineage. In the structural role of the "husband", she also thanks them for their efforts and successes. In contrast, as a wife in her husband's lineage, she in turn expects thanks and appreciation for her support of the husbands' lineage.

Reflecting these structural differences between lineage daughters and wives, the two groups of women often perform differently at the same event.

During the burial ceremony of an aged matriarch in Òyán the different roles of *Ọmọ-Osu* or the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* soon became clear. Both sets of women had a group that co-ordinated their activities, but because the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* knew each other intimately and lived closely together, they were more effectively organized. As wives of the lineage they kept all contributions they received for their contribution to the event from their notional ‘husbands’. In contrast, the *Ọmọ-Osu* collaborated in a more ad-hoc manner and could not keep any money they were given for the praise of their own lineage member. Consequently they distributed their income after the ceremony.

According to Barber (1990:270-271), the roles of lineage daughters and wives are nonetheless closely intertwined. No festivity can go forward without an influx of female relatives, including the co-wives, to collect firewood, cook the food and serve the guests. In order to undertake the duties assigned to them, *Ọmọ-Osú* or daughters who have married, bring groups of thirty to forty of the wives of their husband’s families – also called co-wives – to important family events to help. At the same time, the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*, or wives married into the lineage, may invite their own female relatives, and even women who are married into their own natal lineages to help. On these occasions, each woman belongs either to the *Ọmọ-Osu* or the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* depending on who brought them along.

4 Chapter Four: Marriage and the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*

As set out earlier, in Yorùbá society, married women are not simply wives to their husbands. They are also the wives or women married into a particular compound or extended family by the sons, grandsons, great grandsons, uncles, nephews of this lineage. As members of this group, they also have an organisational structure and hierarchy, which is discussed in detail in this chapter. While Sudarkasa mentions that their participation in the affairs of their affinal compound was channelled through an “organizational structure” in which women were frequently often ranked according to order of marriage (Sudarkasa 1986:28), she does not explain how this organization is formed, what entails in it and how it asserts itself as social sub-group in Yorùbá culture. This is the subject of this chapter.

4.1 The organisation of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*

As explained earlier, the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* are the wives of the sons/male children in a particular compound of a town. But like the male and female descendants of the lineage or compound, the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* also forms a corporate group within the compound. Admission to the group is by marriage only, and seniority within the group is also defined by marriage. The *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* is headed by the most senior wives in order of marriage, who direct and control the welfare and the other affairs of all the wives in the compound.

To avoid disputes, some compound leaders keep track of marriage order. In *Jagun's* compound in Òyán the wives have a recording book where they note down all the marriages in their compound in order to ascertain the dates of marriage of individual wives. Before the name and date is recorded, the mother-in-law, or someone who can act in that position, must buy groundnuts or biscuits for the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*. If two wives enter the compound through

marriage on the same day, or within a short distance of time, the wife whose groundnuts or biscuits are eaten first is recorded as the senior wife.

Like in many Yorùbá towns, the group of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* is organised in a systematic way in Òyán. As previously mentioned, the leader of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* is the woman who has been married into the compound for the longest time. She is the *Ìyàálé*, and she is also the highest adjudicator of the compound wives from among them. She is responsible only to the head of the compound.¹⁶ The *Ìyàálé* normally has one or two assistants, the *Àtẹ̀lẹ̀ Ìyàálé* and the *Àtẹ̀lẹ̀ Ìyàálé*, who follow her in seniority.

It is the *Ìyàálé*'s duty to call the attention of the *Baálé* and the men folk to any trouble in the family, such as the death of young people; barrenness among the wives and even conflicts between the wives. If such things were to happen in the compound, the *Ìyàálé* would have a meeting with the *Ìyá Àpẹ̀ẹ̀*, who is the leader of the intermediate wives. Both of them will seek audience with the *Baálé* and bring suggestions as to how to resolve the problem. The solutions may involve rituals that are particular to the compound. In *Èlẹ̀mọ̀ Arẹ̀sinkéyè*'s Compound, once the wives come back from the meeting, they will inform all the wives that they are going to worship their father-in-law outside.¹⁷ Some compound leaders may opt for prayer, and in some compounds, all the important sections of the family pray together once a year irrespective of their faith.

The women who preside over such activities are usually very old and wise, and cannot be expected to participate in strenuous activities. For such activities, there are other leaders. The

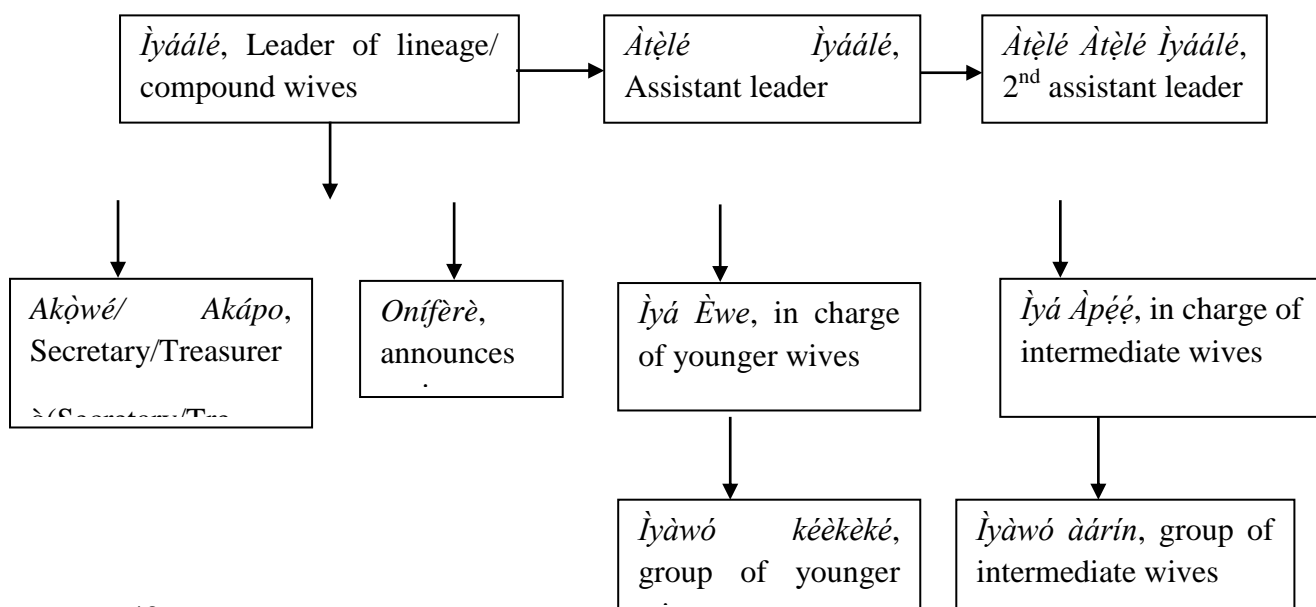
¹⁶ See Adegoke (2010).

¹⁷The deity they worship in their compound is *Èsù*, its altar is always placed outside but very close to a compound.

Ìyá Àpẹ̀ẹ̀ is in charge of the activities of “intermediate” wives, or *ìyàwó àárín*, who are neither old nor young. The *Ìyá Èwe* is in charge of the younger wives, referred to as the *ìyàwó kẹ̀ẹ̀kẹ̀kẹ̀*. Both leaders direct the outings and performances of wives in their categories. The *Onifèrẹ̀* is a wife who blows the whistle to announce the women’s outings. She is usually selected from among the *ìyàwó àárín*, the group of wives of intermediate age, because hers is a job that requires responsibility and a degree of freedom from the duties of caring for very young children. Often two people are chosen for the position of *Onifèrẹ̀* to avoid disappointment.

In addition these leadership offices, the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* also have other officials in line with associational life elsewhere. One of the wives who know how to read and write is usually elected as Treasurer or Secretary. Given that such a title requires important skills and proficiency, it is exempt from the order of marriage. Another category mostly exempt from hierarchies are the *Ọlọbẹ̀*, or cooks, who are chosen from each household within the compound by skill. They prepare the food for any celebration and their activities will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six. The organizational hierarchy of *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* in *Ọ̀yán* (exempting the *Ọlọbẹ̀*) can be seen in the chart below.

Figure 1: Organizational Structure of *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* in *Ọ̀yán*



The organizational structure of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* in Òyán reflects the wives' most important social roles, where the elements of social control and artistic production are closely interwoven. The *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* keep close control of appropriate behaviour among the wives in order to ensure that they make a positive contribution to the compound in the ways discussed earlier, i.e. through responsible work and childbearing. Beyond their own affairs, they also constitute a moral force through their performance.

The wives of a compound are also the custodians of the *oríkì* or family praise poetry, which must be learnt by new wives in the family so they can fulfil their duties towards the husband's family and their own children. Lineage wives recite *oríkì orìlè`* (lineage praise poetry) and lineage *oríkì* of important personalities within the family to salute and welcome different members of the lineage (Awe 1974; 332-334). This is often done during social occasions or when someone returns from a journey. When a wife has a child, mothers also chant *oríkì* to their children in order to calm them down. It is believed that a child or person that never responds to such poetry does not really belong to the family. In this way, *oríkì orìlè`* play an important role both in celebrating the lineage and its members and in constituting (and even policing) lineage boundaries.

The activities of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* include support for their marital lineage in terms of cooking, fetching of water and firewood during burials, marriages, festivals and so on. On such occasions, the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* also provide moral support through songs, chants and dances which celebrate their marital compound, and which are pleasing and impressive to onlookers. In addition to the lyrics, which will celebrate the lineage, the aesthetic appeal of both songs and actions reflects positively on the members of their marital lineage because it demonstrates to onlookers that this is a family or compound that keeps its wives happy. As I explained above, there is an association between a man's good care of a wife and his

character, and so the high quality of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*'s activities implies that the members of their marital lineage are of good character.

Jegade (2006:258) opines that Yorùbá women have great creative force and power which they exercise in diverse ways, and beyond the celebration of others. Referring to Kolawole (1997:77, in Jegede 2006:258), Jegede explains that women use their creativity also in support of the social order, using general as well as exclusively female oral genres to condemn social problems such as immorality, unfaithfulness and idleness. They also use such genres to make demands for what they consider is their right, especially from their husbands' families. In this way, women, and especially the wives living together in their husband's compound, constitute a moral force whose social comments and demands are publicised and generalised through their performances.

4.2 Becoming a member of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*

Being a wife is prestigious in Yorùbá society, and a new wife must be welcomed by all members of an extended family. The Yorùbá song, *tún mi gbé, oko tún mi gbé, iyàwó dùn lòsìngín*, which means, "marry me again, husband marry me again, marriage is sweet when you are young," celebrates the happiness surrounding a young couple and especially a young wife.

The wives of the groom's family form part of the groups that chant nuptial songs during a marriage ceremony in Yorùbá society. There is a special category of epithalamia, or songs to celebrate the bride and groom on their wedding day, which is widely appreciated (Ajibade 2005:107-108). In some communities, and especially in urban environments, people hire professionals to perform these songs.

Historically, marriage was negotiated between the couple's parents or families and involved the paying of bride wealth. However, today many couples are not patient enough to go through a long period of negotiation. Where bride wealth is paid, it is also often returned to symbolise that a wife is not "sold". Most couples have a family event that includes a number of traditional gift exchanges which is referred to as "engagement", and then hold a big marriage ceremony either at church, at the mosque or at the registry office. In the past, virginity at marriage was highly prized,¹⁸ but this has changed to some degree. One of my elderly respondents, Madam Efunloyè, a petty trader of about 90 years of age, considered this a great loss. She explained,

Wọn ò jẹ́ á rí'yàwó gbé mọ́, wọn n gb'óyún ni. Àwon tí wọn kàwé, tí wọn farabalé iyí m̀ bẹ́ fún 'on. Wọn á lọ sòòsì, wọn á gbàdúà fún wọn, sọ bí wọn ti n se n'lé ọkọ ati bebe lo. Tí wọn ba'setán, won ó sìn wọn wá'lé ọkọ.

We are not opportune to participate in marriage again; they [young women] are being impregnated before marriage. Those that are educated and patient are being honoured. They will go to the church and will be prayed for; explanation will be given on how to live a successful marital life and so on. At the end of the service they will be escorted to their husbands' house.

As elderly women like Mrs Efunloyè are among those who oversee the activities of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*, it is useful to see her comment not only as a description of social change but also as indicating the moral judgement that some young women may expect when they move

¹⁸ Virginity at marriage was (and remains) associated with high fertility, meaning that women known not to have been virgins who have difficulties conceiving are often blamed for their own predicament. See Renne (2003).

to their husbands' family's houses. The social control of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* is an important factor for the higher degree of sexual continence in small and rural towns than in the big cities of Lagos or Ibadan.

However, other customs are perceived to have changed for the better. In the past, it was believed that a new wife must enter her husband's house on wet ground so as to bring peace and tranquility into the compound. Therefore, water was poured on the feet of the bride by her co-wives before she entered her marital home. However, because of jealousy, many women fear that such water might contain witchcraft, and today water is poured on the ground for the wife to step upon (Madam Efunloye, interview).

The *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* play an important role in any wedding arranged for a member of their matrimonial lineage. One of my interlocutors, Madam Rachel Soluade, explained that in the past, the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* approached the house of their new in-laws to collect the bride. They would express their delight in the new wife for the family by asking for even more wives, while at the same time praising their marital lineage. One of their songs was,

E fún wa lómì ín ìn sì o (2ce)

Ilé wa dára

E fún wa lómì ín ìn sì o

Give us another one (2ce)

Our house is good

Give us another one.

Madam Soluade also explained that when the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* reached the home of their new co-wife, all of them would sit down and the host would offer them kola nut and food which they would eat there. When they returned, the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* of the bride's father's house

would dance forwards and backwards in front of the bride's entourage and recite her *oriki*, while the bride's friends and all the family gave them money. The *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* of her husband's house would meet them along the way and sing to them (see Appendix vii).

Often the bride is still collected by her co-wives, and on the way home, the bride's immediate senior, i.e. the woman married into her husband's house just before her, sings songs that point out that she is now the most junior member of the family. A popular song focuses on the grinding of pepper, which can be painful and which is therefore often delegated to juniors.

This song was sung for the new bride,

Ọlọta yè lówó mi

Ọkọ gbé'yàwó lé mi

Ọlọta yè lówó mi

Níjìngínní níjìngínní o

Ọkọ gbé'yàwó lé mi

Ọlọta yè lówó mi

Grinding of pepper has eluded me

Husband has married a new wife

Grinding of pepper has eluded me

I am relieved (jìngínní)

Husband has married a new wife

Grinding of pepper of has eluded me¹⁹

¹⁹ Other marital songs are listed in Appendix iii.

When the group reaches the husband's compound, the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* of the husbands' compound take the bride to the bathroom to get her ready before she is taken to her room. If the wedding takes place in a large compound, the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* of the bride's father's house, who are her relatives by descent, often come and take care of her. Eventually a new wife is taken to the *Ìyáálé*, who prays for her and tells her that she will stay as long in her husband's house as the *Ìyáálé* has stayed.

Starting from the ninth day after the wedding, two or four co-wives escort the bride to her father's house to greet them. This is done three times. The bride is left to stay in her father's house for a day, with the co-wives coming back in the evening to escort her home. On each of those ventures, the bride and her co-wives take home pounded yam with okro or *isápá* soup, which is then eaten by members of her husband's compound. The next day, the bride and one of her young co-wives fetch water for all the family members, at least two buckets each.

Depending on the compound and the couple, not all of these activities take place. But the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* of most compounds in Òyán have a large repertoire, and they are usually involved in a range of different activities during marriage ceremonies. Well-known and admired groups of *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* might even be invited for dancing performances in another compound or town by a family that wants to ensure a grand celebration.

As this description suggests, men as husbands and even as heads of the family or compound play a limited role in traditional marriage ceremonies. This has changed today, as many weddings in the church and mosque give the bridegroom an important role. However, the role of men in the customary practices surrounding the wedding is limited, even though there is usually a male leader or overseer who directs the programme and waits back at home to receive report about the outings. So while the relative importance of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* for

wedding celebrations may have declined, a wedding that takes place entirely without the involvement of family co-wives is unthinkable in Òyán, and indeed in many urban areas.

4.3 The role of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* in supporting and facilitating marital life

The *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* also play an important role in helping the new wife to settle in. In her new home the wife is faced with many challenges, ranging from establishing her relationship with her new family to coping with more house work than in her father's house. Many obligations attached to being a wife in Yorùbá society are taught to a girl by her parents or family before marriage. Home training is considered essential to inculcate good character, and a new wife's behaviour will be seen to reflect back on her family.

In her husband's compound, family rules, laws and taboos and their consequences will be explained to the young wife by the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*. She will also begin to join the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* during some family functions in order to learn some practices in the family, including the lineage *oríkì*. It is very important for her to show humility at this stage in order to be accepted both by the husband's relatives and the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*, as she is the most junior person in both groups.

Ladipo (1970:87-88) aptly describes the household chores of a woman:

In a marital life, it is the duty of a woman to do all the work connected with the household other than carrying out repairs of the house or huts (if in a farm) and to keep their house clean and in habitable state. Also the floors must be swept at least once daily or once a week, they must be treated with vegetable or animal dye-stuff, which have the effect of keeping the floors smooth and shining and of preventing the generation of vermin. Other duties of the wives are the preparation and serving of

food, chopping of wood, the grinding of pepper and onions and other condiments for the soup.... it is the work of a wife to pound crops for sales to professional dyers.... they converted the palm fruits into palm-oil and other by-products.... and the marketing of the products of the farm...

Several scholars have commented on the chores of wives in various Yoruba communities, and there seems to be a general consensus that in addition to household chores, cleaning, child rearing and catering for husband and children are paramount (Aderinto 2001:178, see also Aronson 1980:52, Williams 1988, Mabawonku 1988, Olaoye 1994 and Owomeru 2007). Other economic pursuits of Yorùbá wives include trading, as well as home craft such as weaving, dyeing, pottery soup making, food processing and food vending in addition to domestic chores. Typically such income generating activities can be combined with household chores and child care (Akinware 1988: 2). As the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* of a compound often pursue the same or similar economic activities, a new wife will be initiated into her new craft or trade upon marriage by her co-wives. In a farming compound, this may be a particular form of food processing, but it may also involve the transporting or sale of farm produce.

Awe (1975, in Akinware, 1988) states that women's work does not involve tilling the ground in traditional Yorùbá society. However, especially in rural settings, some women are engaged in farming in order to feed their children or to support their husbands. Also, women take care of yam tubers before their husbands plant them, and they harvest and process crops such as cassava and palm oil, as well as they shelling maize, beans and melon seeds. Women also preserve the harvested crops from vermin, insects and other natural elements (see also Favi 1972, in Akinware 1988). Where work for the whole compound is involved, the leaders of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* may develop a roster of duties in which the tasks are distributed among the wives according to seniority.

Once a new wife gives birth to her first child, love and attention will be showered upon her. Again, the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* play an important role in this regard. The older and experienced women now help and support both the mother and her new born baby or babies until the mother is strong enough to take care of her child and herself (Akintoye 2010: 37). The *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* will also share with the new mother their observations about the children of their marital family, and thus provide useful advice and emotional support throughout her childbearing years.

Overall, then, the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* play an important role in the marital life of any woman, because they are an important source of information and help, and because they offer solidarity among those who have joined the lineage as adults. The older wives and especially the *Ìyàálé* also provide a moral and social example for the younger wives, who are expected to emulate them.

Very often, the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* are the main group of people with whom a Yorùbá woman socialises. Fadipe (1970:101-102) describes the intense interaction of the kinsmen and co-wives of the traditional compound in this way, “a larger part of the day is spent in the open... everyone eats and drinks and talks... quarrels and rebukes take place within the full hearing of neighbour...”

Co-wives are supposed to render assistance and comfort to one another when the need arises. According to one of my sources, the situation in Oyan is not different from the general situation, but co-wives can take care of each other’s children when one of them is absent. During a social event, co-wives have no financial assistance to render to one another apart from prayer for the celebrant. She washes the plate she uses to give them food. It is believed that she is reciprocating what she had earlier enjoyed from other co-wives. In most cases, it is compulsory for co-wives of the same husband to assist and stand by one another during any

social events or bereavement, or maybe few co-wives from the extended family. This makes them see each other as a member of the same family working together for the progress of their family. Some co-wives are fortunate when they have their sister and friend as co-wife while others are not. The bulk of the blame goes to the man who married them, some handle the home perfectly and subdue any form of strife and raise the children of both wives together. The prevailing situation now is for the man to get separate houses for the wives in order to prevent fighting. Despite that, an erroneous impression might not be totally erased as one wife will claim ownership of the husband more than the other. The relationship between co-wives is characterized by strife, tension, lousiness, lack of trust, continuous fighting, lack of peace, which may later transfer to the children. Most of the time, the wives do their things personally without cooperation from either spouse, with the belief that the husband is for everybody.

4.4 The role of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* in resolving marital problems and rivalry

The *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* also play an important role in resolving marital problems at different levels. All wives married into a compound are considered co-wives or *Orogún*. However, the relationship between the wives of brothers and cousins is not as potentially difficult as that of those who are married by the same husband. As unchecked rivalry may eventually affect all members of a compound, the timely intervention and resolution of such problems by the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* is important.

In this context it may be useful to refer to the sub-sections of the compound that have some autonomy as households. There is an important debate on the usefulness of this concept,²⁰ and Sudarkasa recognises the difficulty of differentiating between the compound and the household in her work on the status of women in the indigenous African society (1986: 96-97). Having begun the discussion with the importance of compound/ family life, and acknowledging that the notion of “hearth-hold” is productive for many polygynous settings, I nonetheless consider a household to be defined by the wives and children of one man for the purposes of this thesis.

It is at the household level that wives recognise the common authority of a shared husband in domestic matters (Salami 2002:24), and it is also an important location where gender-based relations of power are demonstrated (Mehta, 1999: 5). Although hierarchy at this level is also created by order of marriage, a woman who has a close relationship with her husband may feel that her relevance is lessened by his attention to a new wife, as the new wife may attract most of her husband’s attention. Even where the senior wife encourages their husband to take another wife (Lloyd 1968:69), this situation often leads to emotional tension.

Lloyd (1968:69) suggests that, “one image of a senior wife is of a matriarch presiding over the polygamous household”. He suggests that the first or the senior wife is given a higher status, and that other wives are seen as helpers or housemaids to whom the senior can delegate domestic work. This is confirmed by Ware (1979), who argues that the senior wife is held in the most honoured position, even when the husband is emotionally attached to a younger, later wife. Nomeyo (1967:232 in Ware 1979: 190) even argues that a polygamous

²⁰ For more detail on this, see the discussion in Brydon and Chant (1989).

marriage is a force of liberation for the wife, because it is possible for her to free herself at regular intervals from the chores of married life and thus from time to time rediscover the freedom and to use her time for personal concerns and fulfil her own desires.

However, while it is true that the first wife remains the senior wife, relationships within the household depend both on the wives' character and on the husband's ability to relate to them without partiality. For example, Ojo (2008:365) notes that junior wife may use her religious endowment to assume high status. But often a younger wife attracts special favours because of her individual character or her beauty. Indeed, it is a common practice in Yorùbá polygamous houses to have a favoured wife, the *Àáyó*.²¹ As the *Àáyó*, a junior wife may be privileged over the senior wife due to the favour she enjoys from her husband. Sometimes these problems lead to deep rifts.²² The envy and malice that can exist between women who are in close daily relations of co-operation, rivalry and mutual comparison may lead to suspicions of witchcraft (Peel 2002:143).

Where matters deteriorate to this degree, intervention is necessary. Divisions between co-wives, and the forms of violence they may engender, limit the cohesion of the patrilineage and can even destroy it. It is therefore in the best interest of all to curb such behaviour. The *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* play an important role in reconstituting proper relationships within the household through rituals of purification and reconciliation.

²¹ This title is not necessary based on seniority or age but on the interest of the husband or the attractiveness of the wife's beauty or character. Often the *Àáyó* is distinguished by her good character.

²² The tensions between co-wives often become visible in the next generation. Often, step-brothers and -sisters don't see themselves as one. The saying, *omọ iyá kì í yà, omọ baba ni í ba*, meaning "children of the same mother don't separate, children of the same father are always hidden," paints the picture of a polygamous house where deep relationships are limited to the siblings on the mother's side.

Ritual is an important component of religion and culture which is guided by gender construct and symbolism. It is a means by which humanity controls, constructs, orders, fashions and creates, a way to be fully human. Its components include prayer, song, dance, sacrifice and invocative language (Olajubu, 2003:12). In Òyán, the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* have a series of rituals, slightly varying from compound to compound, which aim to ensure peace and stability among the wives in the compound and the community at large.

Throughout Òyán town, all women are aware that it is a taboo for co-wives to fight physically, especially those that married the same husband. This is linked to a local event. Some time ago, two wives of the same husband fought without the knowledge of their husband. After a time, their children were dying and their husband investigated the cause of death of his children. He was told that there was a curse in his house because his wives had fought. The curse would only be lifted if the women brought out the clothes they wore when fighting and burnt them together with everything on them that day. After that they needed to go to the river to explain the cause of their fighting and pour the ashes of the burnt clothes in the river. This ritual finally halted the destruction of the family.

Once a physical fight takes place between co-wives, their husband must bring it to the notice of the *Ìyáálé* and make sure that his wives are present for the intervention of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*. If the wives do not reside in the town, they must return home for the ritual. People believe that defaulting on this summons might lead to a death in the family, and as most wives love their children they come to the marital compound quickly. In the past, if the ritual was done, the wives would go to the river naked but these days, they are permitted to put on their underwear and the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* would sing for them as they were going to the river;

È r'Òlòun bó ó se p'ókó lé

Tiyáálé t'iyáwó wón n'jà s'èpòn

È r'Óloun bó ó se p'ókó lé

Can't you see how God flatters the penis?

Co-wives are fighting over testicles

Can't you see how God flatters the penis?

This song is designed to embarrass the co-wives and to teach them to be more careful in what they do. At the river bank, the women will explain the cause of their fight to the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*. Whoever speaks first will be warned not to tell lies because of the implications.²³ After this they will throw the ashes of their clothes inside the river, then use their hand to put water on each other's body before they proceed to the *Ìyáálé*'s house, again accompanied by a moralizing song designed to uplift their characters. One of the songs the women may be singing is,

Òjòwú jowú r'odò

Bó wèwè kó d'èja kò lè mọ

A jealous person, jealous to the river

No amount of bathing can make her clean

At the *Ìyáálé*'s house the women repeat their explanation of the causes of their fight. The *Ìyáálé* will judge their matter accordingly, and after a thorough warning for the person judged to be at fault the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* pray for them and fine them. The fines are usually foodstuffs, so they may have to provide *ẹkọ* and vegetable for the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*. It is important that the

²³ Whoever tells a lie may die or lose her child. Often, if there is a lie involved, the aftermath of the ritual is the death of the liar.

women raise the resources for the funds themselves, and – perhaps to emphasise the importance of a husband’s fairness – their husband must not render assistance to any of them.

In many cases, the intervention of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* indeed leads to an improvement of relations between wives, even though wives who have undergone this ritual may not ever become close. At the same time, the ritual also serves as a warning to other wives, and their children, about the implications of aggression, and it may therefore play an important role in preventing conflict.

5 Chapter Five: Performances of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*

One of the main tasks of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* in *Ọyán* is to render assistance to their marital families during social events like funerals, naming ceremonies and marriages. They come together as a group for a performance within their husband's compound or for outings associated with any of their co-wives' social events, which may take them to other compounds of the town. However, the particular degree of assistance, and the specific activities undertaken, may vary from one compound to another.

There are some activities that almost always require the presence of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*, and while these may include normal and annual family celebrations, they also include events which are both socially and spiritually important to the lineage. Funerals of aged people are often elaborately organized and celebrated in ways that affirm the importance of the deceased's contribution to the various groups and associations in the town as well as her or his contribution to their family or families. As future ancestors, the deceased are believed to have power over their family members, and it is considered important for the future wellbeing especially of her or his children and grandchildren that they are given a befitting funeral. In this context the oral arts of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* which accompany these occasions do not only serve a social – celebratory – purpose but also contribute to the ongoing wellbeing of the lineage into which they are married.

For a major social occasion such as a funeral, the funeral organizer, who may be a (co-) wife or an elderly man or woman in the compound of the deceased, will consult the *Ìyáálé* to know whether the date is suitable. Other wives are not involved until the date is approved by the

Ìyáálé. Once that has happened, others in the compound will be informed,²⁴ as will other compounds and individuals, all of whom will draw on their social ties to ensure that the celebration will take place in a manner that would have satisfied the deceased. So while the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* prepare themselves for the event, a daughter of the compound who is married to another compound may also invite her own co-wives or *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* to her compound of birth. This invitation is known as “*gbígbajó Olóbìnrin-Ilé*” or “*ijó Olóbìnrin-Ilé*” and it simply means “the dance of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*”. Looking at the activities of the *Olobinrin-ile* in detail will also illuminate more clearly what position they occupy within their natal and marital families and compounds.

5.1 The *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* get ready to dance

The *ijó Olóbìnrin-Ilé* involves dancing and performances, and the women dance or perform by invitation only. They rely on their organizational hierarchy and internal discipline to be able to fulfil their roles to their own and others’ satisfaction. But as they are wives rather than daughters of the compound, they will nonetheless insist that their contributions are not taken for granted by their “husbands”.

Whoever wants to invite them must provide a certain amount of food. Many *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* provide a measure for different foods. For example, in many compounds, the wives have a measuring pot for their soup which is kept in the house of the *Ìyáálé* and can only be taken by whoever wants to invite them. Normally, one hundred maize puddings or *ẹ̀kọ*, sixty rolls of the cassava product *ẹ̀bà*, and a full pot of meat or fish, together with okro and vegetables are

²⁴ This is called “*wọ̀n rò kálé*” meaning, informing the whole house.

taken to the *Ìyáálé*'s house for sharing after the dance.²⁵ Sometimes the women allow people to pay for their food, or to pay an amount of five thousand naira for their dancing.

Before any outing, all the wives gather at the *Ìyáálé*'s house. In some compounds, one woman notifies all the members by going from one household to another, while members of each household inform all members of the group. In some compounds, an elected officer, the *Onifèrè*, will blow her whistle to call the members together at the *Ìyáále*'s house. Normally the *Ìyáálé* as the most senior wife will not go out with her junior co-wives, and neither will her deputies. These women will however hear reports from the other officers and take relevant actions if necessary.

Lateness and absenteeism both attract a penalty, and absenteeism is punished more heavily than lateness. A woman who was late or absent when called can hope to be spared punishment by begging her co-wives on her knees and explaining the reason behind her actions to them. In the past, any women who did not go with her *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* would be penalized by a fine. Today, if the reason given for absence or lateness is genuine, it is usually accepted without punishment. Otherwise the offender is warned to desist from such action. It should be noticed that not all older women are happy about this, and one of my interlocutors expressed the view that no one cares about what is said to a disobedient wife. If the women notice that anyone of them is absent or habitually absent either because of pride or laziness, they will punish her with the following song,

²⁵ If their host is very rich, she or he can also give them take away food or cooked food which they eat before leaving the place. Money can be used to substitute *ẹkọ* if not available but the stew with fish and/or meat must be prepared and given to them.

Wón ní o kálọ, ọ lọ ọ lọ

Ọlounu mọ j'an gbàgbé rẹ sílé.

You are asked to go out, you refused

May the Lord forbid that you are forgotten at home.

On the day of the celebration the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* must wear the same uniform at that time, including those that have ill-health or are too old to walk around. When everybody is present, the *Ìyáálé* will pray for them.²⁶ After the prayer they will sing this song before leaving *Ìyáálé*'s house that will indicate their obedience to *Ìyáálé*'s instruction of sending them on outing;

Wón rán wa lóde, à wá mọ lọ

Ọlórun má jè á pàdé ọlójó

Pèkí ayé ni pèkí ọrun

Ọlórun má jè á pàdé ọlójó.

We are sent on errands, and we go

May we not meet death on our way

Coincidence on earth is the same as in heaven

May we not meet death on our way.

This song reminds everyone that their task is a serious one which goes beyond the provision of easily consumable entertainment. As their words can open channels of communication between them and other beings, the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* utter protective words for themselves on

²⁶ In some compounds, two or three people will pray for the women in line with their religious principles.

their journey to the house of the person organizing the event. Offering a moral perspective on the event, and on life in general, they also remind themselves and others of the shortness of life.

5.2 Songs and performances of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*

As they are going to the house of the celebrant, the songs of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* change. In Èlémọ Arésikéyè's compound, which is the compound of the current *Oba* of Òyán, the compound wives are perceived as *ayabas*, or king's wives. For this reason they have a peculiar song that refers to their royal status. When they reach the centre of the market, songs to this effect will be sung both to salute the market women and to announce their own status – and by implication that of their marital compounds (See Appendix i).

In response to the song, the market people will give the women money to thank them for their performance. After this everyone will raise songs in turn until they get to the celebrant's house. Nowadays the drummers accompany the singers to give melody or rhythm to their performance.²⁷ While on their way, if they meet an elderly prince or princess, the wives of Èlémọ Arésikéyè's compound will sing and kneel down to appreciate him or her, while the person – here in the role of a “husband” – is expected to give money to them by pressing it against their body or their clothes (See Appendix ii).²⁸

²⁷In the olden days, the *Olóbìnrin-ilé* would go out without drum. They clapped their hands when they were singing and dancing. According to a source, they realised at some stage that this was no longer attractive to the younger ones. For that reason, drummers were then incorporated into their dancing activities.

²⁸This practice is locally referred to as “spraying”.

When they are approaching the house of the deceased, they may sing the following songs to confirm that they have come for a burial. The first song refers to the position of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* as “wives” to every member of their husbands’ compound, including the deceased. At a recent funeral at Èlẹ̀mọ̀ Arẹ̀sikẹ̀yẹ̀’s compound, the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* announced,

‘Torí ọ̀kọ mí ò ló jẹ n wá

Torí ìyẹ̀rú agùn ló, torí Ìyẹ̀rú Agùnlóyẹ̀ o.

I came because of my husband

Because of Ìyẹ̀rú Agùnlóyẹ̀ (name of the deceased).

But the positionality of the singers can shift, expressing different dimensions of grief on behalf of the family members. In the next song, the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* first address the bereaved family as outsiders, commiserating with them on their loss. But after that, they also refer to the deceased as “father”, sharing the family’s grief as fellow descendants. While it is polite in Yorùbá society to address all men of one’s parents’ generation as “father”, the reference nonetheless conveys the feeling of familiar loss as well as love and respect:

Gbogbo ‘lé, ẹ̀ kú idèlé o

Bàbá lọ̀ kò wá mọ̀ o

Gbogbo ‘lé, ẹ̀ kú idèlé o

Bàbá lọ̀ kò wá mọ̀ o

A pẹ̀ wọ̀n, bàbá ò mọ̀ jẹ̀ o

Bàbá lọ̀ kò wá mọ̀ o

All the family, we are so sorry a member of your household is no more

Father has gone and come no more

All the family, we are so sorry a member of your household is no more

Father has gone and come no more

We call him and he did not answer us

Father has gone and come no more

There are some other songs the women sing when they reach the place of celebration which cannot be discussed here because of space, and there is one song all women sing (See Appendix iv). With this song it is the manner of the performance that distinguishes the women from different compounds. While some sing it as part of a dramatic performance, others sing it casually. Others again sing it as an approaching song and mark the beginning of their entertainment. Among some *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* the song will be taken in turn by those who can sing as they come to either the middle or the front of the group. For instance, the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* in Eńlẹ́'s compound sing the song very theatrically. First they remove their slippers, then they run up and down looking for the dead person and dance around the deceased's children. The youngest wives will carry the deceased's picture as they sing the song, and eventually they dance round the whole town. The *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* of Eńlẹ́'s compound also come back for the dance described above dance on the second or third day.

In all cases, and for all performances, the deceased's children and relatives will give out money to the women as they are singing and dancing. However, if the women receive what they consider a lukewarm welcome by the children of the deceased, meaning that they are not being rewarded generously for their entertainment, they call their attention to it with this song thus;

Onílẹ̀ ẹ̀ wá pẹ̀lẹ̀ o

Pẹ̀lẹ̀ o ojú tó bá m'ọ̀ba ní í k'ọ̀ba

Onílẹ̀ ẹ̀ wá pẹ̀lẹ̀ o

Pẹ̀lẹ̀ o ojú tó bá mọ̀ 'ni ní í kını.

Owner of the house treat us with caution

With caution, whoever that knows the king, greets the king

Owner of the house treat us with caution

With caution, whoever that knows one, greets one.

This reminder of their own importance will prompt the celebrant and every other member of the family to come out and give more generously to them. The *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* have a clear sense of the value of their contribution. The *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*'s repertoire of songs is large, and often circumstances at the place of performance suggest the type of songs to sing. If the people are enthusiastic and if they receive large amounts of money, they sing songs of praise, but otherwise songs of reproach and abuse will be sung. Examples of such songs are given in Appendix v.

This type of openly abusive song may even lead the person in charge of a funeral to borrow in order to satisfy the singers.²⁹ It is disgraceful in Yorùbá culture for a child not to be able to bury his or her parent in a befitting way, and the protest of the singers that they have not been well remunerated is embarrassing. Unless there is a genuine reason for such a financial failure, the inability to pay for a befitting burial, including the entertainment by the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*, is long remembered and might turn into a curse for the perpetrator, given that her or his parents will be unhappy in the spiritual world. For those who borrow to spend lavishly, the belief is usually that this will ensure a long and successful life, after which their children will do the same for them in return.

²⁹ Sometimes songs cause problems among the women, especially when there is misunderstanding between them before their outing, and a woman may claim that a particular song is sung against her. Such an accusation is usually interrogated to ascertain whether it reflected a problem between that person and the singer or whether it was just a coincidence. Whoever is at fault is blamed and warned not to repeat such an act.

As this chapter illustrates, during funerals the difference between family wives and family members by descent is very noticeable. While the women go around to dance from one ceremony to another, the descendants of the compounds, and especially the men, or *Ọmọ Ilé*, sit at home or gather at the house of the deceased. And while the wives of the family must be reimbursed for their activities, the *Ọmọ Ilé* must give them money in order to appreciate them (and to avoid being abused).

5.3 The *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* after the performance

There is no time limit for the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*'s performance or dancing, but it usually depends on how much the children and family encourage them by giving them money. When the women are tired or realize that their host has spent a lot of money, they will signal to one another that enough is enough, because they do not want their host to disgrace them by calling them greedy. At the end of a performance, the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* usually round off their dancing with this song, which announces that it is to return home:

Agogo lu méje o

Ìyá mi Àbèkẹ́ y'ọwọ́ rẹ̀ wò o

The time is seven o'clock

My mother Àbèkẹ́ check your watch.

The *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* then call the children of the deceased together and count the money collected from them in their presence. This is so that there can be no misunderstandings among them, and that no-one can boast to have given what he has not given. Conversely, it makes it difficult for any wife to keep the money that was given out privately. But mostly, this serves to let the *Ọmọ Ilé* know how generously they have given. Whether the money is impressive or not, the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* now also pray for them.

After this, the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* round off and the women go back to the *Ìyáálé*'s house to report on how they were treated. As they approach the *Ìyáálé*'s house, they will sing yet another song (see Appendix VI). After the report to the *Ìyáálé*, the money collected will be counted again, and the leaders instruct the *Akòwè'* or secretary to write the exact amount against the name of the person who invited them. After the women have decided on the amount to give to the drummers,³⁰ the treasurer collects the money and takes it to the bank.

In some compounds, the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*'s bank account is opened in the name of one of the women but with three signatories to the account. Other groups open an account with their group's name and three signatories. The sharing formula of the money differs from one compound to another. The majority of *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* use the money collected to buy uniform cloth for their members, either when they have enough or after all members of the group, irrespective of position or office, have added the same amount to the sum.

Other compounds share the money into three, not always equal parts. Usually the first part goes to the strangers, that is, the wives who are not living in the town. If there is a need for them to buy cloth later, they may also be asked to send their contribution. The elders normally take the larger part of the remaining money while the younger one takes the rest. If the money divided in this way is used to buy uniform cloth, the elderly wives may not have to add any amount of money to their own share of the outing's income, and other women have to add to their share according to seniority.

It is more or less compulsory for all compounds in the town to invite the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* to one function or another. However, there are ways out if one cannot afford the expenses for all the

³⁰ The money the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* give to the drummers is in addition to the money the drummers normally collect on their own during the outing.

Olóbìnrin-Ilé. Again, this depends on the compound and the leniency of the *Ìyáálé*. There are two alternative ways of hosting the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* during any function. The first one is called *Òkú Olórogún*. This is a form of invitation goes to all the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* in the compound, and it is elaborate and involves the participation of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* in cooking and dancing to entertain them. In contrast, *Aládàádì* is a form burial entertainment mainly for household co-wives only, i.e. for a small sub-group of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*. It is used when one cannot afford to entertain all the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* and wishes to avoid embarrassment over a lack of funds. *Aládàádì* will not involve dancing but provision is made for the feeding of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*, who will be given *Èkọ* and vegetable soup.

It should be noted that when people look for a less expensive option of celebrating, preference is given to those who are experiencing a known problem at a particular period which makes it difficult for them to carry out the financial obligations associated with inviting the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*. But if this is not the case, and the person is simply suspected of being too careful with money, such a person may be called to order by a letter stating that she should try and include all the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* in her plans for the celebration.

While the close involvement of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* in shaping the expenses of the natal compound members partly illustrates their different status, it also confirms that the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* play an important role as a moral force beyond the lyrics or symbolic actions of their performances. Of course the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* know their own value as wives to the compound. But as daughters of other compounds, the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* are also in a position to point out to those who are considered stingy that they have enjoyed other people's generosity in the past. In this way they point to the importance of reciprocity not only between "husbands" and "wives" but also between all the compounds and lineages within the town.

5.4 Participation during Ceremonies in the Compound

A wife living in her husband's compound is expected to work during any ceremony or celebration within the compound. This usually means cooking the food and serving the guests. Work may also include the clearing and sweeping of to the kitchen or fire place and the washing of the plates. The work is distributed according to seniority, and the younger ones will be the last to leave the venue. In the past, the fetching of wood and water would have preceded cooking. It was gathered in Òyán that the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* still fetch water for compound ceremonies but they have stopped fetching fire wood.

In Èlémọ's compound, the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* have a yearly routine of fetching firewood for the king before Eid el-Kabir festival in order to cook food for guests during the festival. The notification is by calling each other one by one, saying that they are going to the palace tomorrow. On the appointed day all of the women will gather at the *Ìyáálé's* house, and the younger ones will carry a bundle of sticks each, at least six. The king will entertain them and give them money when they are dancing.³¹ The wives in Èlémọ's compound also dutifully sweep the palace a day prior to the five days market which is called *Ọjọ ìgbálẹ̀*, meaning the sweeping day. This is where the king will announce any invitation given to them,³² and that day therefore serves as the date of their meeting and the next outing will be announced.

Generally all the women of a compound fetch water for cooking during a celebration or a burial, but a more organized plan was observed at Èlémọ's compound. In Èlémọ's compound, all the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* would fetch water and bring it to the deceased's house. But the younger

³¹ This can be done on or before the festival.

³² Because they are wives of the king's compound, he must be informed of and approve their outings, especially outing outside their compound or town.

wives would fetch water two times in addition to the general water-fetching. In the same compound, cooking is organized by a division below the compound level and above the household level, called *Káà* (a subsection of the compound). There are some people called *Káà Mèta*³³, who are selected from each subsection, and they cook. Those that cannot cook will supervise what is being done and help to distribute the food to the *Ọmọ-Ilé*, the male folk, the *Ọmọ-Osú*, the married daughters born into the compound and the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*, who have married into the compound.

To distribute the food, two people will be selected among the youngest wives. The same process of selection is done to pick the *Ọlóbèṣ*,³⁴ they are the people who will prepare soup for the three groups of the members of the compound, i.e. the *Ọmọ-Ilé*, *Ọmọ-Osú* and *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*. They prepare the soup for male folk first and later for the other two groups of women.³⁵

The fact that the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* is one of the three groups of celebrants recognized within the compound confirms that the wives are considered as belonging to their husbands' family. However wives do not belong to their husbands' families exclusively, because the married daughters also return to their natal families, still claiming a form of belonging. This illustrates that as daughters, women belong to their fathers' families, but as wives they equally belong

³³*Káà Mèta* are the three sections that make up the compound. The first is the people that reign as king, the second is the people that brought *Ogun* (god of iron) to the compound, the third is *Káà Ọṣàálá* and belongs to the person who brought *Ọṣàálá* (the creator god) to the compound. All of them are from the same father but of different mothers.

³⁴ I observed that those that prepared the starchy food were not given a particular name unlike those that prepared soup.

³⁵It was gathered that in the past, the men prepared their soup by themselves but when they realized that they were usurping the women's role, they allowed the women to cook for them. In some villages or towns, men still cook for themselves during burial ceremonies and they find it fun to do for instance this was noticed in Èkùsá, a neighboring town

to their husbands' families. But in both cases, they are not included among the *Omọ-Ilé*, suggesting that their form of belonging is considered as different.

5.5 Buying and Maintenance of Uniforms

It is the custom of *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* to buy and wear clothes made of the same cloth for any of their outings. This marks them as a distinct group among the other guests. It is compulsory for all the wives that live in the town to buy the same cloth even if someone had a dress made earlier from a similar cloth. Only those that live outside the town are not forced to buy the uniform cloth, but even so most wives like to buy it, in case that they need to wear it anytime they are around the family compound for an occasion. If such a wife has a good relationship with her mother-in-law or any of the co-wives in the compound, her friend may buy and keep the cloth for her.

As mentioned earlier most of the compounds nowadays are strategizing their activities and using the money collected from their outings to buy uniform clothes. Because of the large numbers of people that are buying cloth, many *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* send two or more men to either Ilorin or Ibadan to look for a sample and to buy it in sufficient quantity.³⁶ The cloth is distributed at *Ìyáálé's* house. Each leader of a household within the compound will collect cloth for the wives in her household and later she will share it out for them. The uniform of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* should not be used personally, i.e. independently of group outings. Indeed, many women frown at such behavior among their co-wives, and there are punishments and fines for the unauthorized wearing of uniform cloth. It is usually when the women have about

³⁶ In the past wives would pay for their clothes individually, i.e. whenever it was necessary to buy a new one, and some compounds are still following this custom.

four or more uniforms that it will be announced that a particular uniform, usually the oldest, can now be used as a personal dress.

The *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* may not discipline a woman who does not buy the uniform cloth, as long as she behaves well, especially if she lives outside the compound. However, it will usually be noted if a woman rarely buys the cloth, as this is taken to imply that she does not want to belong to the group. Any woman who mocks or abuses the uniform of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* to their hearing will however be disciplined. The misuse of the uniform attracts a fine in some compounds, especially if the cloth is worn for personal use or is dirty, and the person will be warned. In severe cases of dirtiness or overuse, the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* may decide to wear the uniform on their next funeral outing and ask the person to carry the photograph of the deceased in front of them and sing these songs for her (see Appendix viii). This shames her publicly as everyone will see her dirty or overused cloth and understand why she has been put into this prominent position. The uniform expresses the corporate identity of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*, and a woman who derides the group will be considered to be of doubtful character and in need of punishment.

5.6 Discipline among the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*

In *Ọ̀yán*, the disciplining of a woman who goes against the practice and tenets of *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* starts from her own household. Bad behaviour includes not joining the group when the whistle is blown, or a refusal to carry water to the *Ìyáálé's* house. All of this will lead to scolding and the culprit will be reminded that one day it will be her turn to send somebody on errands, and then fate will catch up with her. If she has a regard for her seniors, the disrespectful wife may kneel down to beg them for forgiveness. If she refuses to do so, she might be overlooked or ignored for some time as her punishment. If it becomes a routine, this may lead to her being abandoned or isolated. The older women may then regard her as

someone who wants to disgrace the compound. When they are going on an outing, no one will call or inform her. If the woman then realizes her mistake, there is room for her to make amends and she will still be accepted back into the fold.

In some cases, the stubbornness of a wife will affect her mother-in-law, who will then not be able to send the young wife on errands. Whatever the wife is supposed to do, the mother-in-law will have to do her share of the work unless some younger women in the compound decide to respect her and assist her. This might be a signal for the mother-in-law to call her daughter-in-law to order. The mother-in-law might also involve her husband if the wife proves stubborn. In such a case the father-in-law will call her to advise and encourage her to realize the benefits involved in being a member of *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*, and he can scold her if necessary. If she does not yield to their advice, the *Ọmọ-ilé*, the male folk may be involved. However, if she refuses to take their advice too, the entire family will abandon her. In extreme cases, the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* may decide to dance to her father's house to show their grievance. The *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* in her father's house will come out to appeal to them and promise to talk to their daughter and warn her to desist from rude behavior. If the person is an indigene of another village or town, an emissary may be sent to her family in order to seek their attention and warn their daughter that she may have to leave their compound because she does not appreciate what is being done there. If the wife's family knows that her *Olóbìnrin-Ilé's* plan to come, they might prevent them from doing so by sending people to beg them in advance. One of my sources said that they see it as cheating if a woman does not

want to participate in their activities. In such cases, her parents will be abused and she will be fined.³⁷

If relations are very bad, the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* can also dance to meet the errant co-wife at home or in her shop. As everybody becomes aware that a song is being sung against a particular person, people will know that this woman refuses to join the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* in her husband's compound. A wise offender will kneel down at this stage at last in order to beg them that it was not her intention to offend her mates and give a reasonable excuse. For somebody who does not care about it, her nonchalant attitude might have further implications because the women that are singing and abusing her are of diverse characters. Mrs. Afeez, a 27 year old petty trader, noted the importance of not antagonizing others because of the possibility of another woman holding strong spiritual authority (or witchcraft) with this statement:

Torí eléyín òkè wà nínu' àwon *Obìnrin-ilé*

Eléyín ìsalẹ̀ nàà sì wà nínu' won.

Because there are people with upper teeth among the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*

Also there are some with lower teeth.³⁸

Most forms of discipline I observed or was told about centred on verbal abuse. The *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* normally punish offenders when they come back from outings. A co-wife might be called upon to kneel down in their midst and in some compounds, she may be subjected to light physical punishment. Some women may punish a young co-wife by squeezing her nose

³⁷The informant believed that her generation will continue to do it the way it was handed over to them and if this generation allows it to die, that's their own problem. Some of the songs for this action can be done for a further study.

³⁸ As babies, some people grow their upper teeth first instead of the lower teeth. To the Yorùbá this is an indication that such a person possesses innate authority and this may negatively affect others in a conflict.

or forcing her to dance to their abusive songs. If she does not show remorse they might invite her family to mediate. The family will send their *Ọmọ-Osú* to go and mediate between the two compounds. The aftermath of such a conflict is not always good, and it can lead to sickness due to the shameful discipline. No matter how strong the offending woman may be, once everybody sings derogatory songs to her, including even her mother-in-law or daughters-in-law, she will experience it painfully.

Another instance of discipline by the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* is when anyone of them divorces and remarries to another compound, usually in a neighboring town. When the news gets to the co-wives, they might decide to dance to the offender's father's house during the next outing and sing (see Appendix ix). In such a case, her family troops out to beg her because of the disgrace, and this may prompt her to come back to her former husband or at least his family.

Illustrating the reach of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*'s moral pronouncement as going beyond the shared marital compound, many *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* punish co-wives who have not contributed adequately to their own parent's funeral entertainment, at which the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* may have been present. Such a woman may be denied access to their uniform until she produces the money she is considered to owe, and she may also have to endure abusive songs (see Appendix x). When the offending co-wife makes it up to the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*, they will praise her with this song:

Ilé yìí gbè ọ́, o bẹ́gbẹ́ ẹ́ pé

O bẹ́gbẹ́ ẹ́ pé, o wà láàrin wa

Ilé yìí gbè ọ́, o bẹ́gbẹ́ ẹ́ pé.

This house favors you; you meet up with your peers

You meet up with your peers, you are in our midst

This house favors you; you meet up with your peers.

Whoever offends the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* in a serious way might be punished by a dead goat or hen, killed by the other women, which is deposited in front of her house. This causes automatic debt for the woman so punished because the owner of the animal will ask for a replacement from her. The woman then has to pay the owner of the animal, and she has to cook the animal with vegetable soup, fried locust beans or another type of vegetable soup with plenty of oil. She must also provide *Èkọ* (maize pudding) with it. The food must be given to the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* to reconstitute good relations in the compound.

5.7 The impact of modernization on the activities of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*

Some changes have occurred in the process of the traditional marriage among the Yorúbá since the introduction of colonial rule. Urbanization, education, migration, religion, urban occupations and other factors have impacted on Yorùbá cultural institutions including marriage (Schwab 1962; LeVine 1966; Little and Price 1969; Olusanya 1970; Bamikale and Pepley 1989; Denzer 1994; Ubong 2010). This has also affected the activities of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*. Importantly, the changes associated with modernization also point to other forms of achievement that affect women's status.

In Òyán, it was found that it is not compulsory for the educated wives to join the group, and that educated women are less likely to be subjected to disgrace and ridicule than others. This is partly in acknowledgement of such a woman's exposure and education. Salami (2004:68) observes that the changes that are taking place today affect the socio-economic life of Yorùbá women especially in the area of their educational attainment and economic independence. It appears as if educational attainment, and perhaps also the higher earning power often

associated with such attainment, give a married woman a higher rank and exempt her from aspects of social control in her marital family.

In urban and semi-urban areas of Yorùbáland, some activities of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* have also been subject to innovation and transformation in manners that reflect the increasing scarcity of time. In the past, the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* prepared and served all the food to be eaten in a social gathering, and thus saved the celebrant some expenses. Today they are only involved in a marginal way or render assistance to the cooks who have taken over their role. No-one will depend on others to do the cooking for them because everybody is busy.

People who might once have played a prominent role as wives in the family are now taking up jobs as civil servants. Moreover, divorce is widely believed to have increased, and some women no longer feel that their responsibility to the family of their husbands should last for a lifetime. Indeed, some women may even go against the rules and the traditions of their husband's family. But even so, many women remain aware that if they fail to show up for a family activity because of their tight schedule or high social status, no one will give them support when it is their turn.

Also, among the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*, many of the elderly women have realized that younger women no longer accept strict discipline or extensive social commitments on behalf of the group. Many of them are cautious when disciplining the younger ones, and they overlook many offences so as not to scare the younger ones, who will eventually take over from them. There is a popular perception that the children of nowadays cannot be handled or treated like the older ones because of their exposure and knowledge.

But the mode of operation of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* has also been improved by modernisation. In the past, no one took money to the bank. However, since the women adapted their practices to modern book-keeping and banking, cheating and unfaithfulness has been reduced. Now

many *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* can use their funds wisely to buy uniforms. Also, the majority of their officers were elected in line with current practices in the society. Moreover, younger wives are often allowed to sing social and new musical styles in order to be acceptable to their audience. This type of uniformity gives them a sense of belonging to the family they are married to.

In conclusion, while many women no longer live lives in which they are closely controlled by the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*, especially if they live in urban areas or are highly educated, their experiences as married women are nonetheless shaped by the institution.

6 Chapter Six: Conclusion

This dissertation looks at the role of women in their marital compound among the Yorùbá. It also explores their functions as *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* in the family, their participation in social engagements, their mutual cooperation, and forms of discipline. Based on field work in the town of Òyán, this thesis establishes the core activities of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*. While the variations between Òyán's compounds suggest that there are further differences between different Yorùbá communities, some characteristics of this group are shared even in very urban environments.

As this thesis illustrates, women's activities as wives play a greater role than has been noted in the academic literature to date. While the discussion about gender in Yorùbá culture has engaged with the traditional marriage practices, it has not explored the institutional role of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé*. The importance of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* is exemplified by the fact that in rural towns like Òyán, the group still has a clear leadership and hierarchy, rules of conduct, and is allowed to pass powerful moral judgments. As a group of people, they are responsible for the fetching of water, cooking and entertainment through song and dance during formal occasions in their marital lineages.

The lack of any scholarly focus on the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* has meant that the lineage belonging of Yorùbá women has not been examined in detail. Often scholars have simply assumed that women belong either to their natal or their marital lineage, even though the practices and the corporate identity of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* illustrate that they are generally recognized as belonging to both. As members of their marital lineages, the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* take on important roles for the family's wellbeing. For these, unlike "children" of the compound, they must be compensated adequately. Even so, there may be areas in which identity is blurred, and

women not only belong to both but perhaps seem somewhere in-between two lineages, such as when women are possessed by their husband's family deities.

6.1 Recommendations for future research

Clearly there is a need for more detailed studies of the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* in Òyán, especially focusing on their ritual practices and the implications of these for studies on female power and possibly witchcraft. Also, while the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* are certainly relevant to Yorùbá culture in some other parts of Yorùbá states and communities, the variations and adaptations of the institution should be explored more widely. A look into the effects of increasing educational levels and modernisation on the *Olóbìnrin-Ilé* will be helpful for a discussion of women's experiences even in highly urbanized contexts such as Lagos or Ibadan.

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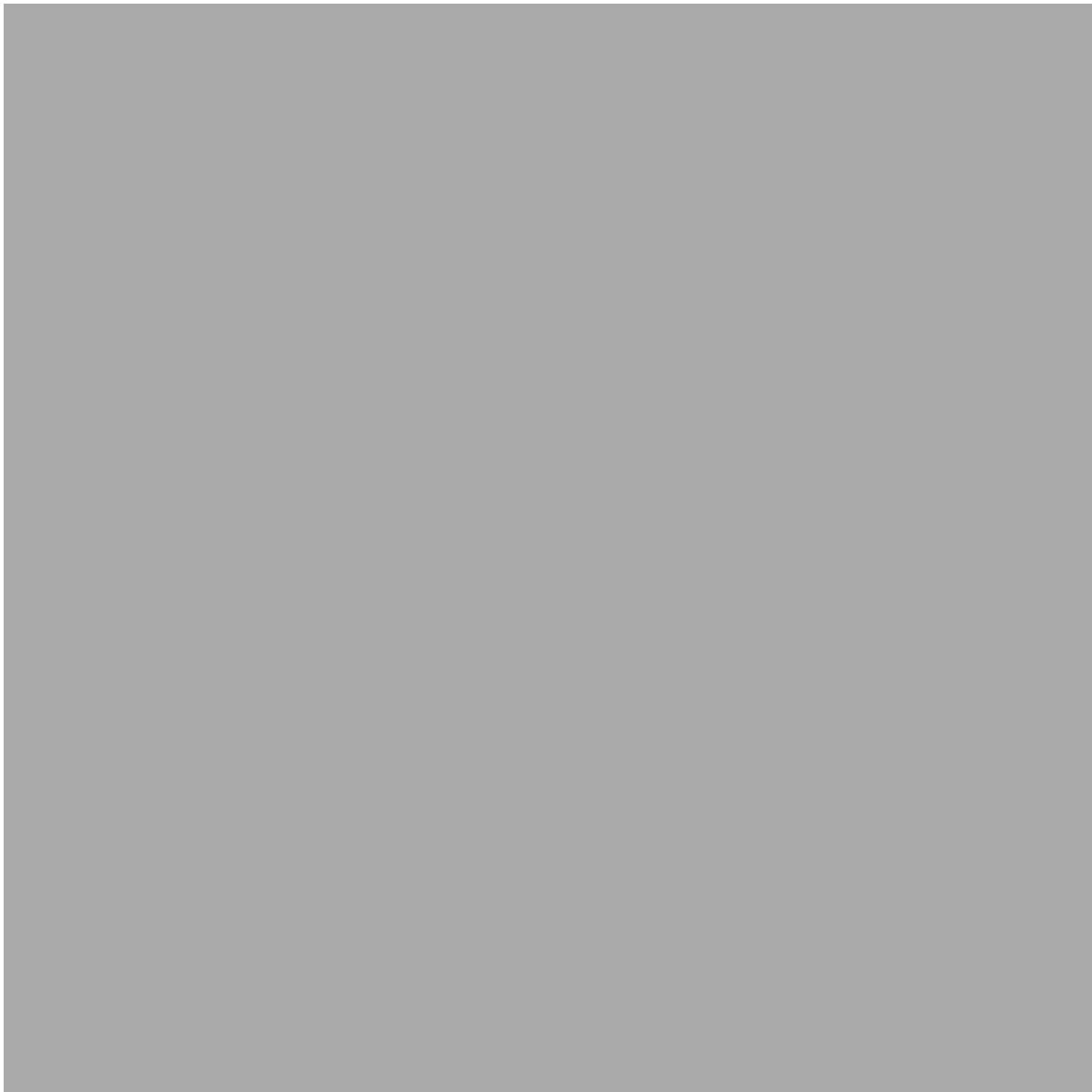
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8 APPENDIX

Àróṃọ gbómọ pón eh eh

Àróṃọ gbómọ pón ni t'ayaba o

Àróṃọ gbómọ pón ni t'ayaba

Àróṃọ gbómọ pón n ni t'àdán o

Àróṃọ gbómọ pón ni t'ayaba

Having a child to back eh eh

Having a child to [carry on the] back is for the king's wife

Having a child to [carry on the] back is for the king's wife

Having a child to [carry on the] back is for a bat

Having a child to [carry on the] back is for the king's wife

Á ará ọjà eh eh

Á ará ọjà a kí i yín o

Á ará ọjà a n kí i yín

Á ará ọjà ẹ pará mọ

Ohun ọjà eh eh

Ohun ọjà l'ọba ó jẹ

The market people eh eh

The market people we greet you

The market people we are greeting you

The market people take heed

The thing of the market

The King will eat what is in the market.

Agba à, àgbà mọ ọn rọra

Ọmọ ò wọşọ wọyè, mọ ọn rọra o

Àgbà mọ ọn rọra

Eyi ye o o se o

Ọmọ ò wọşọ wọyè, mọ ọn rọra

Elder, elder take it gently

The child of someone who wears clothes and bears a title, take it gently

Elder, take it gently

This befits you, thank you

The child of someone who wears clothes and bears a title, take it gently

Ọloun máyò kárí o, ọba máyò kárí wa

Ìwọ ó se, èmi ó se

Gbogbo wa là ó lò'gbà nílè Arésikéyè o, nílè Egúngúnşọlá

Gbogbo wa là ó lò'gbà nílè Arésikéyè o

May the Lord give every one of us joy, may the king give us joy,

You will have something to do; I will have something to do

Every one of us will enjoy in the house of Arésikéyè, in the house of Egúngúnşọlá

Every one of us will enjoy in the house of Arésikéyè

Bo lẹ gbé 'ye wa sí?

Níbo ni'ye wa wà?

È má mà jó, ẹ má mà jó lọ

Àbèké ọmọ, àbèké ọmọ olóyè

Where did you put our mother?

Where is our mother?

Please don't let her, please don't let her go

Àbèké the child of, Àbèké the child of a chief.

Orí maṣé mí n̄ garawa o (2ce)

Ọmọ tí ò ní le sin'yá

Dépò dépò yòò sin baba

May my head not make me useless.

A child that can neither bury his mother

Nor bury his father

Kí n má ra'sába rẹ é pamó

B'ináwo mi bá ṣẹlẹ

Kí n má ràjò lọ rẹ é pamó

May I not go and hide at Asaba

During my expenses

May I not go on a pretence journey to hide?

Ìyáléelé àbò wa mà rè ó

Ó rán wa níṣé, àwá mà lọ

Ìyáléelé àbò wa mà rè ó

Ìyáléelé this our return

You sent us on errands and will go

Ìyáléelé this is our return

Or

È jé á kúnlẹ́ kí'ye wa) 2ce

Àwa náà yóó dàgbà

È jé á kúnlẹ́ kí'ye wa

Let's knee/ down to greet our mother (2ce)

We will all grow up

Let's kneel down to greet our mother.

È fún wa ní'yàwó wa

Ànábì lai bè yín o

Omi n̄ bè l'ágbàlá wa

'yàwó ò r'odò mọ o

Give us our wife

We beg you in the name of Allah

There is water in our courtyard

The wife is not going to fetch water from the river

(viii) Ọ̀bùn mọ́ ọ̀ rẹ́lá) 2ce

Afínjù n lọ sóde

Ọ̀bùn mọ́ ọ̀ rẹ́lá

Dirty person cuts okro

A neat person is going out

Dirty person cuts okro

Ẹ̀ bẹ̀ mí lóde lọ) 2ce

Asọ mi ò dọtí o

Ẹ̀ bẹ̀ mí lóde lọ

Send me on outing

My cloth is not dirty

Send me on outing

(ix) Ọ̀loun mọ́ jẹ̀ n f' à̀nkòò mi yíríko

Èdèré ò ayé e 'lé

Ọ̀loun mọ́ jẹ̀ n f' à̀nkòò mi yíríko

Èdèré ò ayé e 'lé

Ó gbóko gbóko kò ní yèrì

Ọ̀loun mọ́ jẹ̀ n f' à̀nkòò mi yíríko

God do not allow me to use my uniform to move about villages

Eh in this world oooooooooo

God do not allow me to use my uniform to move about villages

Eh in this world oooooooooo

She stayed in the farm with underwear

God do not allow me to use my uniform to move about villages

Eh in this world oooooooooo

(x) Ñ gbékọ kẹbẹ hìn hìn hín

Ñ gbékọ kẹbẹ

Ìgbàwo ló ó le sin bàbá rẹ, sànta lóloòró ?

Ñ gbékọ kẹbẹ

Ìgbàwo ló ó le sin'yá rẹ ?

Tó ñ gbékọ kẹbẹ

She is eating maize pudding quickly

She is eating maize pudding quickly

When will you bury your own father?

She is eating maize pudding quickly

When will you bury your own mother?

That you are eating maize pudding quickly