# Women of Ile-Ife in Yoruba Religion and Culture

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### Abstract

Ile-Ife is construed as the cradle of human civilization and the origin of the Yoruba people. Ile-Ife has been described as a place where symbolic and historical myths intersect; and as representing a point of intersection between heaven, earth and the underworld (Olupona 2011). The great influence of Ile-Ife manifest in the past as in the present among the Yoruba, in Nigeria, Africa and the Diaspora till today. The worship of orisa is a daily affair in Ile-Ife which explains the popular adage that orisa worship is only absent on a single day in a year in the town. Deities worshipped in Ile-Ife include Obatala, Ifa, Olokun, Olojo, Esu, Osun, Aje and Akire. Women play different roles in the rituals for these deities, as priestesses, custodians of tradition, and conveyor of messages from the deities to worshippers through spirit possession. This paper aims to investigate women's roles in the culture and religion of Ile-Ife by discussing roles played by women in Yoruba religion. It is of qualitative design with twelve purposively selected key informant interviews (KII) and participant observation as tools for primary data gathering, while books, academic journals and the Internet supplied secondary data. Data will be analyzed through content and descriptive analysis. Keywords: Ile-Ife, women, Yoruba religion, orisa, rituals

Introduction le-Ife currently (2023) lies between Longitude 4 degrees 32'E and 4° 34'E and between latitude 7° 29'N and 7° 30'N of the equator.<sup>1</sup> The current metro area population of Ile-Ife is 409, 000 which is an increase of 3.02% from 2022 popu-

lation<sup>2</sup>. There are two local government areas in Ile-Ife presently: Ife central and Ife East.

Historically, Ile-Ife evolved through three epochal phases of existence: Ife Oodaye, Ife Ooye Lagbo and Ife Akanlubebe. In addition, there are thirteen autochthonous communities integrated to form Ile-Ife, which explains the prefix 'Oba' i.e 'king' in the titles of their leaders, for example, Oba Laaye, Oba Loran, and Oba L'ufe<sup>3</sup>. Succession ruling houses in Ile-Ife are four: Ooni Lafogido, Ooni Osinkola, Ooni Ogboru and Ooni Giesi. Ile-Ife is construed as the cradle of human civilization and the origin of the Yoruba people. Ile-Ife has been described as a place where symbolic and historical myths intersect; and as representing a point of intersection between heaven, earth and the underworld (Olupona 2011)<sup>4</sup>. Eluyemi submitted that oral traditions of Ife come from three groups of people: priests/priestesses, chiefs and family heads.

lasu journal of religions & peace studies | Vol. 6, No. 2, October 2024 He identified the thirteen ancient communities that make up Ile-Ife as: Ileedo, Idita, odin, Imojuba, Ijugbe, Iwi nrin, Omo loogun, Iloromu, Iloran, Oke-oja, Iraye, Okeawo and Parakin<sup>5</sup>. The great influence of Ile-Ife manifest in the past as in the present among the Yoruba, in Nigeria, Africa and the Diaspora till today. Again, the indigenous religion of Ile-ife is Yoruba religion.

Yoruba religion is a living and world religion with adherents and influence all over the world. The religion is based on oral tradition, though some significant documentation has occurred in recent times. If a corpus constitutes the major source of instruction and guidance for the religion<sup>6</sup>. Yoruba religion recognizes the existence of a Supreme Being who is the creator and sustainer of the universe. This Supreme Being is known as Olódùmarè (owner of the source). There are many deities, called òrisà, who serve as representatives for Olodumare in the exercise of spiritual power. Each orisa has different responsibilities to exercise divine authority in human affairs and the natural world. For example, Òrúnmìlà is the deity in charge of wisdom, Oya is the goddess in charge of wind and storm, and Osun is the goddess in charge of femininity, fecundity, and wealth. Interactions between humans and the orisa are accomplished mainly in the ritual space through liturgies, songs, sacrifices, trance, divina-

7 tion, recitations, and dances . Ancestors, represented by masquerades (Egúngún), are also venerated as continuing participants in the family and society. Then, there is the belief in spirits of various kinds with diverse jurisdictions. Some of these spirits reside in natural elements such as wind, trees, mountains and rivers. People with relevant indigenous knowledge can consult and seek assistant from these spirits on various challenges in the journey of life. Lastly, there is magic and medicine targeting the utilization of natural laws for human agenda and healing facilities, respectively. Women are the majority of adherents of the religion in both Africa and the Diaspora hence they exert considerable influence on the religion. Integral to this structure of Yoruba religion is the peoples' notion of power.

Power refers to the ability to influence, and the ability of actor (or actors) to realize his or her will in a social action, even against the will of other actors. Power can manifest through coercive means but it also manifest as influence without coercion. Power as a concept is imbued with notions of difference, possession of exclusive knowledge and hierarchy. There are also different kinds of power including coercive power (fear), exchange power (barter) and integrative power (respect) (Hillman 1995)<sup>8</sup>. There are different conceptions of power, for instance, power could be visible or invisible, formal or informal. Again, there is the notion of alternative spaces of power, which could be construed for diverse purposes to cater for people at the margin of any power structure<sup>9</sup>. The Yoruba conceive power as visible and invisible, as well as informal and formal.

lasu journal of religions & peace studies | Vol. 6, No. 2, October 2024 In other words, the invisible is as potent (if not more) as the invisible. Hence while men occupy the visible and formal positions of power, women are in custody of the invisible and informal powers, both of which sustain the Yoruba worldview.

Yoruba religion is a consistent currency in Ile-Ife. The worship of orisa is a daily affair in Ile-Ife which explains the popular adage that orisa worship is only absent on a single day in a year in the town. Deities worshipped in Ile-Ife include Obatala, Ifa, Olokun, Olojo, Esu, Osun, Aje and Akire. Women play different roles in the rituals for these deities as priestesses, custodians of tradition, conveyor of messages through spirit possession and 'mothers'.

This paper aims to investigate women's roles in the culture and religion of Ile-Ife through the years. The paper will discuss roles played by women in Yoruba religion as a background to its aim. It is of qualitative design with twelve purposively selected key informant interviews (KII) and participant observation as tools for primary data gathering, while books, academic journals and the Internet will supply secondary data. Data will be analyzed through content and descriptive analysis. The paper makes attempt to contribute significantly to academic literature on women in religion.

# Women in Yoruba Culture and Religion

Yoruba culture prioritizes communalism and the maintenance of balance in all sectors which explains the absence of absolutism among the people. In every sector of Yoruba worldview, there are checks and balances, areas of specializations and accountability. These notions manifest in many sectors of Yoruba culture and religion seeking to uphold binary and complementary categorizations. Whereas some cultures construe binary categorization as oppositional, the Yoruba perceive it as complementary, hence there are assigned roles for females and males, including non-human elements of nature. The Yoruba insistence for maintaining balance is 'the very ground on which complementary gender relations rest<sup>,10</sup>. Examples of binary categorization could be found in Yoruba oral genres: t'ibi t're l'daleaye meaning 'the world was created to encompass both evil and good tendencies', owo omode to to pepe, t'agbalagba ko wo keregbe meaning 'just as the child's hand cannot reach the house lintel, the elders hand cannot enter the gourd. Again, another clear example of this is the intentional combination of female and male principles in the natural and ritual settings.

Women play distinct roles in Yoruba culture including as mothers, sisters, daughters and wives, but motherhood is the most important role for some reasons. Motherhood is the crest of any woman's desire in Yoruba land and in traditional Yoruba culture all women are mothers, biologically or socially. Girl's are socialized to aspire to be mothers and if for any reason this does not materialize such an individual is regarded as having failed. Women go to any extent to attain

lasu journal of religions & peace studies | Vol. 6, No. 2, October 2024 motherhood due to the tie between fulfillment and childbirth in their subconscious. By extension, women often strive to have at least a son due to the conviction that female children would eventually marry into another family but the male child would remain in the family whereby the lineage could be sustained.

Motherhood in Yoruba parlance goes beyond the biological process of getting pregnant and having a baby. Though it includes the afore-mentioned, it has in addition a psychological dimension. This explains why the term 'mother' could refer to a number of female relations apart from an individual's biological mother. These would include the stepmothers, aunts and senior female cousins. Further, there is the spiritual aspect of motherhood which predicates on the symbolic significance of the elements "poured" or lost during childbirth and upbringing<sup>11</sup>. These are blood and breast milk; both are sources of "power" to the mother over the child among the Yoruba. Mothers are esteemed in the Yoruba outlook because they give and nurture life, but also because a mother has ultimate loyalty to her child in all circumstances. Hence the Yoruba say, Orisà bì ìyá kò sí, meaning 'there is no deity like a mother'. The mother sustains the well-being of her husband and children through regular prayers, offerings, and observance of prescribed taboos. Indeed, a Babalawo (diviner) always demands the name of the client's mother before consultation, and rarely that of the father (interview  $Olawoyin)^{12}$ . The mother is considered to be the authentic source of the child, as it is possible to contest paternity but not the maternity of a child.

Conceptually, motherhood is considered a position of power and as a biological function which is symmetrical with the "motherhood cult" (*iya mi*) in Yoruba religion. Similarly, the powers of the motherhood cult (*iya mi*) could be utilized for furthering or thwarting the plans of humans, both as individuals and as a collective<sup>13</sup>. Inherent in the concept of motherhood among the Yoruba, therefore, is the access of the woman to self-realization and personal fulfillment. Among the Yoruba, then, motherhood manifests meanings at two different but interrelated levels. These levels of meanings could be perceived in the images and actions of processes in Yoruba religion. Images of kneeling and breastfeeding figures (*ikunle abiyamo* and *omu iya*) in the visual arts, for example, reinforce the motif of motherhood as an avenue of power. The two concepts and ideas refer to the ontological dimension of women's power.

Furthermore, the Yoruba woman is socialized to be economically independent by engaging in different economic ventures including pottery, dyeing of cloth, small scale farming, trading, Palm-oil making, food processing, beauty products and hairdressing. Yoruba women are known for long distance trading, known as '*alajapa*' (Itinerary traders). As has been noted, there is gender bifurcation along commodity lines in economic ventures among the Yoruba, for instance it is rare to find a 'baba alamala' among the Yoruba; the familiar term is 'iya alamala.'<sup>14</sup> lasu journal of religions & peace studies | Vol. 6, No. 2, October 2024

In public life, there are records of Yoruba women rulers in the past including Ooni Luwo, women rulers in Akure, Ijebu-Ode, Ijebu-Ife, and Ilesa. Yoruba women serve as regents in some contemporary Yoruba towns (such as Aaye kindom and Iboropa-Akoko in Ondo state), as chiefs e.g iyaloja, iyalode in many Yoruba towns (such as Ile-Ife, Ibadan, Iwo and Osogbo).

In Yoruba religion, women serve as custodians of tradition, priestesses, diviners, mediums, votary maids, medicine women and are involved in the recitation of oral genres. As custodians of tradition, Yoruba women are repositories of indigenous knowledge which they make available to individuals, groups and communities in the face of life's challenges. Priestesses serve as links and bridges between worshippers and the deities, taking messages both ways and giving spiritual guidance were required. As diviners (Iyanifa), Yoruba women provide support systems and directives through Ifa consultation as occasion demands. Some deities, especially river goddesses (Osun, Aje, Yemonja) have votary maids and/or mediums through which they communicate with worshippers and give them instructions towards well-being. Again, Yoruba medicine women are important stakeholders in Yoruba communities because they ensure the sound health of people, especially children and women at childbirth. In addition, the recitation of oral genres (oriki) for deities by women in Yoruba religion constitutes an important component of any worship session. The Oriki of deities, could supply information on the deities' exploits, characteristics, taboos, and preferences. Women are at the forefront of such presentations and performances such as these are normal components of weekly (ose) as well as annual worship sessions. During the weekly session worship of Obatala, for example, women dressed in all white attire praise him thus:

E pa orisa, orisa epa Olua o wa jire bi Agbe won ji taro taro Aluko won ji tosun tosun Lekeleke o ji re pel'efun Erin o je ko binu Oosa t'ro mi titu So'ogun agan Baba to r'omi titu So'ogun abiku

[Great divinity, great divinity / Our Lord, we hope you woke up well / Agbe bird woke up with dye / Aluko bird woke up with camwood / Lekeleke bird woke up with chalk / He laughs and does not get angry / Divinity who uses water / To make medicine for the barren / Father who uses water / To make medicine

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lasu journal of religions & peace studies | Vol. 6, No. 2, October 2024 $15$ for the born-to-die child.]
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Women thus constitute the repositories of cultic history and continue to keep its memory alive through oral poetry performances.

### Women in Ile-Ife Culture and Religion

My resource persons for this research paper comprised of female religious leaders and adherents of Olokun. Osun and Akire deities in Ile-Ife. It came to the fore that women of Ile-Ife play important roles in the peoples' culture as mothers, wives, sisters and stakeholders in the economic and political sectors. According to Madam Abosede Adewopo, motherhood is a crucial role played by women of Ile-If because through the process of children's socialization, mothers lay the foundation for positive inclinations in their children. As wives, Ife women support their husbands both morally and financially. Madam Adetuberu on her part highlighted the significant roles of Ife women in the extended family structure both as daughters (omo ile l'obinrin) and as wives of the lineage (obinrin 'le). Madam Ajelola asserted that women of Ile-Ife are economically versatile, so much so that they engage in trading activities especially as 'alajapa' traders and most of them are economically comfortable. Madam Orimogunje and three other women made submissions on the political roles of Ife women. They discussed the example of Lúwo Gbàgìdá, the first and only female Ooni of IleIfe. Lúwo Gbàgìdá was from Owode compound, Okerewe. She married chief Obaloran of Ilode and was mother of Adekola Telu, who founded Iwo town in Osun State, Nigeria. Her popular legacy was the creation of uncommon pavements made of shreds of pottery which are now within the custody of Ife Museum.

In addition, women serve as chiefs and elders with social responsibilities in the community, both formally and informally. Ile-Ife women are fashionable and elegant with priority to modesty and decency. They adorn different styles of hairdo such as *koju soko* (face your husband), *koroba* (styled like a bow facedown), *adi sehin* (all-back style) and *suku* (bunch style). Also, Ife women adorn beads *(ileke)* of different colours and styles on different occasions.

Specific examples of the roles of Ile-Ife women in the worship of Olokun, Osun and Akire in Ile-Ife will engage our attention presently.

#### Women's roles in Olokun worship in Ile-Ife

Women are adherents and leaders in Olokun worship in Ile-Ife. According to Madam Lomitutu Abosede Adewopo, the Oba Obirin of Olokun. Cleanliness and purity is a prime demand for women during worship and preparation for annual festival (odun). The festival of Olokun starts with specific rituals by the women from the extended family of Olokun worshippers (*obirin-ile*). Thereafter, women ensure the cooking of food. Women make the festival lively with dancing, singing

lasu journal of religions & peace studies | Vol. 6, No. 2, October 2024 and general festivity. Women leaders in Olokun worship in Ile-ife include Oba 'binrin, Iya Lemoso, Apero, Mayegun, Yeye Mogun Mosa and Iya Laje. The women leaders are expected to be role models in character and speech to others in the community. For instance they should be respectable, not given to anger, kind and humble. Examples of taboo for women during the festival are no menstruation, no black and/or red apparel, no fighting, and no enmity with adherents of other orisa<sup>16</sup>.

### Women's roles in Osun worship in Ile-Ife

Adherents of Osun comprise men and women but Osun as a female has special affinity with women worshippers. According to chief Osuntoke Adejoke Aworele, the olori Olosun Agbaaye in the Ooni Ife palace, the symbol of Osun ia a pot sitting on a tripod; she represents the pot while the three Iya gbogbo represent the tripod. Women leaders in Osun worship must be alert always to avert evil in the community through prayers. These women leaders are mothers to the whole town of Ile-Ife. They include olori Olosun, Iyalode, Iya gbogbo 1, Iya gbogbo 2, Iya gbogbo 3 and others. Their duties include divination by using Eerindinlogun (16 cowry shells), kolanuts could also be used (obi did), the conduct of sacrifices, and attending to the existential challenges that clients consult with them on for solutions. The performance of oral genres (oriki) by 'omo Osun' (young daughters and sons of Osun) praising Osun is an integral aspect of the worship sessions. The symbols of Osun are brass bracelets, carton colour cloths and yellow (gold) beads which are usually on display. Taboo for Osun adherents include prohibition from eating cat fish (eja aro), no eating or drinking of guinea corn in any form, no enmity, dressing should be modest and humble conduct always, even when provoked<sup>17</sup>.

#### Women's roles in Akire worship in Ile-Ife

Odo-Ikire is located at the stadium area in Ile-Ife and there women leaders usually offer prayers. During Akire festival, majority of worshippers are women. In fact according to olori Akire, who is also Iyalaje Akire, Madam Aderonke Adenike Olawoyin, in the past, people seeking good wives were usually referred to the shrine of Akire because women found there were of good behaviour. A week before the Akire festival, the wives of the families (*obirin ile*) clean the shrine, adorn the walls of the shrine with artistic drawings, perform oral genres in praise of the deity, cook food (especially beans and maize known as *ososo* and yam pottage i. e *asaro*) and make different types of beads for the deity and the king. Married daughters also join them but may not spend the night rather they go home every night to return the next morning. A peculiar practice during the festival is the 'calling out of the sun' during midnight hours by the women i.e *p'oorun'*. They bring out the orisa Akire and orisa Ewu, another deity. It is at the feet of

lasu journal of religions & peace studies | Vol. 6, No. 2, October 2024 Ewu deity that the sun is called. By early hours of the next day, there will be dew which signals the arrival of the harmattan season.

There are drums to be beaten by women only during the worship of orisa Akire i.e., *ilu olukorigi, Igbin* and *Aro*. In addition, young virgin girls who tie wrapper on their chest as clothing usually go into spirit possession (*mu'bo*) and bring messages from the deity to the adherents during worship. Women leaders in Akire worship are the olori Akire, iyalode Akire, Iya Lorigbo Akire, Iya Oloriaye rekende Akire and Taayese Akire. Duties of women leaders in the cult of orisa Akire include praying for the general well-being of everyone in Ile-Ife, settling disagreements among the women, using Eerindinlogun to divine on various challenges that clients bring to them and proffering solutions as well as good conduct and modest dressing. Taboo for adherents include prohibition from the Akire shrine while menstruating and immediately after sex; from eating jute leaves (*ewedu*), *odu* vegetable and from drinking palm-wine.

It comes to fore from the available data from fieldwork that women are active participants in the religious practices in Ile-Ife at different levels,<sup>18</sup>

## **Discussion of Data**

Similarities of data from all interviews and confirmed by literature on women's roles in Yoruba culture and religion include the demand that women leaders be of good character always as they are role models with social and religious responsibilities in the community. Indeed women in this category are perceived as 'mothers' of all indigenes and dwellers in Ile-Ife. Also, all interviews conducted confirm that tolerance of diversity is required of the women leaders. They are not expected to discriminate against anyone irrespective of differences in affiliations.

In addition, the use of *eerindinlogun* (sixteen cowry shells) is basic to divining capacity of women leaders in Ile-Ife. This does not preclude the use of other means such as *opele* or sand, but basically they all use *eerindinlogun*.

Also, the prohibition of menstruating women from sacred space is a common thread running through the data collected, however the premise for this ban needs to be correctly analyzed. Whereas in other religions, this ban is attributed to contamination, in the Yoruba worldview, the ban emanate from respect for the potency power that menstruating blood carries. It nullifies every other power on contact because it is a conveyor of life. It is important that this premise of menstrual blood as conveyor of superior power be appreciated, to correct the influence of other religions on how the Yoruba perceive power and menstrual blood.

Certain differences could be deduced from data from fieldwork in Ile-Ife. Each orisa has his or her taboo which is to be observed by the adherents rather than same taboo for all orisas. The taboo for each orisa is premised on the nature lasu journal of religions & peace studies | Vol. 6, No. 2, October 2024 and protocol of the deity's personality and worship. For instance, adherents of Osun should not eat fish as fishes are construed as children of Osun.

In addition, spirit possession happens in some worship session of orisa. From the fieldwork conducted for this paper on Olokun, Osun and Akire worship in IleIfe, spirit possession featured only in the worship of orisa Akire. It came to fore that spirit possession occurs on young virgin girls who give messages from the orisa to the worshippers.

It is interesting but in conformity with the absence of absolutism in Yoruba worldview that Osun worship in Ile-Ife requires no virgin girl as votary maid (*Arugba*) as is the case in the worship of Osun in Osogbo.

Again, the beating of specific drums by women only during the festival of orisa Akire is not replicated in either Olokun or Osun worship in IleIfe.

# **Ile-Ife Women in Contemporary Society**

There is a deliberate effort by the present Ooni of Ile-Ife, His Imperial Majesty, Oba Ogunwusi Adeyeye Ojaja II to invest in women empowerment in Ile-Ife through many recorded efforts including the Queen Moremi Educational Fund and Queen Moremi Ajasoro Cultural and Leadership Pageant among others. In March 2023, Queens in Yorubaland converged at the palace of the Ooni of Ife to discuss issues pertaining to the empowerment of women. It was reported that the meeting was facilitated by Queen Ronke Ademiluyi and Queen Janet Afolabi under the Queen Moremi Ajasoro Initiative. These women leaders advocated that it is imperative to make the 'wellbeing of women in their localities a priority----'. Worthy of mention also is the establishment of the free Adire training programme for youths and women at the Oodua Textile Hub, African village, Ife Grand Resorts and Leisure, Ile-Ife.

Religious cults in Ile-Ife continue to sustain informal training for young girls who understudy priestesses and female custodians of tradition on the protocol of different orisa worship. This is significantly aided by globalization which has facilitated ease of contact between adherents of different orisa in the Diaspora and the continent.

## Conclusion

This paper attempts to interrogate women's roles in the culture and religion of Ile-Ife people. It was submitted that women occupy important positions in Ile-Ife culture and religion. The importance of women's roles was substantiated by the Yoruba concept of power, which transcends the visible and formal to the invisible and informal parlance. Three orisa worship in Ile-Ife (Olokun, Osun and Akire) and women's roles therein were examined. Similarities and difference in the three lasu journal of religions & peace studies | Vol. 6, No. 2, October 2024 orisa worship were highlighted. Also, contemporary advocacy for women's wellbeing and empowerment were duly noted. In sum, women in Ile-Ife are stakeholders, who make important contributions to the development of the community through religious, social, ad economic activities and this should be sustained.

#### **ONLINE SOURCES**

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- 13 Olademo, Oyeronke (2022) Women in Yoruba Religions New York: New York University Press
- 14 Olademo 2009: 24
- 15 Fieldwork by Oyeronke Olademo at Ile-Ife on 11th April 2024
- 16 Interview with Mrs. Adewopo and others on 11th April 2024
- 17 Interview with Mrs. Osuntoke Adejoke Aworele on 11th April 2024
- 18 Interview with Mrs. Aderonke Olawoyin on 11th April 2024

	Names	Educational status	Age (yrs)	Address
1.	Mrs. Abosede Adewopo	SS3	45	Olokun Street
2.	Mrs. Oluwafumbi Oshimeye	SS3	37	Olokun Street
3.	Miss. Olubunmi Oyelakin	SS3	23	Olokun Street
4.	Mrs. Adenike Orimogunje	SS3	53	Olokun Street
5.	Mrs. Osuntoke Aworele	Pry. 6	62	Ita-Osun, Ajamopo area
6.	Mrs. Olayemi Ajakaye	SS3	42	Ita-Osun, Ajamopo area
7.	Mrs. Folashade Amoo	SS3	40	Ita-Osun, Ajamopo area
8.	Mrs. Temitope Adebisi	Pry. 6	56	Ita-Osun, Ajamopo area
9.	Mrs. Aderonke Olawoyin	Pry. 6	60	Aiyedun street, Ilare area
10.	Mrs. Olufunke Ajayi	SS3	38	Aiyedun street, Ilare area
11.	Mrs. Abosede Adetuberu	SS3	55	Aiyedun street, Ilare area
12.	Mrs. Peju Ajelola	SS3	47	Aiyedun street, Ilare area

### **Table of interviews**