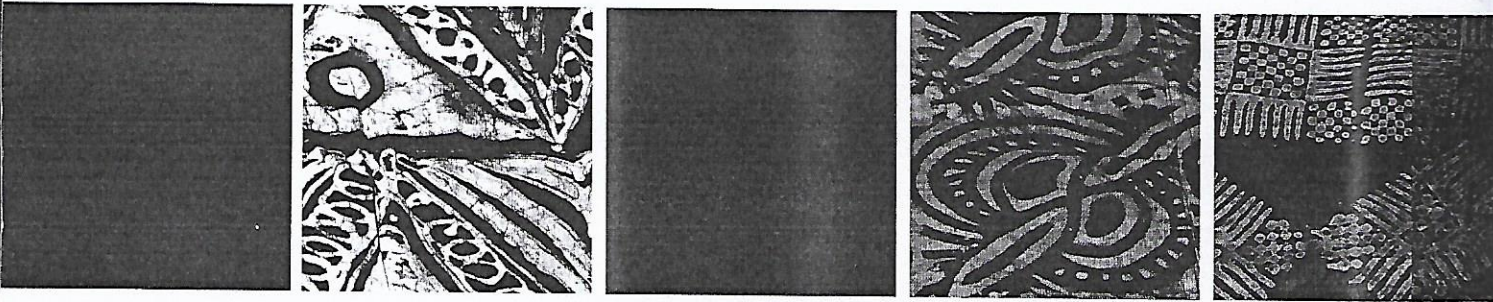


ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE YORUBA

EDITED BY
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Africa

The Yoruba people today number more than 30 million strong, with significant numbers in the United States, Nigeria, Europe, and Brazil. This landmark reference work emphasizes Yoruba history, geography and demography, language and linguistics, literature, philosophy, religion, and art. The 285 entries include biographies of prominent Yoruba figures, artists, and authors; the histories of political institutions; and the impact of technology and media, urban living, and contemporary culture on Yoruba people worldwide. Written by Yoruba experts on all continents, this encyclopedia provides comprehensive background to the global Yoruba and their distinctive and vibrant history and culture.



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WOMEN: TRADITIONAL

Women in precolonial Yorùbá society enjoyed many rights and privileges. Eurocentric scholarship on women in Yorùbáland suggests that women are oppressed and suppressed in the culture. Such representations have received criticism from more critical studies on women in indigenous Yorùbá culture. Scholars like Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí maintain that the concept of gender never existed in precolonial Ọyọ Yorùbá society. In *The Invention of Women*, Oyèwùmí insists that the Yorùbá designations *ọkùnrin* (male) and *obìnrin* (female) were employed merely to denote anatomical differences between males and females, not to preclude either sex from attaining certain social status or to indicate the superiority of one, namely male, over the other. Western notions of social thought, with its fixation on the body as an instrument of selfdefinition and an indicator of destiny, are absent in the Yorùbá worldview.

For Oyèwùmí, biologicism, defined by Heinrich Rommen as “a purely biological concept of human nature” . . . [that] dismisses the efficacy of ‘reason and free will,’” is a Western invention that pervades postcolonial Yorùbá society and other African societies. In Yorùbá language, both *he* and *she* can be rendered as

/o/ or /wɔn/, depending on whether the subject is singular or plural. *Wɔn* could also be honorific to represent seniority, and seniority is given a premium rather than sexual identity. An elderly woman may earn more reverence than a younger man; he defers to her because of her age. Yorùbá women's agency is predicated on the belief *k'ókùnrin r'èjò, k'òbìnrin p'èjò, k'èjò saa ti kú* (if a man sees a snake, and a woman kills it, the most important thing is for the snake to be dead). Realization of collective goals takes precedence over the anatomy of the individual.

Yorùbá cosmology has definite roles for men and women in society. Women play key roles in religious ceremonies as priestesses and prophetesses. Some important deities are female. For instance, several cults, including Ọṣun, Ọgún, and Ẓàngó, have women priestesses who are known as Ìyá Ọṣun, Ìyá Ọgún, and Ìyá Ẓàngó, respectively. The Yorùbá people, like many Africans, believe in the duality of human existence, and this has a physical application, reflected in the people's belief that, according to Kenniston McIntosh, "all undertakings needed to include and harmonize the qualities associated with such pairings as land and water, natural and supernatural forces, and male and female characteristics." Yorùbá religion is anchored in the belief that symbols of calm and peace (*èrò*) represent female principles, whereas toughness represents male principles.

Hence the prayer *k'ódún ó y'abo fún wa o* (may this year bring us all that the female principle stands for). This prayer is a metaphor for the people's conception of female (*abo*) and male (*akò*). A "female year" in this context is blissful; a "male year" is very unpleasant. Maleness or femaleness were prescribed by nature and, as such, were seen not as dialectically opposed attributes but rather as complementary ones. They are also indispensable. The prominence of female deities in the Yorùbá pantheon is a reflection of the fact that maleness or femaleness does not automatically imply exclusion from certain social statuses.

Women in Yorùbáland can be Ifá priestesses. They are better known as Ìyánífá. Tádé Adégbindin, an Ifá scholar, noted that Ifá corpus has several verses that

acknowledge the indispensability of women in the progress of humanity. In the Yorùbá worldview, both men and women must work together to achieve societal goals, not only in procreating but also in providing the values that complement the qualities inherent in men and women. Ifá corpus advocates Ọtúrúpòn Méjì as a panacea for human progress, which demonstrates that wisdom is not inherent in solely one person. The need to harness the wisdom and capabilities of both sexes for human progress includes gender inclusiveness. Indeed, Yorùbá women in precolonial Nigeria were admitted into sacred knowledge (*awo*). As initiates, such women could participate as leaders in high religious ritual practices from which uninitiated men and women were precluded. The admission of women into sacred knowledge translated into religious powers for those women. They went on to serve as diviners (*Ìyánífá*).

With the domestic arrangement, married life represents a space in which the Yorùbá woman possesses and wields social, economic, and political power in her capacity as wife and mother. In the home, J. S. Ọdèyemí describes the woman as "the harbinger of new life, of kings, and noble men. She is the nurturer and the care giver who sustains life until maturity." As the king's wife (*olori*), she is the power behind the throne, surreptitiously contributing to the decisions of the king. Generally, although the role of the woman in the home was crucial in Yorùbá society, women were not confined only to the domestic space. They were able to exercise freedom and engage in diverse trades.

The precolonial Yorùbá woman's active participation in economic activities allowed for accumulation of wealth, through which she accessed sociopolitical space. Prominent examples of women who achieved socioeconomic power and subsequently wielded great political influence in their societies and environs include Ẹfúnṣetán Aníwúrà, the Ìyálóde (woman leader) of Ìbàdàn and Mógàjí of her lineage, and Madam Ẹfúnróyè Tinúbú, the first Ìyálóde of Ẹgbáland. Other women became *adelé ọba* (regents) to fill leadership vacuums in their communities, and some became the *ọba* of their communities, such as in old Onḱó kingdom.

Yorùbá people also believe that some women have extrasensory, celestial powers. Some of these powers are intended for destruction, and these women are referred to as *iyá ayé* (women of the world). Women were often regarded as *atúnnidá*, or women who have the ability to affect one's destiny and possibly change such an individual. As indigenous Yorùbá society is predominantly polygynous, acrimony in households is common. To consolidate one's power in such a home, a woman must bear children; motherhood is highly valued by the Yorùbá people. A proverb states *ọlómọ ló l'ọkọ* (the one who bears children is the owner of the husband). Thus, a barren woman does everything humanly—even spiritually—possible to have a child, which may result in the children of cowives becoming possible targets of attack from a barren woman or other enemies. The issues of having children and the struggle to attract their husband's admiration contribute to rivalries among cowives.

See also Regency; Widow and Widowhood; Women: Colonial; Women: Contemporary; Women in Politics

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