

WOMEN & GENDER

Oyeronke Olajubu. *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003. Bibliography. Index. \$49.50. Cloth. \$16.95. Paper.

This work is an exploration of the interplay of gender and power relations in the worlds of Yoruba religion. Contrary to the general assumption that women play only limited roles in Yoruba religious traditions, Olajubu argues that as the principal repositories of these traditions, Yoruba women are crucial to the conceptualization and practice of both indigenous religion and Christianity. Based on an array of oral and written sources and employing a phenomenological and experiential approach, the work rejects the idea of a prepatriarchal “feminist utopia” for Yorubaland. Instead it attempts to elucidate the paradox that beliefs and practices that had ostensibly undervalued and marginalized women also enabled women to become critical actors within the same religious traditions.

In establishing her thesis, Olajubu examines the role of women in three key areas: traditional Yoruba society, indigenous religion, and Christianity. In the much acclaimed book *The Invention of Women* (Minnesota, 1997), Oyeronke Oyewumi insisted on the nonexistence of gender constructs in precontact Yorubaland. Olajubu strenuously rejects this position, arguing that available evidence on the interaction of Yoruba culture with other world religions confirms the prominence of gender categorizations. She maintains, however, that unlike the situation in Europe and other places, the existence of gender constructs does not translate into oppression and the domination of women by men in Yorubaland, since it is mediated by the principle of complementarity. This principle, which is deeply entrenched in Yoruba cosmology, conceptualizes the paradigms of engagement between the two sexes not on the basis of equality and parity, but of cooperation and specialization. Building on earlier works by Niana Sudarkasa, Rowland Abiodun, Henry Drewal, Jacob Olupona, Lorand Matory, Oyewumi, and others, she maintains that the key question to ask when examining gender relations in Yorubaland is not which sex is dominant, but rather in which areas is each sex preeminent. In any case, gender classification among the Yoruba is essentially culture bound. It is fluid and modulated by other variables such as age and personal achievements, and can be transversely manipulated or even deconstructed in response to structural and ritual needs.

As for women in Yoruba Christian traditions, Olajubu begins with the missionary churches: Catholic, Anglican, Baptist, and Methodist. While noting that there are differences among these churches—with the Roman Catholic Church, for instance, maintaining a strict gender division, and the Anglican Church permitting some degree of gender negotiation—she observes that all the missionary churches to varying degrees excluded women from the exercise of power and authority. Confronted with these

hierarchical and male-dominated religious orders, Yoruba women displayed their inventiveness by deploying the resources offered by indigenous beliefs and practices to create alternative avenues of empowerment and even resistance. They became dominant in the ritual space with regard to worship, singing, prayers, and fasting, and in forming groups (*egbe*) to act in concert to exert pressure on the men, secure concessions, and promote their mutual interests. It is in the African independent churches, however, that Yoruba women have been able to record their most remarkable achievements, crossing gender-restrictive boundaries and excelling as founders, overseers, and especially as “prophetesses” (the most important office) in many of these churches that responded to the need to Africanize the mission churches. The Pentecostal and Charismatic churches nevertheless remain paradoxical for women. Supposedly fluid and unorthodox, they would seem to be contexts in which women could thrive, but this has not always been the case. While there are a few women founders and ordained women ministers, women have remained almost entirely in the background of these explosive movements.

Olajubu is at her best when discussing women in indigenous Yoruba society and religion, a topic that presents us with a fascinating parade of goddesses and of mythical and historical heroines. On Yoruba women and Christianity, the work promises more than it delivers, attempting to cover all the various expressions of Christianity in Yorubaland in just twenty pages. Those expecting an exhaustive exploration of Yoruba women’s engagement with Christianity will be disappointed, but the book does offer an effective picture of women in the mission and independent churches. Even here, however, Olajubu tantalizes us with the juicy story of three women who were ordained in the Ilorin Anglican Diocese and later disrobed, without contextualizing this incident within the framework of the global debate in the Anglican union over the ordination of women.

The examination of women in the Pentecostal/Charismatic churches is also too perfunctory (under three pages) to be satisfactory. Olajubu selects the two most famous of the Pentecostal churches, the Redeemed Christian Church and the Living Faith Church, without giving us any clue as to why these have been chosen or how they have achieved national influence. Other questions remain: To what extent and why have women remained disempowered in these churches? How responsive are these churches to Yorubanization? Furthermore, Islam is left completely out of the study. Given the relative antiquity of Islam in the region and the dynamism of the religion, a comparative examination would have enriched both the data and the analysis.

These criticisms notwithstanding, this is a most valuable work. It is sound in its theoretical underpinnings, rich in its ethnography, penetrating in its analysis, and insightful in its conclusions. Its contributions are many. Methodologically, it is a pace-setter and a major contribution to African feminist study. By engaging in a reappraisal of existing oral traditions from

a feminist perspective, Olajubu is able to retrieve information on religion and gender that has hitherto been subsumed in the patriarchal analysis of history and religion. Second, using this information, she demonstrates how Yoruba women used their dominance of the ritual space, and thus of the approach to the transcendent and the sacred, to exercise invisible but very real power in Yoruba society and culture. She dismisses the argument of many scholars that since this secret knowledge (*awo*) and power are hidden and cannot be verified by scientific method they are thus not rational, insisting that the widespread acknowledgment, resilience, and potency of their knowledge should be enough to establish their importance as well as their “rationality.” Power, influence, and authority, she argues, need not be limited to the visible and the cognitive. Finally, she shows how Yoruba women are creatively deploying the resources of indigenous culture to transform the ritual space in the Christian churches to make the latter less patriarchal, less hegemonic, and more reflective of the Yoruba conceptualization of gender relations as complementary.

Olajubu raises many questions; those she chooses to answer, she answers well. More important, she leaves many pointers and tantalizing hints that other researchers and the author herself can follow up with rich dividends in the future. Her methodology, findings, and conclusions should spur more researches on religion and gender in other cultures as well as in other religions in Yorubaland, such as Islam. Perceptive and provocative, it is a must read for anyone interested in the subjects of gender and religion in modern African societies.

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Nwando Achebe. *Farmers, Traders, Warriors, and Kings: Female Power and Authority in Northern Igboland, 1900–1960*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2005. Glossary. Index. Bibliography. No price reported. Paper.

This study of female power among northern Igbo of the old Nsukka Division of southeastern Nigeria contains many features of a model feminist historical analysis. Achebe examines women’s spiritual power, female economics, and political power during three historic periods—precolonial, early colonial, and late colonial to postcolonial. In addition to drawing on archives, dissertations, government reports, and the diverse publications on the northern Igbo, she makes extensive use of taped life histories and other oral accounts. Copious footnotes include numerous interviews, mostly of women, with all of her interviewees and assistants acknowledged over the lengthy periods of research in 1996 and 1998. Achebe calls those interviewed “collaborators,” a better term than the older anthropological “informants,” with its hegemonic implications.