

## GENDER AND POWER IN MODERN YORUBA

*What Gender is Motherhood? Changing Yoruba Ideals of Power, Procreation and Identity in the Age of Modernity.*

By Oyèrónké Oyewùmí.

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In her 2016 book, *What Gender is Motherhood?* Oyèrónké Oyewùmí develops further the very important argument she put forward in her 1997 monograph, *The Invention of Women, Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. In brief, the central argument is that ‘gender’ as generally perceived today – in terms of a man/woman gender hierarchy of male domination/female subordination – is not as universal as is widely believed. Colonialism imposed this manner of conceptualizing gender on the Yoruba, as well as on many other colonized populations, in Africa and elsewhere. By contrast, pre-colonial Yoruba society was gender neutral: gender played no particular role in social organization, what mattered were hierarchies of seniority and of lineage.

In her new book, Oyewùmí reiterates and elaborates this argument, giving convincing examples from her reading of Yoruba bodies of knowledge, such as the *Ifá* system of divination. She develops her thinking in two directions. First, she traces the role of Yoruba intellectuals and scholars in obscuring this precolonial gender system. Early Yoruba intellectuals were all trained in mission schools, where Christianity in combination with English language learning produced a gendered reading of Yoruba history, mythology, and social institutions. Yoruba language is ungendered, as a general rule, individual names are also not gendered, and kinship terminology expresses relations not of gender, but of seniority and generation (older/younger sibling; parent/child, etc.). Thus the mere translation of Yoruba into English constructs gender categories, where previously, there were none. In making her case, Oyewùmí refers to a series of Yoruba scholars, from founding father Samuel Johnson, the author of *History of the Yorubas* (1921) to Yoruba historians, philosophers, and linguists of the present day. She calls these – generally male – scholars the ‘Gender Dictators’, for their role in imposing hierarchies of gender on Yoruba society. They – along with colonial institutions and Christian missions – helped to create a society of male domination and female subordination.

Attention to language, specifically Yoruba and English, plays a major role in Oyewùmí’s work. Because gender is built into the English language, Oyewùmí contends that it is important to create new and different concepts for expressing an ungendered, seniority-based ethos. That realm constitutes the second direction of new developments in Oyewùmí’s thinking. In Yoruba epistemology, motherhood – or *Ìyá* – is central. *Ìyá* is procreative power (Oyewùmí insists that *Ìyá* is ungendered), but *Ìyá* works through ‘anafemale’ bodies. ‘Anafemale’ and ‘anamale’ are innovative concepts, introduced in Oyewùmí’s 1997 book, that describe male and female bodies without reference to pre-set gender power relations. To express the all-important procreative power, Oyewùmí introduces the word ‘matripotency’: ‘The matripotent ethos expresses the seniority system in

that *Ìyá* is the venerated senior in relation to their children' (58). (As the grammar in that sentence indicates, Oyewùmí chooses to use the plural pronoun 'they' when referring to *Ìyá* in order to avoid the English gendered designations suggested by 'her' and 'him'.) According to Oyewùmí, no one is greater, older, or more senior than *Ìyá*, and the key unit to the Yoruba social order is constituted by *Ìyá* and 'their' child or children. Fatherhood, by contrast, does not carry the same weight – it is socially established, and not necessarily biological. A father is connected to children through marriage only; the bond they share is not spiritual and thus does not bear much resemblance to the relationship between *Ìyá* and child.

Oyewùmí's book is an important one. Her thinking is crucial for venturing beyond the patriarchal smokescreen, which has been cast by Abrahamic religions and supported by colonial languages, institutions, and power. New connections and relationships take centre stage and new understandings are generated by moving away from gender analysis and focusing instead on hierarchies of seniority and *Ìyá*-child relations. Furthermore, as Oyewùmí points out, 'seniority-based categories are relational and do not draw attention to the body. This is very much unlike gender or racial hierarchies, which are rigid, static and exclusive, in that they are permanently promoting one category over the other' (71).

One problem with Oyewùmí's approach, in this book as well as in the 1997 one, are her very scant references to other African feminist scholars who have been making arguments along similar lines. While she spends pages discussing the work of mainly male Yoruba scholars, she neglects to mention how fellow Nigerian feminists – Ifi Amadiume, Niara Sudarkasa, and Nkiru Nzegwu, among others – have proposed comparable interpretations. In her 1987 book, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, Amadiume focused on the ways in which colonial powers imposed Western gender classifications on Igbo social life, and in later books she has developed her analysis regarding the mother-child dyad as a key matricentric unit, even in a patrilineal kinship structure. Her perspective is not exactly that of Oyewùmí, but obviously there are strong parallels between them. Why not credit Amadiume and her research? Similar points could be made about the work of Sudarkasa and Nzegwu, both of whom are only very briefly mentioned in a note (227). In comparison with Oyewùmí's 1997 book, this one is more narrowly focused on Yoruba society; the narrow focus is reasonable, in as far as it makes for more detailed and closely focused studies. It is a pity, however, that Oyewùmí does not discuss the possible broader applicability of these Yoruba insights.

In her important 2007 paper, Latin American feminist philosopher Maria Lugones built on Oyewùmí's work (as well as on the work on other gender scholars) to coin the concept 'the coloniality of gender'. Oyewùmí does refer briefly to Lugones, but she does not adopt her general but useful concept into her own thinking. This again is a pity, I think. Even while insisting on an exclusive focus on a Yoruba problematic, Oyewùmí could have adopted Lugones's general concept to advance her own argument and explore how the Yoruba case details some of the ways in which the coloniality of gender works and has worked in practice. By doing so, Oyewùmí could have turned her book into a much clearer contribution to this larger discussion.

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