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Female Childhood Socialisation in Nineteenth-century Yorubaland[2]

Introduction

In spite of the many scholastic works on Yoruba women in the nineteenth century, investigation into their social lives remains scarce.[3] What we do know about women in the period focuses on their active economic and political lives, which have been described as enviable as compared to the status of women in many societies of the same period. Since women were predominantly traders and crafts(wo)men, they contributed significantly to the economic development of the region. Moreover, for the few who succeeded in amassing significant wealth through trade, they went on to convert this wealth into political power and influence. It is therefore no wonder that scholarship has centred on this aspect of women's lives. The little research that does exist on women's social lives takes the category 'woman' as a given. It discounts any childhood socialisation process responsible for making them 'women' and simply takes biological sex as an equivalent to being a cultural woman. This article seeks to correct this oversight. Using a combination of primary and secondary sources, and Yoruba oral traditions, this study investigates how childhood socialisation in the nineteenth century transformed biological females into social women.

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2 This paper is part of a dissertation written for a PhD upgrade at the University of Exeter. I want to thank Dr Stacey Hynd for her insightful comments and suggestions and Dr Staffan Mueller-Wille and Dr David Thackeray for their recommendations.

3 The Yoruba are an ethnic group who live in present day South West Nigeria.

The 'woman' question in Yoruba history

Before discussing girls in nineteenth-century Yorubaland, one must first ask if the social classification 'women' existed. Some scholars argue that asking the 'woman' question in the context of pre-colonial Yorubaland is an ahistorical Eurocentric imposition on Yoruba history. In her book *The Invention Of Woman*, Oyeronke Oyewumi argues that 'woman' as a social category did not exist in pre-colonial Yorubaland. She contends that although the Yoruba recognised biological sex differences, sex carried no social value. She writes that 'unlike the west, physical bodies were not social bodies… and the presence or absence of certain organs did not determine social position or …social hierarchy… in fact, there were no women – defined in strictly gender terms'.[4] Rather, she suggests that pre-colonial Yorubaland was a gerontocratic society where rank, status, and hierarchy were determined by age and seniority.[5]

Contrary to Oyewumi's argument, although social constructs based on sex were few, they nevertheless existed. To cite a few examples, Lorand Matory identifies that in the nineteenth century, bride wealth payment and polygamy were common occurrences while dowry and polyandry were inconceivable.[6] Furthermore, both women's consanguineal and conjugal residences were patrilocal.[7] In fact, seniority in these patrilocal residences was not determined by actual age, but the length of one's attachment to it. Thus, regardless of her age, a new bride was considered younger than every child born into the lineage before her wedding. Women consequently experienced a mid-life social demotion at marriage to which men were immune.[8] It can therefore be argued that women did exist, and the Yoruba practised some elements of biological determinism.

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[4] Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. ix-xii.
[5] Oyewumi, p. xiii.
[6] Bride wealth is used here as a general term for the transfer of wealth and labour from the groom to the bride's family before marriage.
[7] J. Lorand Matory, *Sex and the Empire That Is No More: Gender and the Politics of Metaphor in Oyo Yoruba Religion* (University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. xxvi.
[8] J. D. Y. Peel, 'Gender in Yoruba Religious Change', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 32 (2002), 136–166 (p. 139).

However, social distinctions based on sex must not be overemphasised. Oyewumi is right to argue that pre-colonial Yorubaland was essentially a gerontocratic society where age determined social status and hierarchy. The Yoruba language, which largely lacks any indication of sex, is a good example of this. First, there are no Yoruba gender pronouns. Words like he, she, him or her have no direct Yoruba translation. Additionally, words like brother, sister, uncle, and aunt that indicate gendered familial relations are also absent. In fact, the word for husband *(ọkọ)* is frequently used as a term of endearment for both sexes, while the Yoruba words for wife, mother and father, although gender specific, are frequently used outside familial relations as an expression of fondness and respect.[9] However, since the nineteenth century, when missionaries began translating Yoruba to English, the non-gendered nature of the language has been widely misunderstood and ignored, and as a result, misinterpretations are endemic in Yoruba translations. For instance, the Yoruba word *ọba*, often translated as king, is more accurately ruler, a gender-neutral term. *Orișa*, usually translated as gods and goddess means deity, while *ènìyàn*, often translated as man lacks gender connotations and is literally translated as human being.[10]

Rather than sex, the language makes substantial distinctions according to seniority. For example, age pronouns such as *wọn* for elders and *o* for those considered to be in the same age grade or younger, are used instead of gender indicative ones. Furthermore, the Yoruba use the words *ègbón* and *àbúrò*, which mean an elder and younger sibling or relative respectively to express familial relations. Yoruba proper names are also largely gender neutral. Writing at the turn of the century, Samuel Johnson, a Yoruba missionary with the Church Missionary Society (CMS), stated that the Yoruba recognised no gender differences in language and any distinctions

[9] Yisa Kehinde Yusuf, 'Sexism, English and Yoruba', *Linguistik online*, 11, 7–23 (pp. 15-16).
[10] Yusuf, pp. 7–23.

introduced by missionaries must first be explained to them.[11] Hence, if we agree with Mikhail Bakhtin that language is a representation of a people's worldview, then it is clear that the Yoruba saw society in ageist terms.[12]

In such a society, being biologically female held few social consequences. Older women outranked younger men, and women as daughters, sisters and mothers had considerable power in the lineage. As daughters, women had the same rights as sons, which they continued to hold even after marriage. They could inherit at their consanguineal home, and could return in case of a failed marriage (although uncommon), or at old age.[13] In their conjugal homes, they were expected to work, earn money, and remain financially independent of their husbands. In fact, some women went on to acquire considerable wealth and influence. However, one question, which remains unanswered, is how biological females became socially gendered as women in pre-colonial Yorubaland. In order words, what social processes transformed biological females into cultural women? In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Bourvoir writes that 'one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one'.[14] Judith Butler similarly argues that becoming a woman was not by virtue of genitalia, but was rather a social process, 'a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate at the end'.[15] Being a woman is therefore not an instrument of

[11] Samuel Johnson (1846-1901) was a Sierra Leonean missionary (originally from Oyo) with the CMS. He completed the book *History of the Yoruba* in 1897; however, it was not published till1921. His comment is significant because from 1892, the British colonial government had continued to extend its influence into the interior of Yorubaland. Nonetheless, this incursion had little effect on the language. Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas: From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate*, ed. by Obadiah Johnson, Reissue (Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. xxxvi–xxxvii.

[12] M. M. Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson, New edn (University of Texas Press, 1982), pp. 291–2.

[13] It is unclear what constituted a failed marriage in pre-colonial Yorubaland. Some sources suggest that women who were childless often left their husband's home thus ending the marriage. Others claim that women could be taken back to the consanguineal homes for disobedience while other arguments state that women could leave their husbands for maltreatment or extreme physical violence. See Peter C. Lloyd, 'Divorce Among the Yoruba', *American Anthropologist*, New Series, 70 (1968), 67–81.

[14] Simone de Bourvoir, *The Second Sex,* trans. by E.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1973), p. 301.

[15]Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New edn (Routledge, 2006), p. 45.

biology but a cultural performance.[16] It is this process of becoming a woman that will be examined in this paper.

This study analyses female children in nineteenth-century Yorubaland. It asks how girls were socialised as children to recognise their status in society, and what gendered roles they were expected to perform as children and daughters. It uses Joan Scott's definition of gender as 'a social category imposed on a sexed body'.[17] However, it identifies that in pre-colonial Yorubaland, gender was not *a* social category but *multiple*, unstable categories, constituted and modified over time and in different contexts.

Methodology

Erving Goffman argues convincingly that there is nothing intrinsic to being a child. 'Children are historical, cultural, political, and social productions' onto whom acceptable social conducts, values, beliefs and behaviors are instilled through a continuous 'molding' process known as socialisation.[18] During childhood, children learn to understand and interpret their environment and interpersonal relationships, which in turn influence their development and future interactions.[19] Through socialisation, they begin to recognize their roles, duties, and responsibilities in society through their actions, and the people with whom they often interact.[20] Therefore, childhood socialisation is instrumental to transforming biological females into cultural women. Nonetheless, childhood socialisation in nineteenth-century Yorubaland remains a

[16] Butler, p. 9.
[17] Joan W. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', *The American Historical Review*, 91 (1986), 1053–1075 (p. 1056).
[18] Erving Goffman, 1967 cited in Norman K. Denzin, *Childhood Socialisation. Second Edition* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers), pp. 2-3.
[19] 'Childhood' varies across historical time periods and cultures. For the nineteenth-century Yoruba, I use childhood to denote the period from birth until the ages of eighteen or nineteen when girls are considered as adults and expected to marry. Jay Belsky, Laurence Steinburg and Patricia Draper, 'Childhood Experience, Interpersonal Development, and Reproductive Strategy: An Evolutionary Theory of Socialization', *Childhood development*, 62 (1991), 647–670 (p. 650).
[20] Sarah Lund Skar, 'Andean Women and the Concept of Space/Time', in *Women and Space: Ground rules and social maps*, ed. by Shirley Ardener, Second edn (Guildford and King's Lynn: Biddles Ltd, 1997), p. 37.

largely unexplored topic. Using a diverse methodology including the remarks of nineteenth-century observers, fleeting comments by sociological researchers, and Yoruba oral traditions, this essay will attempt to piece together a revealing, albeit limited, view of childhood socialisation in the nineteenth century.

It can be argued that, since nineteenth-century observers of Yorubaland were predominantly western or western-trained, their Eurocentric bias would render their observations unreliable. However, like other researchers of African history, the author has had no reason to doubt the validity of their observations. For instance, because of religious bias many missionaries declared certain local Yoruba practices 'barbaric and savage'. Nonetheless, their motive to convert the people meant that they invested much time and energy into learning Yoruba cultures, institutions, and languages. Thus, their observations of Yoruba life are surprisingly insightful and accurate, and hence relevant to pre-colonial study. While speaking against Yoruba marital arrangements in January 1864, a missionary wrote that '…young married women should be keepers at home and guide the house. In this country, women are consistently in the market, or carrying loads, or doing some work'.[21] Despite the observer's western prejudices concerning the 'proper' duties of wives, his observation that Yoruba women worked outside the home is correct. In fact, working was a compulsory duty for every wife. Missionary publications such as *Central Africa: Adventures and Missionary Labours in several countries in the Interior of Africa from 1849-1856* by Thomas Jefferson Bowen, an American Southern Baptist Missionary in Yorubaland, are especially relevant because they give insight into the mundane, everyday life of the time which is useful when studying social history. Furthermore, many western anthropologists recorded Yoruba oral traditions verbatim giving even more insight to local beliefs, customs and

[21] Iwe Irohin, 23 January, 1864.

traditions.[22] In the few instances where the author doubted the accuracy of nineteenth-century reports, they were crosschecked with more contemporary sociological sources.

It is important to note that although this article analyses female childhood socialisation, children's actual experiences and subjectivities in the nineteenth-century are absent. Since Yorubaland was non-literate, almost everything we know about females comes through the voices and writings of men whether missionaries, western travellers, explorers or anthropologists. However, if we are to comprehend the realities of females, they must speak for themselves rather than having their voices colonised by men.[23] Therefore, this paper makes no claim to the 'true' experiences of young girls. What is presented here are the cultural ideals and notions regarding socialisation in the nineteenth century.

The Lineage

To analyse female childhood socialisation, we must first explore the environment children were raised. This requires an understanding of the Yoruba family. Since the family is the social environment to which children are first exposed and within which they spend most of their childhood, it is considered to be the most influential social context for childhood development and socialisation.[24] In nineteenth-century Yorubaland, the familial environment was the lineage.

The Yoruba lineage was the primary mode of association and identity in the nineteenth-century. Theoretically, the lineage comprised of a group of people who traced their origin along agnatic lines to a single ancestor, and their wives, living together in a spatial patrilocal dwelling known as

[22] In this context, oral traditions are historical or cultural knowledge transmitted verbally through generations, which preserve the laws, customs and beliefs of non-literate peoples.
[23] This issue has been widely debated in feminist literature. See Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', *Feminist Review*, (1988), 61–88; Linda Alcoff, 'The Problem of Speaking for Others', *Cultural Critique*, 20 (1991), 5–32; Manjit Bola et al, 'I. Representing Ourselves and Representing Others: A Response', *Feminism and Psychology*, 8 (1998), 105–110.
[24] Hartup W. Williard, 'The Social Worlds of Children', *American Psychologist*, 4 (1979), 944–950 (p. 944).

the compound (*ìdílé*).[25] In reality however, the nineteenth-century lineage was a flexible, accommodating and heterogeneous entity, which included slaves, pawns, strangers and hangers on who attached themselves to certain households.[26] With time, these people were fully absorbed into the lineage and became indistinguishable from the primary group.[27]

The lineage was an economic, social, political, religious and judicial unit. Land was corporately owned by the lineage and granted to members according to their needs.[28] Marriages were brokered amongst lineages, bride wealth was corporately paid, and everyone was responsible for the conjugal success of its members. Likewise, in the event of death, the levirate marriage system ensured that women remained in the household.[29] Chieftaincy candidates and other public official were also nominated from within lineages, and members collectively worshiped household deities. Remarkably, lineages also internally policed their members, and disputes were only referred to higher authorities if they could not be resolved in-house. Outside the household, lineage members were collectively responsible for the behaviour of their individual members, with sometimes dire consequences. In 1851, an entire family in Ibadan was sold for gunpowder because one of its members showed no remorse for murder at his execution. Similarly, an entire household in Kúdetì was sold into slavery because a member started a fire that burnt down two hundred houses and killed a drunken man.[30] All individuals were born into a lineage and remained in one for a lifetime. Even death did not release a person from lineage affiliations as

[25] William R. Bascom, 'The Principle of Seniority in the Social Structure of the Yoruba', *American Anthropologist*, New Series, 44 (1942), 37–46 (p. 37); William B. Schwab, 'Kinship and Lineage Among the Yoruba', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 25 (1955), 352–374, (p. 352); P. C. Lloyd, 'Family Property Among the Yoruba', *Journal of African Law*, 3 (1959), 105–115 (p. 107).
[26] William Bascom, *The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria* (Waveland Press Inc, 1984), p. 23.
[27] Ruth Watson, *"Civil Disorder Is the Disease of Ibadan": Chieftaincy and Civic Culture in a Yoruba City: Chieftaincy and Civic Culture in a Colonial City* (James Currey, 2003), p. 27; Bascom, 'Principle', p. 37.
[28] Lloyd, 'Family property', p. 105.
[29] Schwab, p. 356.
[30] Church Missionary Society Microfilm Collection, CMS/CA2/O: Original Papers- Missionaries (cited hereafter as Journal), Daniel Olubi, 24 December 1868

they were buried in the compound and worshipped as ancestors who were expected to intervene in the lives of their descendants.[31]

The spatial location of the lineage was the *ìdílé* (compound). The compound was physically structured in a way that promoted community and intercourse within the compound while remaining independent and protected from the outside.[32] The compound was a large square structure with a single doorway leading into it. It had a hollow square centre that was used for general purposes of livestock rearing, cooking, and crafts.[33] The compound building was divided into rooms that faced inward and men were allocated separate rooms from their wives. While younger children slept with their mothers, older ones slept together in a piazza that ran round the entire compound. During the day, this piazza was used for receiving visitors, conducting family meetings, and transacting business. Most of the lineage's activities were conducted within the compound walls, invisible to the outside world.[34]

[31] Schwab, p. 357; Helen Callaway, 'Spatial Domains and Women's Mobility in Yorubaland, Nigeria', in *Women and Space: Ground rules and social maps*, ed. by Shirley Ardener, Second edn (Guildford and King's Lynn: Biddles Ltd, 1997), pp.165–182 (p. 174).

[32] Lidia Sciama, 'The Problem of Privacy in Mediterranean Anthropology', in *Women and Space: Ground rules and social maps*, ed. by Shirley Ardener, Second edn (Guildford and King's Lynn: Biddles Ltd, 1997), pp. 87–111 (p. 89).

[33] Afolabi Ojo, 'Traditional Yoruba Architecture', *African Arts*, 1 (1968), p. 15.

[34] Anna Hinderer, *Seventeen Years in the Yoruba Country. Memorials of Anna Hinderer* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1877), p. 59; Johnson, pp. 98–9.

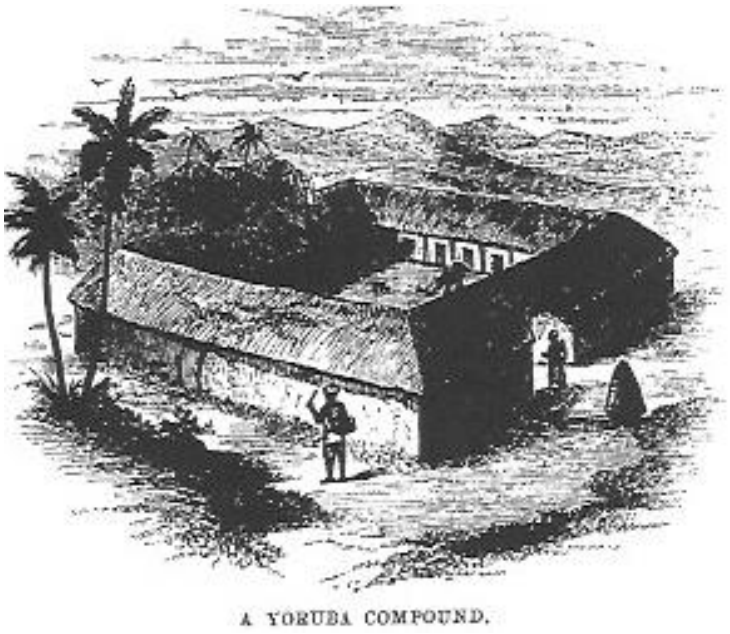

Figure 1 - A Yoruba compound [35]

In 1860, William Clarke, a Southern Baptist missionary, wrote that within the compound walls, 'discussion, laughter, scolding, story-telling, jokes and proverbs' could be heard as inhabitants went about their daily tasks, thus illustrating a certain vibrancy within.[36] Just before the compound entrance stood the lineage deity, represented by an idol. Lineage members were expected to worship it before and after the day's task. In turn, the deity was responsible for the protection of all the household members. Clarke wrote that life was more sacred in the compound than anywhere else. He stated that even town chiefs could not interfere in its activities.[37] However, this may have depended on the town because although lineage structure was identical across Yorubaland, town politics was not. They differed across regions, and town officials had varying degrees of control over the lineage.[38] Nonetheless, the lineage was the primary social grouping in the nineteenth century, and people could not exist outside of it. It was

[35] Church Missionary Society Microfilm Collection, Special Collections, Main Library, The University of Birmingham, CMS/M/EL1: *Church Missionary Gleaner (hereafter CMG)*, 1888.
[36] William H. Clarke, *Travels and Explorations in Yorubaland, 1854-1858* (Ibadan University Press, 1972), p. 237.
[37] Clarke, p. 264.
[38] Some important examples are Abeokuta, Ibadan, and Ijaiye that practiced a limited monarchy, military oligarchy, and military dictatorship respectively.

within this lineage that female children were born.

Childhood socialisation in the nineteenth-century

Henry Drewal writes that the Yoruba made few distinctions between young boys and girls.[39] As children, they quickly learned the age hierarchy and recognised that they were at the base.[40] Discursively, the Yoruba promoted mutual respect, collaboration, and cooperation between the young and the old. The proverb *Ówó omode ko to pepe, ti agbalagba ko wo kèrégbè* – 'the hand of a child can not reach the ceiling, that of an elder can not enter the hole', emphasised the need for older and younger people to work together for a successful society.[41] However, in reality, Yoruba society was more gerontocratic.[42] Young people were considered irrelevant, naïve, fickle, and pictures of vulnerability and candour and were expected to be obedient and unquestioning at all times. Their main duties were to do the bidding of adults and assist in whatever ways they could. In return, they had the right to food, shelter and care.[43] Nevertheless, children were not completely powerless since they had authority over wives married into their household, who were considered to be their social juniors.[44]

Within the lineage, children formed the strongest emotional, intimate and affective bonds with their mother and maternal siblings known as *ọmọ iya* (children of the same mother).[45] This group formed the smallest cohesive unit in the household. Helen Callaway argues that maternal

[39] Henry Drewal, 'Art and the Perception of Women in Yorùbá Culture (L'art Et Le Concept De Féminité Dans La Culture Yoruba)', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 17 (1977), 545–567.
[40] The only people lower on the hierarchy were wives.
[41] A. A. Kila, *Owe. Yoruba in Proverbs*, First (Akada Press, 2003), p. 13.
[42] Olufunke Adeboye, 'The Changing Conception of Elderhood in Ibadan, 1830-2000', *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 16 (2007), 261–278 (p. 264).
[43] Kila, p. 13, 64.
[44] Seniority was expressed in several ways. For instance, junior wives could not call children born into their husband's lineage before their marriage by their first names. Rather they used nicknames and referred to them with gender pronouns used for elders. New wives also did more domestic work than older daughters. Taiwo Makinde, 'Motherhood as a Source of Empowerment of Women in Yoruba Culture', *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 13 (2004), p. 167.
[45] Bascom, 'Yoruba', p. 46; Elisha P. Renne, *Population and Progress in a Yoruba Town* (University of Michigan Press, 2003), p. 34; Niara Sudarkasa, *The Strength of Our Mothers: African and African American Women and Families - Essays and Speeches* (Africa Research & Publications, 1996) p. 101.

bonds were forged because mothers were responsible for feeding and clothing their children while the patrilineage only provided shelter.[46] Women were also responsible for teaching their daughters and sons a good work ethic, at least until the age of six when boys were old enough to work with their fathers.[47] Through daily observation and instruction, women taught children cultural practices, good morals, and proper behaviour, socialising them into Yoruba patterns. Marjorie Macintosh writes that from early childhood these *ọmọ iya* shared the same living quarters and were directly responsible for each other's welfare, grouping together against other *ọmọ iya* in case of internal discord. Although fathers had official and jural rights over children, they had fewer responsibilities towards them and consequently, less daily interactions. In order to get notice and recognition from these remote fathers, children learned from an early age to be 'competitive, combative, and assertive'.[48]

Children were charged with some of the household tasks. They cared for the old and invalids who were too weak to care for themselves.[49] They, along with new brides, were responsible for household sanitation, cooking during feasts, tending to livestock, and other such domestic duties.[50] As children, they were also more likely to be pawned when the family incurred debts.[51] From birth until the age of six to eight, children remained under the supervision of their mother.[52] After this, male and female childhood socialisation began to differ.[53] While boys began

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[46] Callaway, p. 180.
[47] Schwab, p. 366.
[48] Tola Adeniyi, *The Jewel: The Biography of Chief (Mrs.) H.I.D. Awolowo* (Gemini Press, 1993), p. 22 cited in Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, *Yoruba Women, Work, and Social Change* (Indiana University Press, 2009), p. 92.
[49] Drewal, 'Art', p. 561.
[50] Renne, p. 89.
[51] Until the British outlawed it in the 1930s, when a person borrowed money, he could agree to work or pawn a relative to work for the creditor as interest until it was repaid. For more on pawns, see Elisha P. Renne, 'Childhood Memories and Contemporary Parenting in Ekiti, Nigeria', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 75 (2005), 63–82 (pp. 65–8).
[52] McIntosh, p. 92; Olumbe Bassir, 'Marriage Rites Among the Aku (Yoruba) of Freetown', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 24 (1954), 251–256 (p. 252).
[53] Evidence from multiple documentary sources suggest that male and female children were treated identically until the ages of six to eight. See Clarke, 237-240; Percy Amaury Talbot, *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria: a Sketch of Their History, Ethnology and Languages, with an Abstract of the 1921 Census* (Oxford University Press, H. Milford, 1926), pp. 388–9; Schwab, p. 366.

spending an increasing amount of time with men, girls began to learn their mother's commercial activities, which was usually trade.

Girls learned to work by accompanying, assisting and imitating older women in their domestic and economic duties. They were initially given light tasks and slowly progressed to harder work. For girls who learned trade, they first accompanied their mothers to the market to observe and assist, and later, they became responsible for trading in their mother's absence. When they could be trusted with this they began hawking locally before venturing further afield, first to the rural markets surrounding the towns and then joining large caravans to trade in distant towns and markets.[54] These activities prepared girls for a life of rigorous economic activity, and ensured that they had the tools needed to survive and excel in the nineteenth-century markets.

Figure 2 - Young girls accompanying older women in household tasks.[55]

[54] Bọlanle Awẹ, 'Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura (Owner of Gold)', in *Nigerian women in historical perspective*, ed. by Bolanle Awe (Ibadan: Sankore/Bookcraft, 1992), pp. 55–71 (p. 60).
[55] Album of 126 photographs taken in Nigeria by C T Lawrence 1900-1910, National Archives, CO1069/68

Nineteenth-century markets were more than places for buying and selling, they were social venues. Nineteenth-century records explain that markets were social sites where people met, traded, conversed, and socialised. It was no coincidence that most missionaries preached in markets where they felt they could reach the most people. The principal market was in the evening after the day's work. Bowen observed that at this time 'all sorts of people, men, women, girls, travellers lately arrived in caravans, farmers from the field, and artisans from their houses pour[ed] in from all directions to buy and sell, and talk'. He wrote that at the markets, market women were especially noisy, 'and in their glory, bawling out salutations, cheapening and haggling, conversing, laughing, and sometimes quarrelling', with a determination and ability to make themselves heard and make the sale.[56] In such an exciting and boisterous environment, girls learned the necessary skills of assertiveness, confidence, negotiation, friendliness, financial savvy, and other social skills needed to be successful both at the market and in the communal environment of the compound.

Clarke wrote that boys had more leisure time than girls. A typical day for girls began with performing their household duties, and then accompanying their mothers to the market for the morning trade. At midday when there was a 'lull in excitement', they hawked their wares around the town before returning for the evening markets.[57] When the workday was over, boys and girls then played together. This usually took the form of sitting in groups while an adult asked riddles and told folktales. While riddles were meant to encourage quick wit, intellect and intelligence, folktales taught cultural knowledge and moral ideals.[58] These folktales expressed indigenous principles of right and wrong and, as M. I Ogumefu wrote in 1929, as a rule, the wicked were

[56] Thomas Jefferson Bowen, *Central Africa: Adventures and Missionary Labours in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa from 1849-1856* (Lightning Source UK Ltd, 2011), p. 296.
[57] Clarke, p. 240.
[58] Bascom, *Yoruba*, pp. 98–9.

punished and the good rewarded.[59] Ideals of generosity, responsibility, respect, loyalty and even financial acumen were weaved into tales that children could easily understand and learn from.

Figure 3 - Young girls hawking[60]

In the book *Yoruba-Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa,* first published in 1894, A. B Ellis, a colonial anthropologist, recorded some Yoruba folktales. Although recorded in English, which must certainly have compromised some Yoruba concepts and ideas, several of these folktales articulate pre-colonial expectations of how girls should act and behave. One such folktale is *The Story About a Woman Whose Little Girl Made Palm-Oil*. It has been shortened and paraphrased form the original text for brevity.

[59] M.I. Ogumefu, *Yoruba Legends* (NuVision Publications, LLC, 2007), p. 1.
[60] *CMG*, 1850

[A little girl was an apprentice in her mother's palm oil trade. One day she stayed back at the market to trade long after her mother had left. After dark, a goblin purchased some palm-oil from her but paid her fee short of one cowry. She quickly realised this and asked for her complete fee but the goblin said he had run out of money and she would just have to accept the payment given. She began crying insisting that she would be beaten if she went home without the full amount. At this point, the goblin began walking away and the girl followed insisting he paid her what she was due. The goblin asked her to turn back because he lived in a distant and dangerous place but the girl insisted that she would not turn away until she was paid in full. They walked for miles and miles, through a town where people walked on their heads, through a river of blood, into a gloomy forest, and over the Crag Mountains. All the while, the goblin persistently enjoined her to turn back but she refused.]

[Finally they arrived at the land of the dead where the goblin lived. Here, he gave the girl some palm kernels, told her to make oil, eat it, and give him the kernel to eat. Instead, she gave him the palm oil and ate the kernel. He then gave her a banana, asked her to eat it and give him the peel. Instead, she ate the peel and gave him the banana. The goblin then showed her an *ado* bush and asked her to pick three *ado* fruits.[61] He warned her not to pick the ones that cry out to be chosen, but to pick the silent ones instead. He then instructed her to return home breaking one fruit halfway, one at the entrance to her compound, and the last inside her compound. The girl did as she was told and when she broke the first, many slaves and horses appeared and followed her. When she broke the second, many livestock including sheep, goats and fowls numbering more than two hundred appeared. And when she broke the third, the house overflowed with cowries.]

[61] It is uncertain what these ado fruits are called in contemporary language.

> [Her mother took twenty pieces of cloth, twenty pieces of jewellery, and twenty livestock and gave it to the head wife as a present.[62] When the head wife enquired and was told what happened, she refused the gifts and insisted that she would send her own daughter and get as much. So the head wife's daughter headed off to the market with palm oil. Again the goblin came, did not pay her in full, and the girl insisted she would follow him home for payment. When they reached the land of the dead, the goblin gave her palm nuts, asked her to make palm oil, eat the oil and give him the kernel. This time, the girl did just that. He then gave her a banana and told her to eat the fruit and give him the peel, which she again did. He then told her to pick three *ado* fruits, not the ones that begged to be chosen but the silent ones. However, she disobeyed and picked the ones that cried out. When she broke the first, a number of lions, leopards, and other wild animals appeared and chased, harassed and bruised her. At the door to the compound, she broke the second fruit and more ferocious animals appeared and bit and tore at her. When she cried out to be let into the compound, only a deaf person was about, and her pleas went unheard. So, on the threshold, the girl was killed.][63]

This folktale gives us a rare insight into the ethics of pre-colonial Yourbaland. It illuminates several Yoruba concepts including gendered expectations, the nature of trade, the insecurity of the time, lineage dynamics and the beliefs about death. First, the title is significant. Although the tale was about a little girl, the title states that it was a story about a *woman* whose child made palm oil. This title trivialises the role of the social junior, the young girl and the protagonist in the story, in favour of the more socially relevant mother whose character is of little significance. Since the little girl was her mother's apprentice, it demonstrates that girls were expected to learn their mother's occupation at a very young age, and be independent enough to take control in

[62] The head wife is the woman married to the lineage the longest.
[63] A. B. Ellis, *Yoruba-Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa: Their Religion, Manners, Customs, Laws, Language, Etc.* (Forgotten Books, 2007), pp. 167–173.

their mother's absence. They were expected to be enterprising and financially savvy so as to recognise when they were not paid in full, and be willing to do whatever it took to collect their fee. Although Ellis uses the word goblin to describe the customer, we can guess that the Yoruba word used would have been *àlìjònú*, a type of spirit. These spirits are said to be grotesque, with disproportionate body organs and limbs. They are believed to roam market places and can only be seen by people with unique extra sensory perceptions.[64] The *àlìjònú* being the customer expresses Yoruba beliefs about the nature of markets where human and spirits are thought to co-exist in harmony. It also conveys the belief that nobody, no matter their physical appearance or demeanour, should be refused service because we never know the benefits they might bring.

The story then goes on to suggest that girls needed to be fearless in the face of the insecurities of the nineteenth century. The journey through strange and dangerous places was a metaphor for the widespread insecurities of the time. It expressed Yoruba anxieties towards travelling in a region ravaged by war, and susceptible to slave raiders and thieves.[65] Finally, their arrival at the land of the dead illustrates the idea that the dead were in places similar to the land of the living where they could be communicated with, and from which one could return. The story then turns to the virtues daughters were expected to possess. Justifiable disobedience as expressed by following the goblin and refusing to turn back, humility, generosity and self-deprivation articulated through her undesirable diet, and a discerning mind to know when to obey as expressed by her picking the right fruits. Her ordeal ends to positive results revealing that both adversity and good character yield immense results at unexpected times.

[64] The Yoruba believed that children were innocent and for this reason, they possessed a sixth sense many adults did not.

[65] In the nineteenth century, the Yoruba region underwent radical political and constitutional changes. The old order, wherein the *Alaafin* (monarch) of Oyo, ruled the entire region and their neighbours, disintegrated in the early nineteenth century due to a combination of internal and external crisis. The kingdoms of the Yoruba were thrown into a state of crisis that was characterised by violent and debilitating wars, slave raids, widespread insecurity, and grave human suffering. There was mass migration, destruction of homes and means of livelihood, and the breaking up of families. Fought from the 1820s, these wars ended in the 1890s with the expansion of British imperial influence forcing the signing of peace treaties.

Back at the compound, the folktale warns girls of the jealousy and envy amongst co-wives. It also illuminates the role of the head wife as the most respected female in the compound, who must be given a share of everything. Her rejection of the gifts, the daughter's petulance, disobedience, waywardness, and altogether disagreeable attitude which eventually led to her demise warns girls of the dangers of greed, envy, and a bad character. The girl dying outside her compound is also quite significant to the story. To the Yoruba, the death outside the lineage compound was considered a shameful and evil death. The corpse had to be cleansed before burial to ward off evil and prevent similar occurrences in future. Finally, the death of a child was a most devastating experience for all Yoruba women. It meant the demise of a person with which women shared the most intimate bonds, the loss of a lineage member and means of production. Also, it sometimes signified the loss of prestige for the wife, and in some cases, led to witchcraft accusations.

Conclusion

Frequently, gender research on nineteenth-century Yorubaland has taken the category 'woman' as a given, discounting the childhood socialisation processes responsible for transforming biological females into cultural women. This article demonstrates that this is a simplistic way of analysing nineteenth-century gender. It proposes that the classification 'woman' was not determined exclusively by biology. Instead, it was a cultural process whereby female children through daily interactions and instructions were taught societally acceptable values and character and thus socially gendered as Yoruba 'women'. Whether through household relations, during economic activities, or at leisure time events, female socialisation stressed the importance of familial relations, the need to be proficient in domestic tasks, the urgency of economic independence, and the significance of good character. All these prepared young girls for lives as Yoruba women.

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