

## Traditional Marriage in Yoruba Culture: An Exploration of Male Dominance

**Olufunmilola Adekiitan Omotayo**

Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria

Email: olufunmilola.omotayo@eksu.edu.ng

### **Abstract:**

*This paper seeks to examine the structure of traditional marriage in the Yoruba culture and to explore how issues of bride price, virginity and fertility are used to reinforce male dominance. In the Yoruba culture, marriage is seen as a very important institution and it is regarded as a union between two families. Traditionally, the groom's family is responsible for providing a bride price to the bride's family. Bride price is seen as a bargaining chip, conferring rights to the husband to control the wife while also legitimizing her place in his family. Virginity is associated with purity and good character, with faithfulness to the husband being prerequisite for a good marriage. Fertility is seen as a duty of the wife and necessary for the continuity of the husband's lineage. Failure to fulfil these roles was seen as grounds for divorce or repudiation. The paper adopts critical and reflective methods to explain male dominance as related to the issues of bride price, virginity and fertility in Yoruba traditional marriage and concludes that the traditional marriage practices that dictate these values are a source of inequality and oppression that reinforces male dominance in Yoruba society.*

### **Keywords:**

*Marriage; Yoruba culture; Bride price; Virginity; Fertility.*

## I. Introduction

The Yoruba culture is predominantly patriarchal, meaning that it is dominated by men. In this context, virginity and fertility are of great importance to men, as they are used to prove a woman's worth when entering into marriage. The bridal price is also seen as a form of compensation for the loss of her virginity. This paper investigates the traditional marriage in Yoruba society and ways in which the system of bridal price, virginity and fertility can be seen as a reinforcement of male dominance in the culture. It describes the procedures for the traditional wedding in Yoruba culture and discusses the various steps that are taken in the marriage which include: the process of choice and investigation, meeting with the bride's family and the traditional bridal list. The article looks at how the concept of virginity is interpreted and enforced in Yoruba culture and how it has been used to bolster male dominance. It examines the role of bridal price in the marriage and ways in which fertility has been used to determine a woman's status and worth in the society.

## II. Review of Literature

### 2.1 Education of Girl Child

The work of Fasoro in "The Price of Deception: African Women and Political Mobilization" is very relevant to this paper. The author identifies negative cultural beliefs as some of the major factors responsible for the subjugation of women to men in Africa. He mentions that one of such practices is the outrageous bride price that is usually demanded by the bride's family in Igbo society in the South-eastern part of Nigeria. The author explains

that such cultural practices promote the enslavement of women. He further argues that there is a need for women to challenge the cultural beliefs that have hitherto worked against their collective interest. Fasoro's discussions focus on African women and Nigeria in particular while the present effort concentrates on Yoruba culture. However, there are certain similarities in African cultural practices. For instance, the payment of the bridal price, as stated above, is not peculiar to the Igbo society alone. It is also commonly practiced among the Yoruba people. Although, the bridal price in Yorubaland is not as exorbitant as that of the Igbo culture. The present work shall benefit immensely from Fasoro's work as it is an eye opener to crucial factors responsible for the inequality of the sexes.

In his "Interrogating Culture: Rethinking Women's Empowerment in Abortion Discourse in Africa", Ejibuwa argues that the cultural perception of women in Africa when compared with other societies is denigrating. He claims that women are perceived as beings whose voices should only be heard in the domestic sphere. He also says that women are systematically alienated from the decision making process in matters that do not only pertain to their lives but also that of the society. One reason for this alienation according to him is the mistaken impression that women are not able to make reasoned decisions. The author explores how the culturally imposed consciousness affects the perception of women vis-a-viz their reproductive rights. He observes that women generally do not enjoy equal opportunities with the men. The man is the head of the family and by extension, the society. As a result women are almost always compelled to take orders from the men. In view of this, a woman ought to dance to the whims and caprices of her husband, if she is to be regarded as a virtuous woman. He argues that this form of subordination is a representation of the saying that women do not own themselves. In other words, a wife was regarded as the husband's property in the culture. The implication of this is that one cannot legitimately talk of the rights of women in the culture. This work is considerably useful to the present research particularly as it discusses the need for women to be involved in the decision making process in the family and the society at large.

In another paper titled "Patronage and Tokenism: The Bane of Gender Justice in Nigeria", Fasoro investigates the moral justification of sharing political offices based on gender affiliation. He explains that 'patronage' is a situation in which some women are called upon by male-dominated administration, whenever it is politically expedient, to fill up some posts or offices as a matter of good-will or kind gesture while 'tokenism' is a mere expression of appreciation for the support received, a call-up to fill available quotas for gender or geographical balancing. He maintains that political offices should be maintained by those who are eminently qualified, competent and are interested in playing politics and not those who are there to fill quotas. The author posits that it is important for women to strive for quality education in all fields of endeavour and ensure that they possess requisite qualification and cognate experience needed for positions they desire to occupy. He argues that such dispositions will enable women to challenge all forms of domination.

Fasoro's arguments in the above paper are valid and relevant to this research as it provides useful information on the need for female education. Education involves teaching, training and learning to improve knowledge, to develop skills and acquire worthwhile attitudes. It helps women to appreciate their value and understand their roles in the development of the society. Hence, the researcher agrees that to attain gender parity, it is crucial for women to pay attention to education. However, it is important to note that the issue of tokenism is not applicable to women alone. On several occasions, men have also been invited to fill up some political posts and public offices as an expression of appreciation for

the support received from them. Apart from this, Fasoro's paper discusses the issue of gender parity as related to Nigerian politics while this dissertation examines various areas of gender discrimination in Yoruba culture.

The joint work of Olawoye, Omololu, Aderinto, Adeyefa, Adeyemo and Osotimehin, "Social Construction of Manhood in Nigeria: Implications for Male Responsibility in Reproductive Health" offers a comprehensive explanation of the socialization process among the three major groups in Nigeria; the Yoruba of the southwest, Igbo of the southeast and Hausa of the North. The authors emphasized that socialization procedures for developing boys into men and girls into women are largely affected by instructions and examples from the parents. They argue that the roles performed by males and females in the family and the community as well as the responsibilities ascribed to these roles are usually passed down by the socialization process. The work gives a succinct account of the process of socialization and the responsibilities of male and the female in the home. However, illustrations are drawn from different parts of Nigeria and not concentrated on the Yoruba culture.

### III. Research Methods

This section adopts critical and reflective methods to explain male dominance as related to the issues of bride price, virginity and fertility in Yoruba traditional marriage.

### IV. Results and Discussion

#### 4.1 Marriage in the Yoruba Traditional Culture

Marriage is an essential aspect of the culture of the Yoruba people. Husbands are considered as crowns and the ladies are said to be incomplete without the crowns. A woman who is single at a marriageable age is seen as a crownless woman. Hence, it is expected that a lady will marry at a specific age and when the opposite is the case, she begins to lose respect. It is shameful for a man or woman to remain unmarried in the cultures. Consequently, every woman desires to become the wife of a responsible man. Marriage is a union not only of the two spouses, but the two extended families to which they belong.

The marriage process starts after a young man has made a choice of a maiden he desires. He informs his family on his decision to get married. From that point the family takes up the other procedures. The parents appoint an '*Alarina*' that is a middle man who starts the marriage process formally by inquiring into the family of the supposed bride. The '*Alarina*' is expected to make various investigations about the history of the maiden in question and her family (Yahaya, 2018). He acquires information about the town, job, social status, health history and other necessary information about the family. The purpose of such investigations is to ensure that the lady's members of the family are of good reputation and right standing in the society. The marriage process terminates if the '*Alarina*' discovers reasons for which the man should not marry the lady. On the other hand, the marriage process continues if there are favourable reports from the investigations.

Once the '*Alarina*' confirms that the lady is suitable for marriage, the groom's family arranges for an informal meeting with the bride's family for the first time. The meeting is known as "*momi n mo o*". The meeting is done at the lady's family house and only close relations are usually involved. Formal courtship commences after this meeting. Then a date is fixed for a formal gathering (Yahaya, 2018)

The formal gathering is presently known as the Introduction ceremony. This gathering does not require an *Alarina* and it is not only attended by close members of the family. At the gathering, the bride's family provides a list of items known as the bridal list. The date for the traditional marriage ceremony is also usually fixed during the gathering. At the marriage ceremony, the items collected are used in prayer sessions for the couple. Some of the items symbolise a force that represents sweetness and joy. For instance, the salt, honey, sugar and *aadun* (a kind of ground maize snacks) represent sweetness (Olarinmoye, 2013). Bitter cola symbolizes the health of the future family while She-goat (*Ewure*) signifies fertility for the couple. It has been argued that the presentation of the items serves as an assurance that the husband's intentions are serious, that he has the wealth to maintain a family and that the family which is handing over the daughter receives sufficient compensation for releasing their child. Also, the groom has a sense of pride and fulfilment that he is able to discharge his responsibility to his in-laws. However, it has been argued that such gifts sometimes serve as an avenue for the husband to oppress the wife. In some cases, it gives the man the opportunity to compel the wife to submission.

The payment of the bride price constitutes a very vital part of the traditional marriage rites and ceremonies in the African culture, (Jinghuan Chen and Weiyu Pan 2023) particularly among Yoruba people. The bride price can be regarded as an amount of money paid by a groom and his family to the family of the bride. It is also known as the token. Asen (2017) defines the bride price as a gift or payment in various forms such as natural produce, labour or monetary form given to a parent or guardian of a female person for a marriage which is intended or has taken place. A close look at Asen's definition reveals that the Bride Price does not consist of the money alone. In other words, other gift items, for instance, the yam, honey and drinks (*eru iyawo*) that are presented to the bride's family during the marriage are also regarded as bride price. It has been argued that the tradition of bride price gives Yoruba marriage or family institution strong ties. It is the reason for stable family lives, so that divorces are not encouraged (Olarinmoye, 2013). The bride price is said to be one of the highest honour confirming a bride's value and womanhood; giving a husband the full rights to the sexual, economic or procreative powers of the wife (Fawehinmi, 2014). It also fosters a friendly relationship between the two families; providing a material pledge that the woman and her children will be well treated as a level of compensation to her natal family for the loss of her company and labour. The bride price is a symbolic token in the culture. It is further regarded as a token that highlights a degree of commitment and chivalry in a man which shows that he does not only value his bride, but also holds a high regard for her family. Without it, the marriage is not considered complete and the bride is considered "stolen" by the groom.

However, the culture of Bride Price is gradually becoming strange and unwelcome in the 21st century because the tradition is interpreted as a degrading practice to women, especially from a Western philosophical point of view. Critics point out that the practice tends to "commodify" women by representing them as objects of transaction (Wendo, 2004). Mwaikusa (2023) observed that it was a source of wealth for the family of the bride. Hence, a man with many girls was assured of the accumulation of wealth from the dowry. The tradition has been criticised for being an "enrichment scheme for the bride's family because some families take advantage of it to make outrageous demands (Bride Price Practices in Africa, 2019). For this reason, some people feel that it is an avenue for the father to 'sell out' his daughter. It has been described in certain quarters as a licence to purchase a wife. In fact, some individuals have argued that the custom permits the man to exercise economic control and dominance over his wife. Some husbands maltreat their wives on the excuse that they

have been paid for, like a 'commodity'. The husband's relations also have the notion that they are participants in the purchase. They equally assume that the bride price was used to purchase the brother's wife. Thus, they have a stake in controlling her. As a result, the woman has no voice in the family or in the wider community. She is not even consulted on issues which affect her directly. She has low self-esteem. The language used in addressing her is demeaning and derogatory. Hence, some parents perceive that their daughters are being abused by their husbands and the bridegroom's family on the excuse that they have been paid for, like a "commodity".

In the contemporary time, the money is sometimes returned to the groom's family to show that the family of the bride is not selling out their daughter. However, Fawehinmi (2014) argues that:

No amount of money can buy a wife; her value is inestimable in human terms. No man can pay for all the input of those who raised a good woman and all the benefits she brings; her love, care, help and companionship far outweigh any monetary value. A Bride Price is a humble demonstration of appreciation, honour and respect to the bride's family for all the work they put into raising/training "*this*" gift from God and returning it seems utterly disrespectful to the groom and his entire family. Fawehinmi (2014:1)

One can infer from the above argument that the Bride Price is simply a token of appreciation to the family of the bride. Hence, it should be accepted and not refused or returned. In some cultures, a marriage is not reckoned to have ended until the return of Bride Price has been acknowledged, signifying divorce. Thus, it is when a woman intends to leave her husband that she is expected to return the goods (bride price) initially paid to her family.

Bride Price, according to Fawehinmi (2014) is a heritage which should not be eradicated from the Yoruba culture. It is a genuine and deep-rooted customary practice that makes marriages more meaningful and prevents the despicable way of life where wives are extremely easy to find like stones, and equally easy to dispose of, like tissue paper (Fawehinmi, 2014). The payment of the Bride Price of a woman simply symbolises that a man has kept his treasure (money from his sweat) where his heart belongs. However, it should be noted that the issue of bride price (especially when the demands are outrageous) can hinder the woman from marrying a man of her choice or cause a delay in marriage if the groom is not financially buoyant enough to meet the demand of the bride's family. It also puts pressure on a poor man who is seeking genuine marriage but is not able to afford the bride price.

Marriage in Yoruba culture is the vehicle that brings about peaceful family co-existence, sex, child birth, child upbringing, child education and a peaceful society (Aladesanmi and Ogunjinmi, 2019). In other words, sex, pregnancy and child birth do not precede marriage in the philosophy of the Yoruba. The tradition of virginity is cherished and encouraged among young women in Yoruba culture. A woman is expected to marry as a virgin in Yoruba culture. It is believed that it is a sacrilege or taboo for a lady to have sex before marriage (Olusegun, 2013). A virgin is someone who has never had sexual intercourse or sexual activity. The tradition of virginity among Yoruba women before marriage is known as '*Asa ibale*' in the Yoruba kingdom. It is the pride of any Yoruba lady to keep her virginity till the wedding night. Mothers in the traditional Yoruba culture were fond of asking their daughters about their virginity so as to prevent shame and disgrace that come with not being a virgin. On the

wedding night, a white cloth is usually given to a couple and the cloth would be spread on their bedding, mostly mats. The parents of both families sometimes stay at the entrance of the house waiting for the cloth to be brought out of their house while some parents will be in their homes expecting the result. The white cloth is expected to be stained by blood and after the sexual intercourse, if the cloth is stained, it means that the new bride is a virgin. If it turns out that the white cloth is not stained with blood, it signifies that the new bride has been promiscuous and slept with a man or some men before.

Alaba (2018) notes that:

In every division of Yorubaland great importance was attached to a bride being found "*virgo intacta*", and this was the rule of both the high and low alike. It has already been mentioned that two female members of the bride's extended family were detailed to remain with her until after the chief event of the 'bridal night'. These two women usually slept outside the door of the bridal couple's room on the occasion of the expected defloration. They would be straining their ears to catch any exclamation of pain coming from the bride. Should she be found *non virgo intacta*, they seize the earliest opportunity of taking flight, even if it should be very late in the night with all the dangers which it held for those of their sex. It was not only these two but also the *egbe* (associates) of the bride who had to look after their own safety, for the reaction of the disappointed husband could be violent ... A bride on the other hand who was found *virgo intacta* was the cause of much rejoicing to her husband, and of rejoicing and self-congratulation to her parents and relatives. The white sheet smeared with blood was sent in a covered calabash bowl to her parents the first thing in the morning (in some cases, even the same night) accompanied by a sum of money (now as much as a pound or a guinea) and a hen for sacrifice to the head of the 'bride'. (Alaba, 2018:1)

A bride that is met as a virgin by her husband will be celebrated, while the one that is not, will be disgraced and banished from the village. The white (unstained) cloth will be sent to the bride's parents. Other items like rotten yam, empty box of matches, half keg of palm-wine, etc. will also be sent to them. The implication of this is that their daughter was rotten and not complete before she was married. The parents will be publicly blamed for not training their daughter. Such a bride will be made to sweep the whole village and dance naked in the market place and the groom has a right to divorce such a woman. Some young ladies commit suicide because of the shame they experienced as a result of the loss of their virginity. On the other hand, a woman that was met as a virgin will be praised publicly and her parents will be happy. It is believed that virgins are self-disciplined and well-trained by their parents. Virginity has many advantages. It helps to maintain sexual order in the society. It prevents pre-marital sex and it is believed that helps married women to be faithful to their husbands. The tradition of virginity serves as protection against unplanned pregnancies among young people and breeding of children outside marriage (Nnazor, 2016). It also helps in preventing sexually transmitted diseases among unmarried people.

Today, less importance is attached to virginity. This has increased the lack of sexual abstinence in the contemporary time. Loss of virginity especially, among youths in the present

day society has led to increased abortion rates, HIV/AIDS, and other sexually transmitted infections which sometimes lead to the death of the victims when not properly managed. In some cases, children that are born out of wedlock lack affection and proper training which are essential for growth. It has also been argued that couples who had sex before marriage were more likely to have extramarital affairs, they are also expected to marry someone based on sex rather than personality, are less satisfied with their sex life during marriage and are usually less satisfied with their partners (Spease, 2017). This can ultimately result in separation or divorce.

In spite of the numerous benefits derived from the practice of virginity, women are usually at the receiving end. It has been observed that emphasis was not placed on the issue of men's virginity in the culture. The traditional society seems to be silent about the case of a man that has slept with other women before marriage. The punishment meted out to the man in such a situation was minimal, if at all he was sanctioned (Familusi, 2012). It appears that the society operates a double standard on this issue. Women are expected to abstain from premarital sex while men gain social support for their "sexual conquests" (Gwaambuka, 2016). Virginity should not only be regarded as a wholly female affair as both sexes are involved in the act.

The need for procreation is one major reason for marriage among the Yoruba in Yoruba culture. Importance is attached to child-bearing in the cultures. Alaba (2004) argues that the primary purpose of marriage in Yoruba society is sustaining the Yoruba race through legitimate and responsible procreation. There is a deep belief that children are blessings from God. Infertility is regarded as a curse or misfortune. In fact, marriage can be dissolved on the ground of childlessness. Offspring are usually considered as an extension of self and fulfillment of immortality. It is believed that the childless couples have not contributed to the expansion of the family. Hence, a barren woman, however rich, famous or prosperous is considered as a shame to her race (Ogoma, 2014). It is believed in African culture that:

If there is not yet a child in a marriage, there is no guarantee that the marriage will endure ... Barrenness is not only unacceptable, but also disgraceful and an abnormal state. (Baloyi, 2017).

The woman's place in marriage remains precarious until it is confirmed through child-bearing. Children are therefore viewed as a source of pride, strength and economic fortune for the family. The females are usually held responsible for virtually all cases of infertility. Such women are sometimes humiliated, isolated, derided, abused and rebuffed in the society. Childless women in Africa generally complain about disrespectful attitudes and dehumanizing treatments from their partners, relatives and in-laws. In some cases, the husband abandons such a woman for a second wife (Nwosu & Onwe, 2015). Consequently, the woman visits herbalists, traditionalists and spiritualists in search of a solution to the problem of childlessness (Lubano, 2016). Yoruba distinguishes between four types of infertility, namely: first, barrenness – never having conceived (which could apply to men or women); second, not having delivered a life birth (for which the Yoruba word is *iya abiku*, which means 'mother of spirit children'); third, having had a life birth, but no living children and fourth, having only one or two children which constitutes sub-fertility (Coetzee, 2017). Barrenness carries the highest stigma, but all the other types of infertility also have social and psychological repercussions in the society (Coetzee, 2017). This is expressed in a Yoruba proverb that says:

*Eni to ba wa si aye ti ko bimo, o wa lasan ni* (Meaning: Anyone who comes to this earth without children has got nothing). (Coetzee, 2017:1)

Infertility is expected to involve the couples but women are usually singled out as the cause of the problem in Yoruba society. In contemporary societies, many people still believe that infertility is a woman issue that does not concern the husband. The fact that it is the woman who becomes pregnant and carries the baby for nine months before giving birth easily leads people to believe that it is the woman who is responsible for fertility. However, it has been discovered that men are responsible for infertility in some cases. Nwosu and Onwe observe that:

some causes of infertility have been specifically ascribed to men. Examples of causes of infertility in men include: abnormal sperm production or function, varicocele, undescended testicle, testosterone deficiency, inflammation of the prostate, urethra or epididymis, erectile dysfunction, premature ejaculation, retrograde ejaculation, blockage of ejaculatory ducts, lack of semen to transport sperm, anti-sperm antibodies and depressant drugs (Nwosu & Onwe, 2015).

One can deduce from the above that men also have major contributions to the problem of infertility in the society. In view of this, husbands must recognise that they are just as responsible for barrenness as the wives until the facts are proven. The truth is that without sexual relationship between a man and a woman no conception can take place. Hence, the husband and the wife need to protect and support one another as they seek solution to the problem of barrenness in the family.

## V. Conclusion

This paper has examined the complex ways in which virginity, bridal price and fertility are related to issues of male dominance in Yoruba culture. It describes the culture as being staunchly patriarchal with gender norms that distinctly favours men and subjugate women. Male dominance is evidenced by the practice of bridal price. In Yoruba society, marriage is seen as contractual agreement between families and it is often accompanied with the payment of a bride price which serves to cement the legitimacy of the union. However, some individuals believe that the custom permits the man to exercise economic control and dominance over his wife. Some husbands maltreat their wives on the excuse that they have been paid for, like a 'commodity'. The husband's relations also have the notion that they are participants in the purchase. They equally assume that the bride price was used to purchase the brother's wife. Virginity is an important social marker in Yoruba marriage practice, as it is seen as a sign of virtue and respectability. Fertility also plays an important role in Yoruba marriage, as women who are able to produce children enjoy greater social status. Hence, a woman's worth is based on her virginity and her ability to reproduce. The traditional marriage practices that dictate these values are a source of inequality and oppression that reinforces male dominance in Yoruba society. Traditional Yoruba marriage appears to be biased towards male dominance with men holding the majority of power within marriage. The paper concludes that increased gender equality can create positive change in Yoruba culture by allowing for greater agency and autonomy for women.

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