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Wives in Pre-Colonial Oyo-Yoruba Societies of Southwestern Nigeria Before 1900

Abstract

In 1827, Richard Lander (a European explorer) stated that Alafin (the king of the Oyo Empire) had 2,000 wives. But these women were not necessarily wives; they were wives of past kings, wives of the present king, wives of men in Alafin's lineage and female slaves and relatives. This article aims at unravelling the strategic roles of women as wives in the palace and society, with a view to explaining the nature of African womanhood. The article examines the roles of women as wives in the precolonial Yoruba society of Southwestern Nigeria. Understanding the roles of these women lends credence to the fact that Yoruba women's power was manifested in the traditional political system and reflected in the social and economic development of the palace and community. This work contends that the role of women as wives indicates power and powerlessness in the context of gender roles, with nuanced narratives about gender and interconnectedness with patriarchy and masculinity. It is significant as it adds to the knowledge of gender and power dynamics in Yoruba societies before colonialism. Furthermore, it justifies the assertion that African women should be studied based on their realities, devoid of foreign interpretations alien to the peculiar features in Nigerian societies. Therefore, it explains the features of African womanhood. Accounts of European explorers, works of anthropologists and oral traditions complement the historical analysis.

Keywords: role of wives, pre-colonial Oyo-Yoruba societies, intra-gender politics, Alafin, African womanhood.

Introduction

This paper examines how gender is constructed in Oyo-Yoruba societies. The Oyo-Yoruba societies feature a sub-ethnic category with familiar Yoruba language intonations and culture. In certain accounts of the missionaries, Oyo-Yoruba societies are comprised of communities with geographical proximity to the savannah region along the Trans-Saharan trade routes. Women as wives were an important institution that shaped the power dynamics in traditional Oyo-Yoruba societies.

The Oyo-Yoruba societies are largely an agglomeration of empires and kingdoms formerly in the Old Oyo empire before the 19th century. The empire was the largest and best-known of the Yoruba kingdoms. Located in

the savannah below the bend of the river Niger in the Bussa-Jebba region of southwest Nigeria, it achieved prominence during the 17th and 18th centuries but collapsed and disintegrated in the early years of the 19th century. Oyo-Yoruba societies refer to all empires and kingdoms that Oyo imperial rule extended to. They shared similar language intonations and cultures. Oyeronke Oyewumi analyses the inclusion and exclusion of women in the making of politics and power in Oyo-Yoruba societies. While Oyewumi posits how gender has been understood and used by men, this paper engages the nuances of power that exist in the lives of women as wives in Oyo-Yoruba societies (Oyewumi, 1997, p. 85). Subsequently, she challenges the writings of scholarly and non-scholarly historians as biased and asserts that they have distorted history to reduce women to mere regents. The existence of these women as wives and holders of administrative roles is affirmed in the scholarly works in Yoruba history (Johnson 1921; Adediran, 1994). *Ile* (family/compound/lineage) in Oyo-Yoruba understanding is a basic political unit that determines kinship politics and its influence on society. Through wifely arrangements, power shifts manifested as status in paternal/maternal families, were reflected in displays of authority. Also, motherhood, seniority, and economic advantages are reflected in the ways power features in Oyo-Yoruba societies. In contemporary Oyo-Yoruba societies, politics and governance in traditional terms are mostly masculinised, yet in the accounts of the pre-colonial era, wives of the palace and society held important roles in public and familial milieus. In masquerading practices, marketing, domesticity and governance, wives tend to be portrayed in scholarly and non-scholarly works as means of power transmission and determinants of kinship relations. Invariably, being a wife could thus indicate power and powerlessness.

This article construes gender by examining how and what women display and offer as wives. Bolanle Awe emphasised the necessity and the need to study women in their own terms (Awe, 1977; Oladejo, 2018) within the construct of societies presumed to be exclusively paternalistic. Oyewumi's argument is affirmed in Robert Smith's findings from oral traditions collected from Arokin in the 1960s, which described women as Kings. The case of Orompoto showed that she was a king who ruled for twenty years (Smith, 1965; Oyewumi, 1997). The construction of gender among the Oyo-Yoruba counters aspects of Western feminism. This is because the African understanding already embedded some feminine roles, aesthetics and appearance as part of a whole, where women already had respectable status in domestic and public affairs. At the centre of Oyewumi's argument, several complexities question the sense of gender portrayed, but more importantly, the female domain is nuanced with varieties of roles which translated to power, especially in the 19th century.

The role of wives in sustaining the political economy is clear as the palace was an institutionalised public setting. The Alafin controlled a lot of officials who assisted in ceremonial and administrative responsibilities; they occupied compounds around the palace in their thousands (Law, 1977).

Thus, power systems revolved to come extent around gender roles. The gendering of wifely status translates into political and economic power. In the administration of the palace, the roles of women in the court are analysed to unravel how intra-gender roles were manifested in everyday life. Given the series of migrations of Oyo refugees into other parts of Yorubaland, emphasis is placed on how the Oyo-Yoruba political system interfaces with Otta, a Yoruba town, that was an extension of Oyo in terms culture and values. Otta was once under the control of the Kingdoms in the Old Oyo empire. Its history is symbolic because it witnessed a series of migrations and refugees from Oyo, Gun and Egbadò. Power and gender were well embedded in the pre-colonial society of Otta, and the influence of Oyo also mattered. This paper explains how gender roles in Otta are largely related to the Oyo-Yoruba political system. The role of wives in precolonial Oyo-Yoruba significantly portrays African realities of womanhood before the advent of colonialism. The paper advances Ade Ajayi's argument that colonialism is an episode in African history (Ajayi, 1969). He advanced the fact that rather than focus on errors of the past in Africa through condemnation, African realities should be presented as they are. Hence, this paper analyses the milieus of African womanhood through their wifely status in precolonial Oyo- Yoruba society.

Gendered Power in Pre-Oduduwa Tradition

The extent to which Yoruba societies were patrilineal before the emergence of Oduduwa cannot be fixedly juxtaposed, as power status was accorded to women, including matriarchal lineage connections that revolved around political affairs. The parallel roles by which feminine positions exist are articulated in the analysis of Awe (Awe, 1977). The Porto Novo legend of Abeesan (a woman who bore nine sets of twins) lends credence to the way women led society. Roles and power were not gender-biased, rather being based on a culture of respect and values for adulthood. The pre-Oduduwa communities showed four settlements led by women namely: Mepere, Akere, Bokolo and Panku (Adediran, 1994). These women were title holders that contributed to society. Within the lineage, the wifely and motherhood roles are gender neutral. Either the father or mother had the final jurisdiction on family or lineage affairs. This showed how powerful some women were in the society, for example, Iya Mepere as an influential head of the Opo-Meta settlement, who could not accommodate the Ede group (Parrinder, 1967, p. 18).

The role of women in early Yoruba societies lack documentation, but the few references to them that exist give the impression that female rule was conditional and circumstantial. Even in the 19th century, female leadership became circumstantial, mainly in times of crises, which led – for example – to the emergence of Ina Mego in Ile-Sabe (Adediran, 1994). Accounts of Ina Mego's reign show her emergence in a still predominantly paternalistic society. The impression given was that she emerged as an opportunist who took advantage of anarchy. However, her emergence meant that leadership was not exclusive to men. Ina Mego's rule was rare, but women had parallel roles in the form of feminine versions of political offices, thus negating overly deterministic paternalistic accounts. In the 18th century, accounts of feminine positions existing separately were also reflected in Oyo societies, and became prominent in certain political relations.

Gendering Wifely Status and Connotations of Power

In the words of Oyewumi, marriage is a delicate institution and thus care is taken to avoid marrying wrongly (Oyewumi, 1997). The wifely role of reproduction is held in great esteem and wives are often considered instrumental in reproducing lineage wealth. Nathaniel Fadipe's study of the sociology of the Yoruba, and Oyewumi's work, give accounts of 20th century perceptions of being a wife in Oyo-Yoruba societies, which rarely differed from the precolonial era. The justification of women's relative powerlessness is a function of the family, kinship and group, they argue. Wives in polygamous families co-exist by virtue of rank, where economic and political power connect. In this ranking, elderly wives have more opportunities to explore political and economic peace. Controlling gains from trade in the adjoining markets creates economic power to finance the political aspirations of the household or lineage. The conjugal implications are evident in the way the economic power of wives projects the political ambitions of men (mostly sons) within the lineage.

Fundamentally, the social power of wives within the family indicates that she could be powerful or otherwise. Powerlessness recurs in the relational attitudes of the mother-in-law and sister-in-law in her husband's family, while she could be powerful as the first wife to other co-wives as she must be consulted on family matters (Okome, 2005). Entangled in this power status is the place of motherhood, which further increases the spheres of the wife's power. Motherhood was an important phase that influenced women's power in the Oyo-Yoruba world. Social power is accorded to a woman whose home is filled with children because she has fulfilled her reproductive role, and is referred to by names such as *Iya Sola* (called by the name of her children). The inability to fulfil the biological role meant powerlessness within the lineage,

which also connotes to attributes of witchcraft or spiritual possession (Apter, 2013). Motherhood enhanced relations among co-wives and was a form of female socialisation. The *Agbo-Ile* (lineage) is interesting for intra-gender politics as several issues unfold in everyday life here. An artistic impression of the architectural design of *Agbo-Ile*, as presented by Majorie McIntosh, shows a communal living style that attests to these assertions (McIntosh, 2009). In the Ifa corpus, a body of literary knowledge in Yoruba traditional religious system, the challenges of co-wife relations goes a long way to expose intra-gender politics within the family. According to Wande Abimbola, the attitudinal behaviours of wives in polygyny create complex situations of conflict at the family level (Abimbola, 1968, pp. 25–26).

Wifely Relations in the Oyo Palace

The Oyo court was the centre of decision-making in the palace and was never devoid of feminine influence. The place of wives as mothers is nuanced in the consideration for power accord and distribution. In Alafin's palace, all women are termed *Ayaba* (wife of the King) though not all were involved with the king in sexual relations. The categories of women that formed the composition are as follows: *Iya Oba*, *Iya Kere*, *Iya-Naso*, *Iya-Monari*, *Iya-in-Iku*, *Iyalagbon*, *Orun-Kumefun*, *Are-orite* (Johnson, 1997, p. 63). The names given to these women depict old Yoruba feminine roles assigned to women. These are examples of traditional political offices women held in pre-colonial Yoruba societies. The *Ayaba* (wife of the king) in the palace involved roles that connote women's power in the community. The nomenclature of these women informed Lander's observation that there were about 2,000 wives. To maintain the everyday life of the palaces, women were very important, especially in the pre-colonial era as Yoruba was already occupied the attention of men.

For example, *Iya Kere's* role in maintaining the *Ilari* meant that she possessed significant control in the palace; she managed the royal treasury and was the feudal head of some Oyo-Yoruba towns such as Iseyin, Iwo and Ogbomosho. *Iya Kere's* function creates the impression that wifely roles in the palace were highly regarded and this challenges the perception of patriarchy. The *Iya Oba* (King's Mother) was a wife of the past King and the Alafin's biological mother. In Oyo traditions, a woman attains wifely status before motherhood. The practice meant that wives in the palace had the potential of becoming a King's mother. The situation where the *Iya Oba* becomes an interface king is peculiar. Therefore, wifely status and motherhood mattered in the governance to fill the vacuum – or interregnum. Part of the strategies for retaining power would be that wives became Kings in Oyo history, to maintain power within the family. Gender rarely mattered as women were deemed fit to

hold it. Specifically, *Iyayun* (a female title holder) ruled as the King in place of her son Alafin Kori (who was a child). Mainstreaming wives to power status meant a lot in the traditions. The regency status accorded to these women meant that at the emergence of their sons as the Alafin, they were expected to commit suicide.

The status of the Alafin was powerful, therefore, once a woman had held such status she should not return in the palace (Law, 1977). Entangled in the relevance of motherhood in power relations was that social mobility changing the rank of a woman to *Iya Oba* is latent. Accounts of slavery in the Oyo Empire implied that there were female slaves in the *Ilari* who worked with *Iya Kere* (Little Mother). Therefore, at what point could a female *Ilari* become a wife and by implication be a King? Richard Lander tried to distinguish between the categories of women in the palace by differentiating Alafin's wives from other palace women. While it is limitless to put a figure on the number of women that could bear children for the Alafin, the place of the female *Ilari* is almost that of being able to bear children for the King. Lander's *Records of Captain Clapperton's Last Expedition* observed that there was no restriction on the kind of woman that could enjoy sexual relations with the King. And every child born of a slave woman had equal status with freeborn women. Evidently, slavery rarely constrained the place of power for women. Robin Law posited that palace slaves were so powerful that they enhanced the power of the King despite the opposition from Oyo Mesi in the 1750s (Law, 1977). Having slaves in and out of the Empire and with other Yoruba societies ensured the continuity of culture and civilisation that evolved from the palace.

Wives and Priesthood in Otta

The politics of ethnicity tend to determine power relationships in Nigeria, but Oyo culture and gender intersect. John Thabiti Willis extensively studied 'masquerading practices' in Otta (Willis, 2018). As mentioned earlier, the *Ayaba* had powerful roles within the palace, while outside it, many advocated for the political hegemony of the Oyo. A key factor that shaped these relations was the Trans-Atlantic trade that constantly rejigged the lineage settings of Oyo-Yoruba societies. The Oyos' power was exerted by control of the slave trade across geographical settings (Law, 1977). Oyo representative culture is reflected in Otta from the second half of the 18th century. Gender and religion featured as Sango and *Egungun* masquerading tradition were part of the imperial policy. In the waves of inter-Yoruba wars, Oyo imperial policy became the norm that governed these societies. Favourable commercial ties were made in an understanding that ultimately accrued returns to the Oyo central governing system.

Support for the Alafin, as evidenced from the occupants of the quarters around the Alafin and the institution of representatives outside Oyo, had several ramifications for wifely agencies. Entangled in this wifely philosophy are the intertwined constructs of gender and religion. Alafin is regarded as Sango incarnate and the ritual performers were the wives and sons of the King. The metaphor appears complex and paradoxical because a Sango priestess, who is the daughter of the Alafin, was also her father's wife. These paradoxes highlight notions of the roles that could determine power. The double significance of the Sango priests and priestesses and sons, daughters and wives obviously elevates an African sense of gender in which the memories are translated into contemporary worship of traditional religions in Yoruba societies.

The late 18th and early 19th century made the Oyo culture visible as these traditions were performed, generating a sense of history as the genealogies of the priests trace their origin to central Oyo. Family traditions were thus expressed. This was due to a decline in the Oyo Empire from 1789 to 1836, which made migrants in Central and Southern Yoruba more likely to perform oral renditions of their genealogies. They re-enacted family history through masquerading performances. Such expressions have conventions that link them to the Oyo Empire (Willis, 2018). The delegation of representatives to Otta from Oyo was evident in the Itimoko tradition as Odikaye (Ajele) was sent to collect tributes. Odikaye's role was important in the gender context because he was a Sango priest and Otta, being a slave trade town, made it strategic to Oyo. He established a house referred to as *Ajele Oloyo* in *Iga Ajele*. Oyo became more entrenched when Aina, Ege Odikaye's younger brother, joined and established his house, *Iga Ege*, with the institution of Ege's masquerade. The beaded crown of the masquerade they introduced had the symbol of imperial Oyo. The gendered implications of Sango's priest and priestesses as wives of Alafin manifested in the politics of Basorun Gaa. It was evident that Basorun Gaa through the institution of Oyo Mesi formed a parallel rule to the Alafin. Indirectly, he disrupted the political structures and attempted to disengage the role of wives in the political economy. By the last quarter of the 18th century, the Basorun Gaa had destroyed the structures by targeting the wives (Sango priests and priestesses). They were destroyed using the notion that they were protecting the interests of the Alafin and aiding the expansion of the Empire. Alafin's power was thus reduced and became merely symbolic. The wives were no longer empowered to function for Alafin's power. Alafin Abiodun had to rejig the political structure by appointing new sons to represent him and counter officials appointed by Gaa and also introduce new forms of *Egungun* (Morten-Williams, 1967). Indirectly, gendered interpretations of sons and wives still hold for Alafin Abiodun, but more importantly the wives were replaced with

his children to avoid disloyalty. Therefore, rituality was adjusted to give way to political royalty. The ritual wives were not really the focal interest of power, but sons of Alafin were considered as protecting and maintaining the political interests of the Oyo Empire. Ritual wives and masquerading practices together were revolutionised by Alafin Abiodun to create a new brand of Oyo gender symbolism still embedded in imperial culture and often expressed through the celebration of festivals.

The Oyo influence in Otta was expansionist but rarely imperialistic because Odikaye, Aina and Olataya, who were wives in Otta, maintained the culture but fairly integrated into the local ruling system in Otta. The politics of ritualisation could, arguably, have been economic. The purpose was to ensure tributes accrued to the Oyo Empire. The works of Saburi Biobaku were meant to ensure that the commercial networks from Egba towns created wealth (Biobaku, 1957). The contours of wifely agencies were thus an economic initiative.

Gender in the context of *Egungun* traditions is not of sex, but of culture. Being a wife means a source of money for the Oyo power system. Mojubaolu Okome explains that women's experience is especially relevant if we take seriously the contention that gender is socially constructed. It has to be understood as emerging out of the particularity of a people's history. It ought to stand to reason then, that in every instance constructions of gender react to and reflect the social, political and economic realities of the cultures from which they are drawn (Okome, 2005).

Wives and Involvement in *Egungun* Practices in Otta

In this context, power for a wife implies that her ambitions are in line with those of her husband's lineage, which earns her respect. Within the lineage, the skills and work of a wife are held vital once they add value to the occupation that brings prosperity to the family (Barnes, 1990). From this understanding, in the Oyo Empire, the palace women partook in the economy to favour the powers of the King.

In the domestic realm, wives were no longer seen as necessary for imperial roles with the statehood of Alafin, competition and rivalries among wives in the expansionist agenda, reduced the power of wives in the agency of being a male or female. Rather, the domestic wife was more conspicuous. The status of domestic wives aptly fits into accounts by Europeans that Alafin had 200 wives. Retaining women at home was normal for it was a period of wars of displacement. Historical circumstances in the 19th century mattered in the new wifely model.

In the view of Karin Barber's work, *I Could Speak Until Tomorrow*, women as wives articulate their roles in the patrilocal societies they belong to. The oral tradition was an indication of the roles played in exercising and preserving family tradition. Women were very important as depicted in the oral traditions as expressed in the oriki (praise poem). The powerful role of lineage wives in their patrilocality is well expressed in the account of Moniyepe's life narrated below:

According to oral tradition, an Oyo woman named Moniyepe arrived at her new home, the town of Otta, during the days of Oyo imperial rule, as the second wife of her new husband, a warrior named Arogunmola. Before emigrating to her husband's town, Moniyepe had inherited an Egungun mask from her father. She brought to the marriage the essentials of an Egungun that her descendants practice to this day. When the newlyweds arrive at their home in Otta, one of their first acts was to introduce the Oya masquerade into the community. It was the warrior Arogunmola's senior wife, Osungbayi, who organised, financed, and led the first performance in which her husband carried the mask as Oya (Willis, 2018, p. 143).

Secondly, the co-wives relationship between Moniyepe and Osungbayi and their role in Arogunmola's career manifested. Osungbayi was a wealthy trader who financed the performances. In this regard she uses her assets as a prominent cloth trader, she introduces a new style of clothing and mode of performance for the *Egungun* ritual, which was witnessed by the entire town and immediate neighbours. Osungbayi went on to become the first occupant in the town to hold a chieftaincy office known as Iyalode, charged with representing the interests of women and merchants on the King's advisory council (Willis, 2018).

The Arogunmola family performed the Oya masquerade around the 1850s. Karin Barber's analysis is evident in Moniyepe's skills before marriage. She knew performance, prayers and the chants needed for *Egungun*. Moniyepe's roles transformed into significant power that resonates in contemporary times. Thus, the intersection of politics and economy is reflected in the translations of power for the Arogunmola family because Moniyepe had political power, while Osungbayi had the economic materials and necessities. The economic role of Osungbayi is emphasised as she was a cloth merchant and adviser on textile use. At the core of her networks were market women and the *Egungun* practitioners, who were needed to gather a large audience from the town. The material wealth she had accumulated was probably critical to the family's ability to provide a feast for the town and give Arogunmola and Moniyepe opulent cloth to wear for the occasion. Osungbayi used her inventory of rich fabrics to supply Oya *Egungun* with new clothing: *an agenda* of a long, flowing

garment: The agbada (male garment) consisted of velvet, damask, cotton and aso-oke (woven fabrics). Arogunmola wore the mask made of fine fabrics that Osungbayeri provided (Willis, 2018, p. 144).

The kind of innovation that Osungbayeri introduced to *Egungun* masquerading costumes was influenced by Islam as the costume is designed like men's *agbada*, and it was adapted to resemble the dress of Muslim men. Towards the end of the 19th century, several women as wives already became Christians or Muslims while the men were at war. And of course, while the men were at war, waves of migration from Oyo, Egba and Lagos to Otta engaged the people with a new religion. To appeal to the sensibility of European explorers, missionaries and Islamic clerics, the masquerade clothes were designed to fit into the Yoruba flowing dress style (*Agbada*). This style was evolved by women to create a synergy for 19th century religious diversity in Otta.. Muslims particularly from the 1850s became powerful in Otta and hence the perceptions of society were mixed up in the religions of Islam and African traditional belief systems. The journals of James White attest to this (White, 1855; Willis, 2018). And particularly, the fashioning of the regalia showed adherence to Muslim dress style to create an impression that both religions co-exist. Osungbayeri's innovation in the 1880s blended the interests of Muslims into traditional religious practices.

The roles of Moniyeye and Osungbayeri as promoters of culture are evident in the beliefs in Oya mythology in Iyana (the Oyo quarters in Otta.) Oya was an ideal wife and this appealed to society. The interaction between Moniyeye and Osungbayeri is realistic in the assertion of Obioma Nnaemeka's analysis that "Africans who are in polygamous marriage are not morons or powerless, exploited, downtrodden victims" (Nnaemeka, 1997, p. 15). Invariably, polygamy in itself was a source of power, where women work collaboratively for political and economic reasons. Being that there are mutual gender understandings that women also work to generate income for the family (McIntosh, 2008). Furthermore, this view resonated in the way women as co-wives in a family engaged in market days to network the commerce of commodities in Trans-Atlantic trade.

Politics, Wives and Power

Wives in Oyo-Yoruba societies often are referred to as Iyawo. They fulfilled the biological and social functions within the lineage to serve as wives, mothers and workers. Typical of the Yoruba family structure, by marriage, a wife possesses lower status, initially, but with time more power is accorded to her, and it advances into public spaces. Within the Oyo-Yoruba family,

a woman marrying into the family is powerless, in the sense that she resides in the patrilocal lineage house and has lower status. Men and women in the family symbolise the authority of husbands. The husband's female relatives are more powerful than her. Often, she offers domestic services to everyone in the family.

Economic factors featured in the 19th century Oyo-Yoruba societies. The geographies of proximity to the coast were very prominent in Otta. A series of displacements in the 19th century entrenched new frameworks of being Yoruba. The historical links of lineage relations in the previous centuries could not create a central/homogenous identity in Otta. The Oyo influence was important to pass on tributes to Oyo. Monetary value was in the economic activities of wifely women who generated wealth through commerce in the Trans-Sahara and Trans-Atlantic trades. Scholarly work on the economic history of the 19th century found the Trans-Atlantic trade interconnected with the waves of migration and resettlement (Hopkins, 1968). Indirectly, wives were involved in the lineage practices that generated wealth in the new era of legitimate commerce. For example, women were known to engage in commodity trade at short and long distance. Therefore, they facilitated the supply of textile materials used in designing masquerade regalia. In other words, women profited from masquerading practices and they were also involved in performative spiritual practices in the lineage they belong to. This maintained the heritage of lineages that possess the power to perform *Gelede* and *Egungun* masquerades. Wives within lineages sponsored masquerading ceremonies to create wealth and increase patron-client relations in the community. This was meant to facilitate the purchase of imported European cloth, combs, cowries, glasses, paints, and beads among other things. Wives facilitated the arts and crafts work used in the making of regalia; provision of food and other roles. In this, women in lineages provided these services to ensure success and uphold the political status of the family where they are patrilocally resident. The dynamics sufficed throughout the 19th century.

The internal Yoruba wars of the 19th century drifted men out of their homes by being captured into slavery. Some men regained freedom because the missionaries and Europeans made efforts to stop the wars and slavery as the decision to quit the slave trade gradually influenced the new converts to Christianity. Men involved in the slave trade outside their homes returned in the 1880s and 1890s. Their return complicated gender relations with their wives. This is because wives in Otta were already keyed into the economy of masquerading and made fortunes that enhanced their relevance in the lineage compounds. The returnee husbands aimed to take over the households where their wives had been wealthy and found prosperity in emerging modern

legitimate commerce. Wives in households clearly used wealth to challenge patriarchy in their patrilocal status, thereafter, creating a new social order in the family.

Conclusions

Women as wives significantly influenced the social construction of gender in Oyo-Yoruba societies. Their roles were explicitly interwoven within the traditional political system. This paper unravelled the models and agencies of wives in the political economy. The economic roles of wives sustained the palace, tradition and society. The nuances and dynamics of being wives and their roles feature in traditional practices of modern times. Despite the waves of displacement from the late 18th to the 19th century, wives remained custodians of culture and resiliently sustained the traditional institution of womanhood. Polygamy and co-wives' relations within a lineage also increased the relevance of women in the political economy of the 19th century. The wifely agencies and models of power therefore indicate that gender is constructed; that gender equality is dynamic; and that power is performed and expressive, ultimately Trans-Atlantic and Trans-Sahara trade were defining factors that shaped the economic power and political relevance of wives in Oyo-Yoruba societies.

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