

A Review of Thomas Mákànjúọlá Ilésanmí's
Obìnrin: A Cultural Assessment of Yorubá Women

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Reviewer: Táíwò Şónéyẹ

The book entitled *Obìnrin: A Cultural Assessment of Yorùbá Women* has eleven chapters that enunciate the unique “Yorùbá perspective to the nature of women and the mysteries about them.” It attempts an elucidation of deep, esoteric, sometimes controversial but consistently illuminating issues on the dynamics of the features and functions of *Yorùbá* women in virtually all aspects of cultural life. Perhaps, the most amazing thing about this book is the quantum of mysteries it unravels about *Yorùbá* women and the fact that this staggering revelation is coming from a “celibate priest”.

Ilésanmí, in chapter one, undertakes a preliminary demystification of values about the Yoruba women still shrouded in cultic mysteries by gleaning into orature and interacting with the adherents of the cults. The unique Yoruba women cult association known traditionally as *Awo abiyamo*, akin to the fertility cult of the ancient Middle East, the



traditional attitude to witchcraft in Yoruba land, the witches (*àwọn iyàmi* or *Àjé*) intrinsically embedded with psychological, curative and political roles in the community, the Yoruba female deities and their connections to rivers and the Yoruba myths concerning women, most especially as narrated in *Ifá* verses, are all given peripheral attention that could heighten the expectation of the reader.

The author's description of "Motherhood" as an art that transcends biological readiness which the younger women learn from "older women" and the sharp dichotomy drawn between the Hausa/Fulani culture and the culture of the *Yorùbá* with regard to "child bride" (page 14) in chapter two, unequivocally certify the uniqueness of *Yorùbá* women in relation to Motherhood. The author's treatment of related issues of early marriage, pregnancy/delivery complications and nursing presents a holistic assessment of the discourse on motherhood. His discussion of other *Yorùbá* beliefs are quite insightful. Such beliefs include spiritual interception of pregnancy by evil people, the tying of pregnancies with charms to avoid miscarriages before maturity, as well as the spiritual symbol of the placenta and its cultural functions, even after its expulsion from the body of the mother. Also included are the potency of

the placenta and its inherent potency to be medicinally induced positively or negatively, the effects of a ruptured placenta on the body of the baby, the family taboos or sub-ethnic rituals which Yorùbá mothers undergo after delivery, and the cultural significance and spiritual influence of the breast, the knees and the vagina of the mother.

Ilésanmí's exposition on "Ritualized Paediatrics among the Yorùbá", and relevant traditional cults, such as the *Olómitútù* cult connected with Òsun, a female deity in Yorùbá land, and his categorization of children in Yorùbá land into difficult, simple and/or special children encapsulates the cohesion of the content and the entitling of the chapter as "ritualised". The author exemplifies difficult children involving specific rituals, such as the Ìbejì regarded as personifying the twin deity known as *Òrìsà Ìbejì*, and the *Àbíkú* interpreted as "born to die". Here, the translation of *Àbíkú* as "born to die" is certainly not a faithful equivalent of child-type. Consumers of translated verses might easily say but we are all born to die someday. This reiterates the difficulty of capturing a culture in an alien language. The author's eyewitness account of *Egbé Èwe* (aged between four and sixteen) in Òtan Ayégbajú in 1970 (p.26) heightens the credibility of the book. The distinction the author draws between modern paediatrics and the *Olómitútù* cult of Òsun, where the



former uses scientific medication and the latter uses elementary philosophy, psychology and some socio-religious devices to cope with the cultural problem of infant mortality (p.39) and the concept of “the accursed hand” (p.43) in Yorùbá belief system, are significant within the purview of Yorùbá ritualized paediatrics, it is a major contribution of the women folk to health care in Yorùbá land.

Chapter four entitled *Common Image of Women* (45-65) describes the common images of Yoruba women as wives, co-wives, concubines and prostitutes. These images are discussed under four sections, namely Marriage, Co-wives, Concubinage and Prostitution (48-65). Here, the author samples images from many dialect groups of Yoruba land since the peculiarities of the *Ijèbú* women, for instance, are different from Ife women in many ways and the *Ijèṣà* women possess certain characteristics not found among the *Òyó* women. This chapter is particularly enriched with examples from Yorùbá orature that the author must have had hard times interpreting to English. The Yoruba world view of marriage shows that “a woman’s respectability and honour depends on her marital status”(p.49), “but it is believed that a woman is not sincere when she prays for a co-wife (*Èdùmarè jé n pé méjì obinrin ò dénú*). This women’s show

of displeasure at being packed as slaves in a man's house just because the man is rich or powerful" the author supports (p49) and corroborates with the story of *Ọwá-a-Bépolórùn-obìnrin*, the *Ọba* who was said to have been insulted by the wife. The king invited his wife the *Olorì* to help him bathe (scrub) his back. While doing this, she remarked "*Káábìyèsí* as smallish as you are everybody in the kingdom shivers whenever they see you". The king later ordered the wife's execution, touched her blood with his toe and states "*lyì ni ọba í forí bíbẹ se*" (pgs. 50-51). Such emotive stories pervade this book and stimulate the reader in no small measure.

The recommendation of Ifá corpus and belief that "monogamy is the ideal form of marriage" (despite the many wives of Ifá) is given considerable attention in the book:

Ọkan soso póró l'obìnrin dùn mọn lówó ọkọ
Bí wọn bá di méjì wọn a d'òjòwú
Bí wọn bá di mẹta wọn a d'ẹta-ń-tú'lé...
Bí wọn bá di mẹfà, wọn a d'ìkà
Bí wọn bá di méje wọn a d'àjẹ...

Only one wife is good for a husband
When they become two, they envy one another
When they become three they become quarrelsome
When they become six they turn wicked
When they become seven they become witches



The author considers as unjustifiable *Ifá*'s blame of women for the problem of polygamy, which he says is caused by the men. Perhaps, the author should say the men are partly responsible. However, Ilésanmí's perspective is largely revolutionary and capable of breaking down enduring stereotypes about women generally. The increasing moral degeneration of the women from the envious to the quarrelsome, to the wicked and to witches, as documented in *Ifá* corpus is instructive, but does this corpus, say anything about the effects of polygamy on the man. Another observation here is the loss of rhythm in the English equivalent of the verses. For instance, the pun and the assonance in “*bí wón bá di méta wón a dètà n 'túlé*” could not be sufficiently captured by the author in “when they become three they are quarrelsome” because to *túlé* has more implications in Yorubá than quarrelling.

Another vital issue discussed here is the traditional custom of “widowhood”, such as the dehumanizing rituals that women are subjected to in places such as *Arámọko Èkìtì* at the demise of their husbands. The author's mention of actual place names accentuates the validity of the account the book gives on the subject. There, a widow does not change the dress she wears from the moment the husband dies until the 21st day. Then she

takes her bath, changes to a clean dress which she again wears for one year. In Ibòkun, an Ìjẹ̀sà dialect town, the widow remains naked at home for between seven and nine days and she eats *àtẹ́* (food without oil and salt). But for the men, the traditional Yorùbá Community does not permit a man to mourn the loss of his wife, even on the very night of her death another woman is called in to sleep with him to prevent him from feeling the loss of his wife. All of this, the author remarks “was initiated at the time when might was right and when brute power was used to acquire ... position” (pgs. 53-54) but since culture is not static due to its interaction with other cultures via trade, forced governance and especially contact with foreign religions, some of these are also no longer as pronounced as before.

Ilésamní’s unequivocal pragmatic treatment of the image of the Yoruba women as co-wives, why they accept polygamy, the concept of the Yoruba husband as *Olówórí Aya* (the one who pays the bride price) and the diplomatic interaction of each wife to win the heart of their husband, some with their beauty, some with their acumen at preparing delicious meals, some with their productiveness of children, some with their sex appeal and the use of traditional medicine in a bid to win the heart of the husband (page 57), is a major strength of the book. The author exemplifies the types of quarrels and insinuating songs common



in such polygamous settings as in the song on page 57 and the humour this creates is an essential aspect of the easy-to-read style of the author.

Bi iyale sefo ma seja ko le le mi l'òdèdè
Bi iyale sefo ma seja ko le le mi l'odede ori lope

If the first wife cooks vegetables, I will cook fish
She should not take over the house, I have a
sound mind

The author's response to this persona is that she does not have a sound mind. She personifies the failure of women in recognising their ability, rights and nature. According to the writer, "when women set against one another; it is men who benefit from their. . . quarrels", jealousy..., sometimes lead some women to kill their co-wives, children or each other" (p. 58). His conceptualisation of *dálémosú*, a married woman who leaves her home due to the unbearable conditions therein to settle in her original family, the scapegoat-children and the superiority of the wife who has male children are salient contemporary issues which make the book quite consequential. Still on *dálémosú*, there are women who do not return to their original family houses. In fact, there are several of such in Europe. As regards categorization are the

dálémosú divorced or separated? Such presentation keep one thinking and re-thinking.

The distinction between the image of Yorùbá women as concubines and as wives is drawn in this chapter. The author states on page 59 that “The only difference between the concubine and the wife is that the concubine is not living in the man’s house as a wife; neither could she show herself as the lover...in public” (p.59). An empirical analysis of Yorùbá people’s perspective (especially the younger generation) in contemporary times on the concept of concubinage might be interesting because issues of morality, amorality and immorality are constantly shifting with modernity.

The author regards prostitution as a recent phenomenon in Yorùbá land. He defines a prostitute as one who “has no lover and she is not bothered about love but about sex for trade in order to acquire money” (p.61). What about the “Sugar Mummies” who themselves dish out money to younger men with whom they prostitute. Could it be always for money? Are there no girls who prostitute as a result of their being nympholeptic (having a demonic enthusiasm; a frenzy of emotion) and/or being nymphomaniacs? What about undergraduates who sleep endlessly with lecturers to pass and even aid the lecturers financially? The author rightly observes



though that, “Modernism has changed some traditional values and attitudes” (p.61). The author’s insistence on adequate provision for especially female children who are more inclined to cosmetology and the father being a right model void of promiscuity is quite instructive. The author laments the crumbling of the foundation of educulture (page 66). To him, Yoruba people no longer insist on pre-marital virginity instead they opt for pre-marital pregnancy. His assessment of the popularization of contraception among youths and the several intrusive aberrations from counter-cultures threatening proper parenthood and the marriage institution and having strong influence on our world is deep.

Perhaps the depth and breadth of the revelation in “*Women and Yorùbá Cults*” (pages 67- 82) precipitated the author’s declaration that the work “... is practically the work of a researcher and not that of an initiate; but that the researcher is not an initiate does not negate the results of his research” (p.69). The author admits the limitation of this book in dealing with Yoruba cults as “a cult must have an element of secrecy for the exclusive preserve of the initiates, that if divulged could endanger the common purpose of the cult”. However, the book unequivocally explains the position of women in Yorùbá native

cults, such as the *Ifá* cult, the *Orò* cult, and the cult of the *Eleye*. This book, like a cultural dynamo, unearths the hidden values of Yoruba women and expresses the vicissitude of power vis-a-vis men and women in the Yoruba society. Within the purview of the polytheistic Yorùbá culture, the chapter compares “the external with the hidden arrangement of the community illuminati” (P.70).

Numerous and extensive exemplifications of the place of women in specific cults pervades this chapter. For instance, “a woman brought *Éégún* to the earth, she was *Odù*. In *Éégún* cult, the women priestesses (*Ato*) possess *Aganmegun*; in *Orò* Cult, the women are prominent, one is called *Ajá* (Dog) and another *Alàgbà* (the elder) and another *Olugaga*”. These take the lead and are responsible for the laws of secrecy of the cult. In the *Ògbóni* cult, “*Erelú* (a woman) is the central focus of *Ògbóni* cult, *Ìyá*, the mother is the power of *Ògbóni* cult, *Apèèná* (the male persona) is not by any means comparable to the *Erelú*... whatever she declares secret remains secret which no man can know” (p. 73). “*Gèlèdè* belongs to the women and they are responsible for the invocation of *Şàngó*”. The most powerful women cult, according to the author, is the witches’ cult. “Any *Ifá* priest who does not honour them would be powerless”.



Various methods by which initiation into the witches' cult could be contracted ; women's phobia only for the *Sànpònná* cult, the prominence of *Odù*, the 16th wife of *Òrúnmìlà* and the pervading "operations of "*Èlẹ̀rìndínlógún* (*Òṣun* cult) all connote varying degrees of mysteries that the writer unravels with considerable dexterity. This entire elucidation has implications for re-investigating *Womanism* (a form of feminism focused especially on the conditions and concerns of black women) and Feminism (the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes).

On "*Women: Power and Witchcraft as Manifested among the Yoruba*" (pgs. 83-107), Ilésanmí interrogates issues of power and witchcraft among the Yoruba as they pertain to women. He aptly states that "Women's powers are universal but not universally exercised, since only few women of very few world cultures understand the use of their powers". The author's choice not to provide a definition of witchcraft, as there is no universally and/or etymologically agreed definition, is ingenious. This subjects the concept to wider multidisciplinary investigations. All through the chapter, the author uses "witches" and "witchcraft" to refer to *àjé*, *ẹ̀lẹ̀yẹ* or *iyàmi* (three Yorubá terms that virtually mean the same thing)". Sub-sections

of this chapter on the binary nature of human creation, the peculiar powers of women, *Ifá* myths concerning women, their powers and their craft are expository in nature, with the positive and negative outlooks of women in *Ifá* corpus (especially in *Ifá's* wives). Negative myths of *Ifá* concerning women, their power and their craft are particularly replicated in the mythological descent of *Àjé* from heaven. They were naked and refused help by *Ọbàtálá*, *Éégún* and *Ògún*. “*Ifá* covered their nakedness by mysteriously swallowing them in his belly but when they reached the earth they refused to come out of the belly of *Ifá*, thus displaying act of ingratitude to their only benefactor” (P.92) . The author’s comment on this myth, while creating humour reveals his bias for the women, the *Àjé*. He states “If they (the witches) were still naked, normally, *Ifá* should not expect them to face ignominy of appearing naked on earth”. Perhaps, one of the greatest interventions of the author with regard to the study of witchcraft in Yorùbá land is his interrogating the praise song of the *Èlẹyẹ* or witches as in the verses below:

Mo júbà èyin iyàmi Ọ̀ṣòrò̀ngà
Apani má wàágún, olókíkí òru
Ajèdò̀nìyàn ma bì, Atapájorí,
Atèdò̀jokàn, Atòróòrojèfun.



Homage to my mother *Òsòròngà*
Who kills without allowing the vulture to eat
Who eats raw liver without vomiting, who eats the
head from the hand
Who eats the heart from the liver, the intestine
from the bile (p.94)

In the above verses, the witches engage consistently in many dastardly acts, preying on others. This homage, according to the author, would only excite an intrinsically evil persona. He states that research in Yorùbá land reveals that there are seven pedestals to be ascended in the craft of the witches. The first three are said to be educative pedestals and people who ascend them are able to perform some mysterious feats (not fits). The author vividly describes the activities of witches, their delicacies and medicinal ingredients devised in Yoruba traditions to prevent their assault on pages 98-102. But the question that remains unanswered and shared by the author is: if some witches are good “white” (page 167) using their craft to enhance their business and to protect their families, why is there no different praise song for this category of witches in Yoruba cosmography? According to the author it is “surprising.., that the Yoruba people claim that the Almighty gave the control of the world to witches. If God is good and witches evil, then how

would God create a beautiful world and leave the evil witches to run it, unless if the *Yorùbá* idea is not that of a good God”. Such scholarly engagements with what has been in culture could be rewarding.

Chapter Seven, entitled *No Woman No Deity: A Testcase of Ìjẹ̀sà Yorùbá*, focuses on “the mythological metamorphosis” the priestesses of deities in *Ìjẹ̀sà* land perform on *Ìjẹ̀sà* heroes and heroines which culminate in their “deification and perpetuation of the worship of the hero-deities” (Pg. 112). The author’s reason for choosing to particularize *Ìjẹ̀sà* women and the dedication of the entire chapter to this discourse is not clear. This might be due to the author’s easy access to data and/or the uniqueness of this set of women in relation to deification. The section on “Women as creators and advertisers of Deities” is integral to this chapter because it elucidates the process through which deities are created and women are often in the centre of this creation. In the event of national calamity, the female singer may raise a song regarded as the deity’s antidote to calamity or national disorder which assures adherents of immediate peace.

Chapter Eight (pgs. 122-145), entitled *The role of women in Yorùbá internecine War*, unearths the significant roles of women in war which are often underestimated in the literature. The chapter elucidates “The Yorùbá world view in relation to



Women, Women as causes of War, Women as instrument of War, Women's influence in bringing about peace and Women's Role in the avoidance of War. Each section is laden with important historical events capable of re-orientating the reader on the contributions of Yorùbá women to especially traditional politics. The author explains men's attempts to shield women's immense contributions in this regard. He states that "men often would want to obliterate the traces of women's political hegemony". To him, "war in the traditional Yoruba society has been associated with men because they are physically built for brute combat..." (pg. 126) but there are pieces of evidence that corroborate the nature of women as positive "binary system. . . and an inevitable support for the success of men". The Yorùbá conception of the world "as a conglomeration of dualistic events that are often complimentary" is also considered in this context. "While men rely on brute force and medicinal power in fighting wars, women rely on psychological and the cult" (Pg.128) as encapsulated in the verses below:

E soniimeruigiifonna, in-in
E soniigorieleyinbon, in-in

No one takes fire with a bundle of firewood, oh yes

No one would shoot a gun while enjoying the pleasure of the vagina, oh yes

The unearthing of these verses that express the uniqueness of the feminine power, which the author claims that no male can replicate gives the book a unique stance. Vivid explanations of how women use the cults to fight wars are also enunciated in this chapter. The author's assessment of women on page 131 seems holistic but one is not sure whether this assessment is a product of research, observation, bias or interaction with them. He states:

But women are said to be the weaker sex. They are weaker in the realm of brute force while they possess higher psychological, metaphysical and even material powers. Their beauty is power, their comportment can unbalance the seeming fixity of man; their menstrual phenomenon can neutralize the medicinal power of men; their feelings may be more effective than the reasoning of men; their love can melt a rock and their hatred can obliterate an entire nation. (Pg.131)

The author discusses various reasons for wars but one is worth reinvestigating and that is the mere desire to capture some women which Ifa corroborates:

*Wọ̀n ò jẹ́ sígunilóbìrìn kìn bá wọ̀n lọ
Kìn bá wọ̀n lọ*



M'bá mú pa
M'bámutà
M'ba mu loo lé Lo o sobìnrini

If people dare declare war against women folk
I will certainly enlist myself
I will take and kill
I will take and sell
will take home and marry as wives.

The factors for internecine war expressed in this book necessitate our re-investigation of causes of war and/or formation of some human right organisations and nongovernmental organisations which extrinsically seem patriotic but intrinsically self-serving, like this persona in Ifa corpus who wants war just to acquire women as wives.

The author's vivid descriptions of *Yoruba Women and Sexuality* (chapter nine; pages 146-156) are quite revolutionary. Perhaps only few books on Yorùbá culture would explain the subject of sex with that degree of bluntness. Questions on how the Yorùbá conceive sex, its tolerance within marriage, part of the sexual organs that ensure satisfaction, expectations of the woman from the man, behavioural patterns of men and women with regard to sex, the role of cosmetology and implications of sexual fulfillment for healthy marriages, existing aberrations about sex,

such as circumcision and female genital mutilation, and the necessity to educate the younger generation on the intricacies of sex receive considerable attention that makes the book relevant for all people of all ages, ethnic or national affiliations and disciplines.

Chapter Ten (157-170), entitled “*Women’s Economic, Religious and Political Status in Yorùbá land*” discusses the contributions of women to the economic, religious and political phases in the Yorùbá society. The author asserts from the outset that “Men do not work as hard as women do”. This declaration may have been borne out of the author’s experience as a Catholic priest (with several women in attendance in church) for more than four decades or as a university don for about four decades too. The author regards women as “pillars of traditional religion”, acknowledges women’s prominent roles in Yoruba land provided for by Christian influence in specific denominational domains, such as in the Catholic Church and in Pentecostal churches and the near-silent and emerging roles of women in Islam (pages 162-165). Perhaps, as subjects for further research, the author asks “Could witches do good? (Pg.166). One should want to be sure if the *Yorùbá Olódùmarè* is the same God, and if He is the creator, or if He is Allah? The author expresses his opinion thus: “I do not see why we should



say witches are evil and claim that God, who is accepted as good would give them authority to do what they desire with His creation” on images of witches (black witches on page 167) the author asks. “Why is black colour always used to describe evil? And states, “Maybe men are the creators of poems on witches. . .witches have never had an opportunity to defend themselves.” (Pages 167-168). The author’s admittance in the concluding chapter (pgs. 171-176) that he does not have the last say on women and culture should propel more research in this direction.

The book *Obinrin: A Cultural assessment of Yoruba Women* draws vividly from relevant works of prolific researchers of Yorùbá culture, such as Wándé Abímbólá and Adébáyò Fálétí, and numerous scholarly works on culture, mysteries, witchcraft, psychology, medicine, science and power from around the globe and the Bible.

This book is etymologically vast, culturally stimulating, politically illuminating, educationally insightful, anthropologically rewarding and disciplinarily versatile. In particular, every youth of Yorùbá descent needs to read this book and sufficiently interact with their culture and the fervour of their language. Ngugi Wa Thiongo (1985:151) says “the first

sure sign of self-colonization is when.. .one does not know enough of one's own language..." Soneye (2003:9) suggests that we Africans need to re-orientate our minds so that we do not cast as "crude anything indigenous and as sophisticated anything Foreign". This book has the intrinsic capacity to supply such re-orientation. The negligible typo errors, lexical malapropisms and sparse translational malformation in the book are not enough to daunt its value. The rich cultural content is undoubtedly impossible to unearth by this review and I anticipate a more scholarly engagement with the book, such as undertaking comparative analyses of the images of the Yorùbá women, including the pictorial effects with those of their counterparts in other parts of Africa, Asia and Europe.

While thanking the author of the book, T.M Ilésanmí for inviting me to undertake a review of the book, let me also say to prospective readers: welcome to the reading of a pragmatic account of Yoruba women entitled *Obìnrin: A Cultural Assessment of Yorùbá Women*".

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