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Women in Yoruba Religions: A Review of Oyèrónké Oládémọ's Argument

Oyèrónké Oládémọ is a professor of comparative religious studies working at the University of Ilorin in Nigeria. She has been a researcher in the religious studies field for over thirty years, publishing over thirty pieces of her research in scholarly journals and books. The majority of her books have focused on the Yoruba people and their religious experiences, specifically the experiences of the Yoruba people through gender, more specifically, that of women.¹ Her book "Women in Yoruba Religions" primary focus, as she has stated, is to consider "women's roles and representations within Yoruba religions, with a particular focus on the dynamics of Yoruba culture in women's experiences in Yoruba, Christian, and Islamic religions."² Her work has been to trace Yoruba women's influence throughout the diaspora, in particular, their influence on civilizations and religions, and pursue how the widespread migration of the Yoruba people have affected their civilization and religion. She breaks down her overarching argument into three parts to show a fully comprehensible examination of women in the Yoruba tradition and contemporary Yoruba women. Her first argument point is "Yoruba women attain and wield agency through their economic and religious roles."; her second argument point is "They exercise profound influence on issues of power and gender relations using different mechanisms,."; her third argument point is "Whenever Yoruba women have the

¹ Oyeronke Olademo, "I'm Prof. Oyeronke Olademo," Welcome to Oyeronke Olademo, last modified 2021, accessed March 29, 2023, <https://www.oyeronkeolademo.com/index.php>.

² Oyeronke Olademo, *Women in Yoruba Religions* (New York, New York: New York University Press, 2022), 1.

opportunity, they consistently utilize the resources within their religious traditions that are supportive of women's equality.”³

Along with Oládémọ's three-point argument, she uses a three-point structure throughout her book to support her argument path. In chapters one and two, she introduces historical and contemporary women's roles in Yoruba religious and societal roles. Moving into her second structure part in chapters three and four, she shows the influence Yoruba women have on Christianity and Islamic religious traditions in Yorubaland, and their influence on them. Then in her last structure point, taking place in chapters five and six, she shows the influence Yoruba women have incited throughout the diaspora, as well as globalization's influence over them and how they are able to adapt to its influence. Through this structure, she is able to introduce sub-arguments brought on by the structure while also addressing and providing significant evidence for her main three argument points. Along with this three-point structure, she is able to delineate her three main argument points into a well-crafted argument throughout her book. She clearly sets up each argument point throughout the first structure section. Then, moving forward, she is able to further her argument, not only through the eyes of traditional and contemporary aspects of Yoruba traditions but also in other traditions, as outlined in section two of her structure, and throughout the diaspora, as outlined in her third structure section.

Oládémọ uses a variety of sources to support her claims. Considering that she uses over fifty sources in each of her chapters, I will focus on what I found to be the most important from two specific chapters in her book chapters one and three.

³ Oyeronke Olademo, *Women in Yoruba Religions* (New York, New York: New York University Press, 2022), 12.

Starting with her first chapter, we are introduced to “Women’s Family, Economic, Social, and Political Roles in Yorubaland”⁴. Within this chapter, she uses multiple different sources from academic writings from other scholars in the field as well as accounts of women in the tradition and cosmology trends. To support her first argument that “Yoruba women attain and wield agency through their economic and religious roles.”⁵ She uses a particular example depicting Efunsetan Anuwura, a prominent female trader from the 1790s to 1874, showing that women, even early in traditionalist Yoruba society, have been at the forefront of trade and business.⁶ She then follows this with a more contemporary piece in support of her argument, giving depictions from the 2022 list of Richest Women in Yoruba, showing that this trend is still alive and thriving in their culture, stating that “These highly successful women demonstrate that Yoruba female gender roles and women's agency allow them to attain success and power in their economic activities.”⁷. Moving into her second argument point, she supports that motherhood is a mechanism through the work of another scholar who states that “Yoruba women are appreciated and idolized as mothers because as noted, procreation, without which the community cannot continue, in a paramount concern for the people.”⁸. She uses this point in relation with evidence of the Iya Mi (society of powerful mothers), to back up that women use motherhood, in this way, as a mechanism, to gain power knowing that the society cannot continue without them. Giving them a social up-hand to support their needs. To support her third argument in the first chapter she uses the cosmological story of Osun to back up how women use traditional stories to uphold women’s rights. The story of Osun essentially shows that without women’s influence and opinions, the society would fall apart.⁹

⁴ Oyeronke Olademo, *Women in Yoruba Religions* (New York, New York: New York University Press, 2022), 13.

⁵ Oyeronke Olademo, *Women in Yoruba Religions* (New York, New York: New York University Press, 2022), 12.

⁶ Oyeronke Olademo, *Women in Yoruba Religions* (New York, New York: New York University Press, 2022), 12.

⁷ Oyeronke Olademo, *Women in Yoruba Religions* (New York, New York: New York University Press, 2022), 13.

⁸ Oyeronke Olademo, *Women in Yoruba Religions* (New York, New York: New York University Press, 2022), 22.

⁹ Oyeronke Olademo, *Women in Yoruba Religions* (New York, New York: New York University Press, 2022), 26.

Moving into the third chapter, we see “Yoruba Women in Christianity”¹⁰ Much like in her first chapter she uses many sources throughout the third chapter including other scholarly sources to support her claims regarding women in the Yoruba society in relation to the Christian faith. However, of her sources, I would like to particularly point out, especially in her third chapter, her use of first-hand accounts. In the beginning of her third chapter she is trying to point out the use of the Christian religion in relation to the Yoruba society and she talks about a female pastor named Busola Olotu, who was born to a Muslim family in Lagos, Nigeria. She became pentecostal in 1983 upon being “saved” into the faith.¹¹ She uses Olotu’s story to support her claim that women in Yoruba society gain agency through religious roles. In this source she describes that in faiths such as Christianity and Islam, the only way for women to gain this, as they are more patriarchal rather than in Yoruba traditionalism, they have a complementary system, is through things such as religious visions.¹² This was in fact the case for Pastor Mrs. Busola Olotu, who received a vision and was trained and then later ordained.

Using sources of this caliber, especially those of other academic sources, her argument became extremely sound. Her accounts of women such as Efunsetan Anuwura in the first chapter and Pastor Mrs. Busola Olotu were refreshing making her argument more personable and sound. The use of these accounts of real women in Yoruba culture I find particularly interesting because they add a level of depth that simple academic accounts and doctrine just do not have. Seeing these personable accounts show that these arguments definitely hold true. In length, using such sources as personable accounts of Yoruba women, Oládémọ is able to show that her argument holds up to actual charges in cultural Yorubaland.

¹⁰Oyeronke Olademo, *Women in Yoruba Religions* (New York, New York: New York University Press, 2022), 68.

¹¹ Oyeronke Olademo, *Women in Yoruba Religions* (New York, New York: New York University Press, 2022), 65.

¹² Oyeronke Olademo, *Women in Yoruba Religions* (New York, New York: New York University Press, 2022), 65.

Overall, the book is a masterpiece in religious studies. With Oládémọ's insightful knowledge and studies into the Yoruba religion, the book becomes very comprehensible for anyone to read, not just in an academic field. Her argument is the greatest strength of her book, making every other point in her book easily fall into the three points of her overarching thesis. Her work, specifically in women's studies in relation to the field, is refreshing, and she is able to do it very well in this topic, where women are of such high importance. Not only analyzing the religious aspects but also the political, economic, and social aspects made her argument even more convincing, as she shows throughout her book. This, in my opinion, is an excellent strength as religion is not just about doctrine or oral recitations in the case of Yoruba, but it is about their history and how they interact with each other. Especially since her book has focused specifically on women, it is essential to represent these other aspects to show gender relations in Yoruba tradition. With the use of these other aspects throughout Yoruba life, she not only states their importance but links it back to a religious sense, which I must say is a very complicated thing to succeed in. Also, throughout her book, she was able to balance both support for her claims while addressing counterarguments such as that of sociologist Oyeronke Oyewumi, who believes that Yoruba held no gender constructions prior to colonialism, which she successfully and respectfully disproved throughout her argument by showing early signs of gender norms through religious traditions.¹³ Second, to her argument, I believe the strongest point in her book is her ability to navigate two very contemporary and controversial fields of study: Africana and women's studies. The only qualm I have with the book is that I would like more cosmological examinations than what was provided. While I could see that she has a vast knowledge of this, I

¹³ Oyeronke Olademo, *Women in Yoruba Religions* (New York, New York: New York University Press, 2022), 23.

would have liked a section specifically related to women in Yoruba cosmological stories to better support her argument of women's importance in the religion.

In conclusion, Oyèrónké Oládémọ's argument was extremely convincing. Her work specifically in Yoruba women was very refreshing and in my opinion, from what I have read in the past, very original. Not many academics in general perform studies in traditionalist African religions. Her expertise in the field is definitely shown throughout her book, and her sources were top-tier. Historiography of previous works relating to the field shows that she had original ideas relating to the topic and made her work unique in that way. As stated previously, she was able to successfully navigate contemporary and controversial topics in her book, and provide pivotal information on the topic of women in Yoruba traditions. Her work not only in historical Yoruba beliefs, but also their relation to contemporary Yoruba life was very intelligent and gave her arguments a full circle understanding of the topic, which not all academic sources provide. The book seems to be a very unique take on Yoruba women and in my opinion is a very important addition to the fields of Africana studies, women's studies, and religious studies, making it a very important piece of work for each of these fields. I recommend anyone studying in these fields especially if they are interested in multiple of these fields to read this book. It provides valuable information for anyone studying this topic. I would however recommend doing some research into Yoruba traditionalist religion prior to reading to fill in the blanks Oládémọ leaves out due to them not specifically relating to the topic.

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