

KETU MYTHS AND THE STATUS OF WOMEN:
A STRUCTURAL INTERPRETATION OF
SOME YORUBA MYTHS OF ORIGIN

Modern literature on the status of Yoruba women in south-western Nigeria has corrected the view that they were oppressed by throwing into relief areas in which they were prominent. Awe has drawn attention to the prominent part women like the Iyalode played in traditional Yoruba politics (1977; 1979), while Atanda (1979) and Babayemi (1979) have stressed the significant roles of women in the palace organisation of Oyo. Karanja (1980) has studied Yoruba market women, showing the economic strength that made them powerful. Finally, in drawing attention to the role of women as mothers and as occupiers of the innermost and sacrosanct space within Yoruba domains, Callaway has demonstrated the importance of Yoruba women to many central features of Yoruba society (1978; 1980). In this article some Yoruba myths will be discussed and analysed, in order to throw into relief this prominence of Yoruba women.

The Ketu¹ share with other Yoruba sub-groups those myths which attempt to explain their origin. These fall into two categories, those of creation and those of migration. The former have a metaphysical quality, and attempt to explain how the whole world originated from the Creator *Olodumare* who chose Ile-Ife as the spot for the creation of the universe. It is this type of myth, and what it says about women, that will form the focus of my attention.

¹ The Ketu of western Yorubaland, a sub-group of the Yoruba people of south-western Nigeria, are located astride the Dahomey-Nigeria boundary. The town of Ketu from which the name derives was the capital of the ancient kingdom of that name (Parrinder 1956), much of which now lies in the People's Republic of Benin (Dahomey).

The first myth of creation can be described very briefly. The Supreme Being (*Oloдумаре*) resides in the heavens with his divinities (*orisha*). Below this spiritual universe was a great void and a great deal of water. It occurred to *Oloдумаре* to create another universe peopled by mankind. He gave an order to the arch-divinity *Orisha-nla*² to descend and begin the work of creation. *Oloдумаре* gave *Orisha-nla* a five-toed hen, a chameleon, a small quantity of loose earth in a snail shell, and a chain with which to descend into the void. *Orisha-nla* left the presence of *Oloдумаре* determined to carry out this task to the best of his ability. On his way he became thirsty and helped himself to a copious amount of palm-wine. He became intoxicated and fell into a deep sleep. When he did not return to the heavens at the appointed time, *Oloдумаре* sent down *Orisha-nla*'s younger brother, *Oduduwa*, to find out if all was well with him. *Oduduwa* came upon the drunken *Orisha-nla*, took stock of the situation, and quietly proceeded to carry out the work of creation. He descended into the void by the chain, threw the loose earth onto the water, and released the five-toed hen upon it. The hen scratched the earth and spread it to the end of the world. Then *Oduduwa* let down the chameleon to test the firmness of the earth. The chameleon had been chosen for this test because of its extreme carefulness and the delicacy of its movements. It gave its approval, and the spot where the creation took place was called 'spreading' (*Ife*) in commemoration of the event.

Orisha-nla appeared not long after, to discover that his task had been accomplished by his younger brother who had, in so doing, usurped his right as the creator of the earth. He quarrelled with *Oduduwa* for his impertinence. The quarrel was reported to *Oloдумаре*, who effected a reconciliation between the estranged brothers. In compensation, he commissioned *Orisha-nla* to carry out the task of moulding the human figure. He confirmed *Oduduwa*'s right to own and rule the earth on his behalf from the sacred city of *Ife*. *Oduduwa* later gave birth to several children, who moved away from *Ife* to establish kingdoms of their own. His second child, a female, gave birth to *Alaketu*, whose offspring are the *Ketu*.

A second myth was collected by Ellis (1894). It asserted that the Yoruba originated from incestuous pairings among the divinities. In this myth, *Oduduwa* is presented as a female, the earth goddess.³ *Orisha-nla*, the arch-divinity, belonged to the

² *Orisha-nla* is the arch-divinity and the most important spiritual being after *Oloдумаре*. He may be conceived as the refraction of the creative power of the Supreme Being since he is said to be the Divinity assigned to mould the shapes of living things.

³ There is disagreement over the sex of *Oduduwa*. Ajisafe (1924:10) asserts that he was the husband of *Omonide*, mother of *Alaketu*, etc. Parrinder (1956) recorded a *Ketu* tradition which claimed *Oduduwa* to be female. Idowu (1962:24-7) says that the historical personality of *Oduduwa*, the deified ancestor of the Yoruba, was

heavens. He married *Oduduwa* and they had two children, the 'land' (*Aganju*), and the 'water' (*Yemaja*). These engaged in sibling marriage and gave birth to the 'air' (*Orungan*), that is, the region between the solid earth and the edge of the heavens. *Orungan* brought the incestuous relationships to a head when he ravished his mother *Yemaja*, who in an attempt to escape further humiliation purposely fell and burst open, whereupon a number of minor divinities emerged from her gaping body.

A third myth of creation shows the link between these two. It also bears out a message of the myths, which emphasize the important position of women in Yoruba society. This third myth recounts the great escapades of a virtuous Yoruba woman of great beauty, *Moremi*. She succeeded in freeing her people from the attacks of a neighbouring group called the Igbos (these have nothing to do with the Igbo, a major, but separate sociolinguistic group). On previous raids the Ife warriors, all male, would not defend themselves against their attackers, who dressed as if they were super-human. *Moremi* made a vow to the river goddess *Esinmerin* that if the goddess would help her to overcome the attackers, she would sacrifice her dearest possession to her. At the next Igbo raid she allowed herself to be captured, and being a woman of great beauty, she was given as wife to the King of the Igbos, into whose favours she endeared herself. During her captivity, she discovered that her dreaded enemies were human beings in a special type of dress made of grass, so that they resembled spirits. She escaped, went back to her people, and revealed this secret to them. The attackers were met at the next incursion with lighted torches, and the Ife victory was decisive. In fulfilment of her vow *Moremi* made great sacrifices to the river goddess, who refused all, demanding instead *Moremi*'s only child, *Oluorogbo*. *Moremi* complied and her loss was mourned by all her people. *Oluorogbo* rose up and later ascended to heaven on a rope.

As myths, these stories cannot, of course, be taken as an accurate record of historical events. Among the conservative Yoruba, they served as charters for social actions which aimed at accommodating new experiences with existing traditional practices (Simpson 1937: 5). Thus they projected the current social outlook and hopes into the past, in order to accord them the authority of the ancestors. This sanction was vital to the acceptance of any new idea for a people who believed that their social order and values were ancient, unchanging and continuous, having been handed down from one generation to the next. On the other hand, for a people struggling to blur, if not erase, the memory of a recent traumatic experience, the myths may also serve as a means of counterfeiting history. Such stories become vital to the group's attempts to re-unify after a period of internal division, by endeavouring to put an end to the recurring dialectic of segmentary fission and fusion, through the building-up of an elaborate genealogy specifying the common

grafted onto that of the earth goddess *Oduduwa*, whose cults flourish at Ado and Imeho in western Yorubaland.

origin of all sub-groups. The implication is that the desire to unite is of ancestral origin. In the words of Fortes, such myths of origin 'become intelligible when it is realized that they are nothing more than formulations of the contemporary scheme of political and ceremonial relationships' (1945:23).

In the structural tradition, however, myths have been shown to express the contradictions in the basic premises of culture. In doing this, they show the gap between what cultural institutions try to achieve and what they succeed in achieving. Although such myths are related to given empirical facts and reality, they are not a straight reflection of reality. One must analyse them to identify the contradictions they mediate, if one is to get at the message they convey. It is in this light that I shall now look more closely at the Yoruba myths I have already described, following the example of Leach's analysis (1969) of the story of Creation in the Book of Genesis.

The antinomies of 'heaven' and 'earth', 'good' and 'bad', 'strong' and 'weak' are built into the structure of each of these myths. In the first myth there is a clear distinction between the deity and man. Thus *Olodumare*, in heaven, delegated the arch-divinity to create men below. These sets of oppositions imply one other, 'above' and 'below'. The link between them comes in the divinities *Orisha-nla* and *Oduduwa*, who symbolize opposition in their final act of separation, with one going up to heaven and the other becoming ruler on earth. Yet *Oduduwa* on earth is heaven-bound, having originated there, while the arch-divinity is earthbound, having been assigned the task of moulding the figure of the men who inhabit the earth.

The characters of the arch-divinity and *Oduduwa* develop the theme of opposition. Thus the 'good' and 'strong-willed' *Oduduwa* resists the temptation to drink, and succeeds in accomplishing the task of the 'bad' and 'weak' *Orisha-nla*. In the second story, the 'bad' *Orungan* commits incest with his 'good' mother (the only permitted incest among the divinities being that between brother and sister), who demonstrates a considerable measure of strength by attempting to escape. In the third story, the 'good' and 'strong' *Moremi* finds a solution to the problem of her people, while the sacred, but 'weak' and cowardly men of Ife fail to defend the people. The sets of oppositions which emerge from these relationships may be rendered as:

heaven	earth
good	bad
strong	weak
above	below

When we add sexual opposition to these, on the merits of the characters in the stories, we must assign woman to the column of strength and man to that of weakness. This anticipates the suggestion that underlies this article, that Ketu women are powerful and that the instances of overt expression of male dominance are a mechanism of male defence against the perceived power of women.

At the level of discrimination in sexual relations, the analysis offers a more interesting insight. Most societies recognize some rule of incest and exogamy, however this may be defined. In the second myth, although the divinities regard sibling incest as 'normal', they view child-parent incest differently, and the attempted escape of *Yemaja* expresses disapproval of it. In the story of *Moremi*, the marriage of the heroine to the Igbo king, no matter how brief, exemplifies exogamous marriage or alliance, as against the practice of marriage within the group. The contrasting point of interest is that while the incestuous assault of *Yemaja* by *Orungan* leads to the former's death, the exogamous liaison of *Moremi* with the Igbo chief results in the preservation of *Moremi*'s people. This is an example of transformation where the end-result of the second set is a reversal of the first. On the one hand, coercive endogamy leads to death; on the other, exogamy (albeit temporary) leads to life.

In the myths about *Moremi* and the incestuous dealings of the divinities, women play very active and positive parts. Added to the fact that there is no complete agreement on the sex of *Oduduwa* who is, in most areas of Yorubaland, regarded as female, the imbuing of women with such characteristics as strength, life, fertility and courage is clear. The same myths associate the opposing characteristics of weakness, death and lack of courage with men.

There are three dominant themes in these myths:

- 1) they emphasize the insistence on marriage within the group, so as to keep the blood of the group pure;
- 2) they speak of the change necessitated by practical political considerations, which suggests the wisdom of creating a peaceful link with neighbouring groups through exogamous marriage;
- 3) they speak of the powerlessness of Ketu men, who realize they are dependent on women to effect these extra-group alliances. This powerlessness is masked by the ideology of male dominance, and by the socialization of women, which encourages them to accept such dominance.

Yoruba tradition insists on tribal endogamy, so as to keep the blood of the group pure. Although this practice has created a sense of exclusiveness and unity within the group in relation to others, the *Moremi* myth shows the price of maintaining such exclusiveness. To conservative elements within the society, the proposal to allow intermarriage with neighbouring groups was regarded as a complete break with tradition. The myth of *Moremi*, and the incest of the divinities and their consequences, provide the ideological underpinning and charter for the change. In so doing, they help the ordinary Ketu male accept the new situation as traditionally ordained, thus avoiding the conflict that may accompany social change.

The compromise in tradition implied in the transfer of females has had another effect on the relations between the sexes in this society. For the Yoruba man, claiming superiority over the Yoruba female, the realization that he depends on females for survival has weakened his feeling of dominance. These myths not only portray this contradiction, which is inherent in the patrilineally-

oriented world of the Yoruba, but also present a permanent paradox running through all relations between the sexes.

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