

Beyond the Stereotype: Yoruba Women in Leadership Capacities in History and Contemporary Society

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Abstract

The vibrant tapestry of Yoruba culture, rich in history, traditions, and spiritual beliefs, often presents a seemingly hierarchical gender structure in its cosmology. A prevalent challenge is moving beyond limiting stereotypes that depict Yoruba women solely as domestic figures or subordinate partners. This paper delves into historical and contemporary contexts to illuminate the multifaceted roles Yoruba women have played and continue to play as leaders, wielding influence and authority not only within the domestic and communal spheres but also in domains traditionally perceived as male-dominated. The study relies on Yoruba histories, mythologies, and social-political occurrences, past and present, as data sources. Using Ilesanmi's theory of Binary Complementarity, the analysis examines socio-political structures, religious institutions, economic activities, and artistic expressions, providing instances where Yoruba women have effectively led and guided men. This demonstrates their agency, strategic acumen, and capacity for impactful leadership. The study expunges the simplistic narratives of female subjugation and offers a nuanced understanding of Yoruba women's leadership, highlighting their historical significance and ongoing contributions as powerful agents of change and influential figures in society.

Keywords: *Binary Complementarity, impactful leadership, Socio-political structures, Stereotypes, Yoruba women*

Introduction

The rich tapestry of Yoruba culture, while often presenting a seemingly hierarchical gender structure, is frequently viewed through a patriarchal lens, positioning men as the primary authority in political, economic, and

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social spheres. This perspective is deeply rooted in the culture, politics, and language, as noted by Aragbuwa (2018, p. 88), who suggests that

Yorùbá culture portrays a patriarchal discourse which dictates societal expectation on the status, roles and behaviours of women... [and] Yorùbá linguistic heritage is suffused with male hegemony.

While acknowledging the historical prevalence of male dominance in certain domains, this article moves beyond simplistic stereotypes to illuminate the significant and often overlooked roles of Yoruba women as leaders of men in several areas of life. In fact, for some, granting decision-making power to women—who are seen as the foundational strongholds of men—is tantamount to the subjugation of men (Òpéfèyítímí, 2009).

This exploration necessitates a critical examination of the definition of leadership itself. Is it confined solely to formal political appointments and chieftaincy titles, or can it manifest in more pervasive ways, influencing decision-making, shaping societal norms, and driving progress? By broadening our understanding, we can recognize the multifaceted ways Yoruba women have historically exerted authority and continue to do so, challenging simplistic views like those of Avien and Ming-Chang (2020, p. 491), who argue that women are often stereotyped as unassertive and not achievement-oriented political leaders.

Furthermore, it is crucial to acknowledge the internal diversity within Yoruba society. Generalizations about gender roles often obscure the variations across different subgroups, lineages, and historical periods (Ajibade, 2009). Examining specific historical figures and contemporary examples will reveal the agency and influence women wield. This article thus challenges the monolithic portrayal of Yoruba society, highlighting the dynamic interplay of gender and power. As Ajíbádé (2009, p. 1) argues, 'the gender-related status quo is viewed as the product of socio-cultural and historical forces, which have been created, and are constantly recreated by humans, and therefore can potentially be changed by human agency.'

Theoretical Framework: Theory of Binary Complementarity

The Theory of Binary Complementarity underlies the interface between two seemingly opposing forces, such as positive and negative. The central

argument is that these binaries are not direct opposites but are, instead, complements of one another. While the theory acknowledges dichotomies like good vs. evil, male vs. female, and light vs. darkness, it argues that these are not mutually exclusive but rather independent and interdependent.

The proponent of this theory, Ilésanmí (1989), questions the strict oppositions found in life, revealing the complexity and nuances embedded within the Ifá literary corpus. Since its introduction, the theory has been viewed as a potent theoretical projection that illuminates various aspects of life and human existence. Hence, Sheba (1997) builds upon this concept of binary fusion when quoting Ilésanmí (1989):

The Yorùbá believed things were created in binary forms, good and bad, husband and wife; ... male and female, the aged and the young. They even accept that God created two people at the beginning, a male, the second a female ...

The existence of everything in twos, according to Yoruba cosmology in *Ifá* and other oratures, is not accidental. The essence of men is important and meaningful only when women exist, and vice versa. Without one, the other is truly incomplete, as encapsulated by the adage: *Eyẹ̀ kì í fì apá kan fò* 'A bird does not fly with a single wing'. Ajíbádé (2009) uses many adages to support this claim of Binary Complementarity in the Yoruba belief system and emphasizes that...

To the Yorùbá, virtually every creature in his or her cosmography has its complement. That is to say, even though two objects, situation, actors or reaction ideas- seen and unseen- complement each other, they are not oppositional. The Yorùbá Philosophy of binary complementarities ensures an arena where each different force has its place and space serving as complement to each other for better existence and vitality. (Ajíbádé (2009, p.12)

The Theory of Binary Complementarity offers a nuanced approach to the complexity of life, proposing that opposing concepts, phenomena, and forces—including gender—interact harmoniously to create meaningful existence. To the theory's proponents, the dominance of one force in a specific aspect of life does not render the other inferior; the force that dominates in one domain may hold silent influence in another. Life must

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be observed through this complementary lens. Thus, the true essence of men is realized in the existence of women, the essence of light is noticed only when there is darkness, and good cannot exist without evil.

This theory is highly relevant to the present study because the monolithic narrative of female inferiority exists only in perception, not in practical life. Women are forces to be reckoned with in all domains. While women's intrinsic existence may favor dominance in economic, commerce, marital, communication, and religious spheres, as against men's preference for politics, agriculture, transportation, and numerous energy-sapping and adventurous expeditions, this framework does not relegate women to subordinate roles. Rather, it suggests how they can maximize the potential in their natural endowments to promote their domains to enviable heights, transcending conventional gender stereotypes.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research approach, relying on data from Yorùbá oral traditions, which include historical facts, proverbs, aphorisms, and various oral genres. Secondary sources of data comprise published books, academic and online journals, and other documentaries. The work is anchored on the precepts of the Theory of Binary Complementarity, which posits that the two recognized genders are not seen as oppositions but as complementary forces that ensure harmonious living.

Monolithic Assumption of Patriarchal Dominance in Yorùbá Society

Twentieth-century African scholarship, especially in the Yorùbá literary field, is characterized by extensive discussion of gender balance and equity. Prevalent narratives, both within and outside the continent, frequently underscore the patriarchal nature of Yorùbá and African societies, positioning men as the primary superior figures in political, economic, and social spheres. These deeply rooted narratives in literature and history must be addressed using mechanisms embedded in the cultures themselves.

Awé (2016), in his popular book *Mọ̀rèmi Àjàsọ̀rò*, was critical of women's treatment in African societies. The female characters of Àyáná and Mosún were depicted as mishandled, maltreated, and relegated to mere objects used by men. Even Mọ̀rèmi herself was initially silenced

before her worth propelled her to lead the liberation fight against the Ùgbò people. This, however, ultimately describes Mọ̀rèmi not as a second-class citizen, but as a leader over both males and females due to her unique strength and innate ability. The attempt to create a simplistic generalization against women ignores the thousands of books, literary works, and historical records where men are similarly mishandled, maltreated, and subjugated. Does this, then, suggest an agenda against men?

In contrast, Sàngótóyè (2016) gives a detailed statistical breakdown of character portrayal in five novels by Fágúnwà, noting that the writer depicts female characters more positively than negatively. Therefore, women are not universally targeted for abuse, negative portrayal, or maltreatment in Yorubaland.

Sheba (2017) is also critical of the usual patriarchal stance purported in much of Yorùbá verbal art against the female, arguing that the female gender is consistently placed at the receiving end of failure when depicting societal ills. She challenges this status quo and makes a clarion call to women to rise against the subjugation reflected in negative portrayals across almost all spheres of African life. To support the stance, Ògúnnàíkè (2018, p.11) said:

... every time I give a presentation on the tradition in the US, someone always asks if there are any female diviners because the name for Ifa priests- babalawo- means “father of the secrets” in Yoruba and the tradition is usually presented as overtly male-centric. Over the past few decades many women-mostly but not exclusively in the United States- have sought to gain initiation into the tradition of Ifa and also to be trained to perform Ifa divination.

By all indications, the literary acumen of African societies according to this school of thought underscore male superiority over men. In politics, a mere figurehead *ìyálóde* and *Ìyálójà* with no authority are selected to represent women in the midst of domineering men in traditional Yorùbá political landscape. The authors critique the negative portrayal of women in Yorùbá literature and advocate for greater inclusivity and recognition of women's roles. The discussion around *Ifá* tradition also shows women actively seeking to challenge and participate in traditionally male-dominated areas.

In this present study, it is posited that women are not subjugated or relegated to subordinate roles but they act within their capacity, potential and natural endowment. Instead, the inequality in the gender dynamics substantiates the fact women are binary complement of men and vice versa. Women are versatile in communication, commerce, and some leadership roles in the past and present socio-political arena of Yorùbá society. In the history, mythology, literature, worldviews, Yorùbá women have had monumental feats in governance and economic progress of their people.

Muraina and Ajímátanraèjẹ (2023) argue that before colonial era, Yorùbá culture was gender-neutral and gender-silent and women were seen as direct complements not subordinates to men. Women just like their women counterparts aspired and achieved whatever they desired with little or no hindrance, they cited few examples of women in authority in politics, economics who later became heroines in Yorùbá land including ascending the paramount political seats in Yorùbáland. Their assertion is on the impacts of Islam and Christianity on the silent voice of women in Yorùbá society. But one can actually say that, Islam and Christianity were not the harbingers of this, a bit of men dominance existed in Yorùbá land since pre-colonial era. A lot of cults, groups and gathering permitted limited participation of women.

Mythico-religious Echoes of Female Authority

Women in Yorùbá oral tradition are well acknowledged and recognised. Even if there are some aphorisms and oratures that depicts the negativity about women, plenty of them adore and praise the positive nature of women (Òjọ and Oláiyá, 2024). Taking the clue from the two sides of the coin, as stipulated in binary complementarity, this study affirms that women were not deemed second class citizen in Yorùbá traditions but necessary complements of men just like men are to women in some aspects.

In the Ifá verse of Òyèkú-méjì, women were said to be betrayers, hypocrites, jealous, murderers and instrument of evil doers. People are quick to reference this and other derogatory remarks in the oratures of Yorùbá as an instance of women subjugation and dehumanization inherent Yorùbá oratures as repositories of their cosmology including women's image as seen thus:

Obìnrin lẹ̀dàlẹ̀	The woman are the betrayers
Obìnrin lẹ̀ké	The women are the hypocrites
Kéèyàn má finú hàn fòbìnrin	No one should tell women the secret
A díá fún Olójòngbòdú	Divined for Olójòngbòdú, the
obìnrin ikú	wife of Ikú
Tó jí lówúrò kùtùkùtù;	Who woke up early in the morning
Wòn ní kí ni ikú ọkọ rẹ jẹ	She was asked to tell them the
ò gbọdò	taboos her husband should not eat
Tí fí pọmọ ọlọmọ kiri?	While in the killing spree
Ó ní kí ni wòn ó fún oun?	She asked them what they will offer her
Wòn ní àwọn ó fún un lẹgbẹta	They promised to give her plenty
ọkẹ owó money	
Ó ní ikú ọkọ oun ò gbọdò jeku	She said her husband must not eat a rat
Tí ikú ọkọ oun bá jeku	If her husband eats rat,
Ọwọ ikú a máa wá irọrọ irọrọ	His hand will be shaking uncontrollably
Ó ní ikú ọkọ oun ò gbọdò jeja	She said her husband must not eat fish
Tí ikú ọkọ oun bá jẹ eja	If death, husband eats fish
Èsẹ ikú a máa gbọn iriri iriri	Ikú legs will be shaking terribly
Ó ní ikú ọkọ oun ò gbọdò jẹ	She said her husband must not eat
eyin pẹpẹye	duck's egg
Tíkú ọkọ oun bá jeyin pẹpẹye	If her husband eats a duck's egg
Ikú a máa bì igòròrò igòròrò	She said er husband will be vomiting
Ó ní ikú ọkọ oun ò gbọdò jẹ	She said her husband must not
Elébúté	eat elébúté
Tí ikú ọkọ oun bá jẹ elébúté	If her husband eats elébúté
Ara ikú a máa hú ibúté ibúté	Iku's body will be itching so badly

(Ọyẹkú-Méjì from Ifá Priest Rẹmílẹkún Adégbìtẹ)

The excerpt above shows the negative portrayal of women in Yorùbá. Ikú's wife did not hesitate when presented money to divulge all her husband secrets, which she knew quite well will bring his downfall. It is demeaning and detrimental to the image and personality of women indeed, but the Ifá verse above only presents things the way it is to the recipient at that point

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in time, relationally, because the same genres have several instances where women are seen from positive lens as found in this following example:

Òdà owó awo kóro	Scarcity of money, the confidant of Kóro
Ààbò aya rè	The protector is his wife
Bí òdà owó ẹ́ ń dá mi	As I am longing to have money amid scarcity
Lààbò aya mi ń bò mí	Protector, my wife is shielding from evil
A díá fún Ọ̀rúnmìlà	They cast divination for Ọ̀rúnmìlà
Níjọ tí Ajogun dé bába	The day malevolent spirits came to visit
mólé pirimuhim	
Baba ọ̀ sì lóókan à yọ ná...	And he was very broke (Babaláwo Adégúnwà)

In this Ifá verse, Ọ̀rúnmìlà, the protagonist of the verse, was visited by seven malevolent spirits which he must appease with a lot of sacrifices to avert evil occurrences to him and his household but Ọ̀rúnmìlà was penniless. It was his wife who rallied around to salvage the situation and made provision for ingredients that Ọ̀rúnmìlà used to entertain and appease the malevolent spirits. Therefore, Ọ̀rúnmìlà's wife and by extension all women cum wives are protectors, shields and providers. The same Ifá systematically demanded for the constant percentage of women in any religious or political activities as found in Ọ̀ṣẹ̀túrá:

A díá fún igbamọ̀lẹ̀ ojùkòtún	Cast divination for 200 deities at the right hand
A bù fún igbamọ̀lẹ̀ ojùkòsì	Cast divination for 200 deities at the left hand
Ìdí ọ̀pẹ̀rẹ̀gẹ̀dẹ̀ àjùbà	At the base of maiden deep forest
Wọn lagbó orò	They cultivated <i>orò</i> forest
Wọn lagbó ọpa	The cultivated <i>ọpa</i> 's forest
Wọn lànà tóóró ẹ̀sẹ̀ ń tò	They cultivated a deep forest to make a pathway
Wọn peégún eégún ọ̀ jẹ	They called on masquerade, it

Wọn porò, orò ò fòhùn	refuses to answer They called on <i>orò</i> , he refuses to respond
Wọn wá gbòdò Olódùmarè lọ	They revert back to God
O ní ta ní n bẹ lẹyin tí	He asked if they leave anyone behind in their quest
wọn ò fí tirẹ ẹ	They confessed it was Ọṣun
Wọn ní Ọṣun Àwúráolú ní	Àwúráolú
Ìmòsẹ ilé Ìdó	Ìmòsẹ, the noble one from Ìdó
Şebí obínrin lẹyin ẹ	We supposed you are an honourable woman
Iye wa pélé mò	Our mother, the veteran
A fimò jò tòṣun ooo	We have paid obeisance to you
Iye wa pélé mò	Our veteran mother
Bí gúnýángúnýán bá n gúnýán,	If someone pounds yam
Tí ò fí tẹyin ẹ	Without due obeisance to you
Iyán wọn a máa dí kókó	Their pounded yam will be full of lumps
Iye wa pélé mò, àwá fimò	Our ubiquitous mother, we
jò tòṣun ...	venerate you Ọṣun.

(Ọṣètùrá Verse from Priest Adégúnwà)

The verse from *Ọṣètùrá* above is giving credence to indispensability of men in any gathering or institution. Ọṣun was sidelined in a matter that is very vital to people's well-being but all their attempts to make way in their deliberation and rites proved futile. That was the time God guided them to carry woman along in their quest to achieve their goals. They did as instructed by Olódùmarè (God) and offered Ọṣun, representing women significant respect which eventually paid off. The verse underscores that women are necessary part of the society, their percentage in representation must always be respected even in contemporary Nigeria political landscape. The pre-colonial Yorùbá political and religious setting as seen above made woman a mandatory figure before there would be tranquility. Invariably, co-habitation of women and men is like conjoined twins when it comes to harmonious living in the society. None is more important than other but they complement each other with distinct attributes (Muraina and Ajímátanraèje, 2023). Just like Ifá demands for equitable distribution of power as seen above, legislators and decision-makers in Africa polity must also do the same. Mythico-religiously, women voices were heard, they are not to be subjugated if society desire to thrive.

Historical Echoes of Female Authority - Tracing Leadership Roles Through Time

The historical landscape of the Yorùbá people is punctuated by the powerful presence of women who defied conventional gender expectations and exercised significant leadership over men. While formal political structures may have predominantly favored male rulers, a closer look reveals numerous instances where women held positions of considerable influence and authority.

Consider the figure of Mọ̀rẹ̀mì Àjàṣorò, the legendary heroine of Ilé-Ifẹ̀. Her strategic brilliance and courage in infiltrating the Ùgbò enemy camp not only saved her people but also demonstrated a form of leadership that directly influenced the actions and safety of men. Her story serves as a potent reminder of the respect and recognition accorded to women who exhibited exceptional leadership qualities. This recognition of women as equal to men—neither inferior nor superior—forms part of the precepts of the Theory of Binary Complementarity, where the existence of men and women is intentional to balance the force of nature (Ọ̀pẹ̀fẹ̀yítímí, 2009)."

In the political history of Àkúrẹ̀, women have demonstrably held and wielded power. Eyẹ̀ Aró (1393–1419), Eyẹ̀ Mọ̀hin (1705–1735), and Amaro (1850–1851) served as the 13th, 16th, and 36th Déjì of Àkúrẹ̀, respectively. Their reigns were marked by landmark achievements, devoid of chaos or maladministration, just like those of their male counterparts. This further supports the view that women in Yoruba history were complements of men, not subjects.

Similar instances of female political, economic, and religious power abound in ancient towns like Ilé-Ifẹ̀, Ọ̀yọ́, and Šakí. History records the socio-political impact of powerful Aláàfin (rulers) of Ọ̀yọ́ such as Jomijomi, Jepojepo, and Ọ̀ròm̀pòtò̀nìyùn, who were crucial to the Old Ọ̀yọ́ Empire's development. Furthermore, Lúwòó Gbágídá (also known as Ayarè Akósulógbè' from Ọ̀táátáá lineage) was once the Ọ̀nì of Ifẹ̀. These historical personae, though sometimes viewed through a mythical lens, are vital parts of Ọ̀yọ́'s and Ifẹ̀'s political history, underscoring the ever-competitive power of Yoruba women. The ancient political structure did not shut the door against women who desired to rule; these queens were renowned, influential, and powerful, often displaying courage that surpassed their male counterparts.

Beyond mythical figures, historical accounts and oral traditions point to women holding influential non-regal positions, such as spiritual

leaders, lineage matriarchs, and market queens (Ìyálóde). The Ìyálóde, in particular, held significant economic and social power, representing women's interests and wielding considerable influence over male decision-making. Their ability to mobilize women and exert economic pressure made them formidable figures. A contemporary example is Fúnmiláyò Ransome-Kútì, whose unparalleled leadership attracted both women and men during the liberation movement against excessive tax in Abẹ̀òkúta. Her recognition in the political space rivals that of the most prominent men in Yoruba history, reinforcing that the stereotype of women's subjugation exists primarily in the minds of people.

Furthermore, the intricate Yorùbá chieftaincy system included female titles with specific responsibilities and authority. Examples from Ìjẹ̀sà history include Ọwá Obòkun Yẹyégúnrògbà (1596–1652) and Ọwá Obòkun Yẹyẹwájì (1681) (Ọjẹ́táyò and Ọláwọ́yìn 2024). All these instances indicate that pre-colonial Yoruba society was not gender hegemonic but receptive to both male and female leadership in the political sphere, challenging the monolithic thought of women's subjugation.

The Economic Engine and Social Architects - Women's Influence in Everyday Life

Moving beyond formal political structures, the leadership of Yorùbá women is profoundly evident in the economic and social fabric of their communities. Their dominance in the marketplace, their roles as mothers and educators, and their active participation in communal life demonstrate forms of leadership that directly shape the lives and actions of men.

Yoruba women are renowned for their entrepreneurial spirit and significant role in the market economy. As traders and business owners, they manage substantial financial resources and often employ both men and women. Their economic independence grants them social and political leverage, allowing them to influence decisions within their families and communities. The Ìyá Ọjà (market leader), a powerful figure, acts as a mediator, regulator, and advocate for the market community, wielding considerable influence over male traders and local authorities."

In line with the Theory of Binary Complementarity, while Yorùbá men were traditionally known to be versatile in farming, politics, and religious practices, women are leaders in commerce, business, and family affairs, among other domains. Thus, women and men have their unique and incontrovertible places in society (Mathews, 2014).

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Within the family unit, Yorùbá women as mothers and grandmothers hold immense social and moral authority. They are the primary caregivers and educators, instilling values, shaping character, and influencing the aspirations of their sons. Their wisdom and guidance are often sought and respected by men throughout their lives. The matriarchal figures within extended families play crucial roles in resolving disputes, offering counsel, and maintaining social cohesion, demonstrating a form of leadership rooted in experience and familial bonds.

Furthermore, women's active participation in various social and religious organizations provides platforms for collective action and influence. Through these networks, they mobilize resources, advocate for their interests, and exert social pressure on men to address community concerns. Their contributions to cultural preservation, religious practices, and social welfare initiatives highlight their leadership in shaping the social landscape.

Challenging the Political Landscape - Women's Evolving Roles in Modern Nigeria

In contemporary Nigeria, Yorùbá women are increasingly challenging traditional gender norms and asserting leadership in the formal political arena. Despite significant obstacles, their growing participation in politics, civil society organizations (CSOs), and professional fields demonstrates a clear trajectory towards greater influence in previously male-dominated spheres. The struggle for increased female political representation has been long and arduous. Facing systemic barriers and cultural biases, Yorùbá women are making strides by contesting elections, holding appointments, and advocating for policies that benefit the community. Their resilience in navigating the complex political landscape highlights their leadership and commitment to shaping Nigeria's future.

Beyond formal politics, Yorùbá women lead numerous CSOs focused on gender equality, human rights, education, and healthcare. These platforms allow women to exercise leadership skills, mobilize communities, advocate for social change, and directly influence government policies and challenge patriarchal structures. Furthermore, the increasing number of Yorùbá women excelling in professional fields—from law and medicine to business and academia—demonstrates their intellectual capability. As they rise to authority in these sectors, they not

only serve as role models but also directly lead and mentor men within their respective domains.

Case Studies in Contemporary Leadership - Illustrating Women's Influence in Action

To further illustrate the leadership roles of Yorùbá women in contemporary society, examining specific case studies provides valuable insights into their impact and influence. Consider Chief (Mrs.) Fọlashade Tinubu-Ojo, the Ìyálọjà General of Lagos State. In this powerful position, she not only leads thousands of market women but also wields significant economic and political influence. Her ability to mobilize traders, negotiate with government officials, and advocate for market women's interests demonstrates a formidable form of leadership that directly impacts the livelihoods of both men and women. Another compelling example is the growing number of Yorùbá women entrepreneurs who are building successful businesses and creating employment for both men and women. Their innovation, resilience, and business acumen showcase a leadership that drives economic growth and empowers communities. Figures like Mo Abudu, a media mogul, demonstrate the power of women's vision in shaping cultural narratives and creating opportunities for others.

Furthermore, the contributions of Yorùbá women in academia and civil society are equally significant. Women like Professor Bọlanle Awẹ, a renowned historian, have shaped our understanding of Yorùbá history and culture, influencing generations of scholars. Activists and advocates working on gender-based violence and women's rights demonstrate courageous leadership by challenging harmful traditional practices and advocating for a more equitable society.

These case studies, among many others, highlight the diverse ways in which Yorùbá women are exercising leadership in contemporary Nigeria, often directly influencing the actions and outcomes for men within their spheres of influence.

Reimagining the Narrative - Towards a More Inclusive Understanding of Yoruba Leadership

Moving beyond simplistic stereotypes reveals a more nuanced and complex understanding of leadership within Yoruba society. While acknowledging the historical context of male dominance in certain areas, this article has highlighted the significant and multifaceted ways Yorùbá women have historically acted as leaders of men and continue to do so in contemporary Nigeria.

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From the legendary Mòrèmi to the powerful Ìyálóde, from the influential market women (Ìyálójà) to the trailblazing professionals and political figures of today, Yorùbá women have consistently demonstrated their capacity for leadership, often through different avenues and spheres of influence. Their economic power, social authority, intellectual contributions, and political activism have demonstrably shaped the lives of men and the trajectory of Yoruba society.

To truly understand the dynamics of power and influence within Yorùbá culture, it is essential to move beyond gendered stereotypes and embrace a more inclusive definition of leadership. Recognizing the diverse forms of authority wielded by women—whether in the marketplace, the family, civil society, or the political arena—provides a more accurate and complete picture of Yorùbá society. The narrative of gender balance is far more nuanced than simplistic patriarchal models suggest, supported by the historical and contemporary presence of powerful female figures and institutions.

Ultimately, celebrating the leadership of Yorùbá women not only acknowledges their historical and contemporary contributions but also paves the way for a more equitable and prosperous future for all. By dismantling outdated narratives and embracing an inclusive understanding of leadership, we foster a society where the talents and capabilities of all individuals, regardless of gender, are recognized and valued. The stories of Yoruba women as leaders are vital lessons in resilience, agency, and the enduring power of women's influence in shaping their world and challenging the often-oversimplified narratives of gender relations in Africa.

Conclusion

This study has successfully watered down the over-simplified narrative of women's total subjugation since the pre-colonial Yoruba era. It established that women have strong and vital roles in the political, economic, commerce, religious, and social domains across Yorubaland. It argued that while contemporary Yorùbá women may be perceived as voiceless, this was not universally true across the entire history of the Yorùbá people. The monolithic notion of women's subjugation contained in stereotypes should not be seen as intimidation, as pre-colonial Yorùbá heroines did not rely on men to fight their causes, but took the bull by the horn to achieve liberation in political, religious, economic, and social aspects of life.

Contemporary women too can and should also embody this spirit for the restoration of their eroding voices, a decline partly attributed to foreign religions which often mandate submission to men and limit female religious roles and leadership capacity, unlike in the pre-colonial Yorùbá setting (Muraina and Ajímátanraèjẹ 2023).

Although women have contested and won a number of political posts, and their societal roles have improved due to education, their voices still need to be heard more clearly. This requires action, especially through legislation and the intentional mandatory allocation of a percentage of political, religious, and economic positions to women in Nigeria. Such measures are crucial to achieving the 1948 United Nation's gender equality target.

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RESPONDENTS

S/N	Name of Respondents	Description	Location
1.	Mr Rẹ̀mílẹ̀kún Adégbìtẹ́	Ifá Priest	Lagos
2.	Mr Ọ̀yámákin Adégunwà	Ifá Priest	Ọ̀şun State