

UNIVERSITY OF ILORIN



**THE ONE HUNDRED AND THIRTY-SIXTH (136th)
INAUGURAL LECTURE**

**“THE PARADOX OF LOVE: WOMEN AND
RELIGION IN SOCIETY”**

By

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Preamble

I give all glory to God for the privilege of presenting this inaugural lecture-indeed, God is great! Let me first say that I understand that for a number of reasons, this lecture is historically significant. This is the first inaugural lecture by the first female Ph. D holder and the first female Professor in the Department of Religions, University of Ilorin, Nigeria; the first female Professor of Comparative Religious Studies in Nigeria; and the first female scholar of religions from Nigeria to teach postgraduate studies under the 'Women in Religion Program' at the prestigious Harvard Divinity School, Harvard University, Massachusetts, U. S. A. (2000-2001). I return all the glory to God! This is the 20th Inaugural lecture from the Faculty of Arts, the 8th from the 'old' Department of Religions, and the 5th from the Department of Religions as presently constituted.

My Background

I was born some years ago into the royal family of Oyedeji, Ilé-Anfáyùn compound in Ikire, the headquarters of Irewole Local Government Area of Osun State, as the first born of a middle class family. I attended Ijeru Baptist Day School, Ogbomoso; Baptist Girls' High School, Osogbo; Olivet Heights, Oyo; and the University of Ilorin; for my primary, secondary, higher school certificate and University education respectively. My interest in religion dates back to my primary school days. This phenomenon of communicating effectively with the unseen has always intrigued me and it is not surprising that I led my classes in the subject many times; in fact I never failed the subject in all my schooling years. I have been privileged to do research in religion for the past twenty-two years, specifically on Yoruba religion and Christianity. Through observations, convictions and personal experiences, I narrowed my research focus to women, religion, culture and society and today's lecture will be in these areas.

This lecture is in the area of Comparative Religious Studies with special focus on Women in Religion.

Introduction

Religion in Africa

I begin with some introductory remarks on the enterprise called religion and its sojourn in Africa. Religion is a difficult phenomenon to define as has been proven by past efforts of scholars over the years¹. Each definition of religion is tainted by the agenda and prevailing perspective of the protagonist. Hence, different definitions of religion emphasize the formalistic, doctrinal, experiential, volitional

or emotive perspective on life. However most definitions of religion would include notions of the supernatural (personalized or non-personalized), liturgy for worship, an ethical code and a set of myths and sacred narratives. Generally speaking, religion is the attempt to understand the relationship between the mortal and the immortal. Furthermore, religion is as old as humanity and there is no society without a notion of religion across history. There exists an intricate relationship between religion and society due to its wide scope, covering both existential needs and eternal concern; hence religion has a significant impact on economic, social and political spheres of life. As observed many years ago by Jonathan Smith, ‘Religion has not been a *good* thing, but it has been a *great* thing’².

Furthermore, religion has been described as a central force in world history, both for good and for evil. Due to the crucial roles of religion in human culture and history, and every phase of civilization in human history, it is imperative to study religion. A major challenge to the study of religion has been the emphasis on materialism and secularism in modern societies and the dearth of students who choose to study religions, specifically in Nigerian universities³. Religious understanding is essential if we are to achieve the social harmony required so that Nigeria participates in the establishment of peace around the world.

Religion permeates all sectors of daily living in Africa from social relations to the processes of socialization. In Africa, the explanation for the origin of the world and nature is located in religion. African cosmology and cosmogony are expressed in the many myths and sacred narratives recounting how God created the world, and trusted human beings only to be betrayed by them, and

how God consequently withdrew from close proximity with the people. Also, the rites of passage including birth, marriage, initiation/puberty and burial are all embedded in religious sensitivities in Africa. Social relations are regulated by religion through mechanisms such as ethical codes, covenants and oath taking to maintain the integrity needed for human development. Consequently, religion is indispensable to the African person. However, it has been observed that 'religion has served as a means of justifying gender inequality, perhaps more so than any other social institution'⁴ and the implication of this observation for human development is grave.

The study of religions in Africa began as part of the colonial agenda, especially the conversion of the 'natives' to Christianity. As part of their work, missionaries kept dairies of observations concerning the practice of African religions, and anthropologists were commissioned to study the religion of the people to facilitate their subjugation by colonialist administration. The first set of scholars to study African religions were European anthropologists, who concluded severally that Africans were untutored and thus could not comprehend God. These anthropologists came up with pejorative labels for African religion referring to it as fetishism, juju, animism and ancestor worship⁵. African scholars of religion offered a corrective to these colonialist views, writing about the nature and structure of African religion from the African perspectives. Because of their work, the study of the dynamism of African sensitivities towards religion took off in earnest, with African scholars playing active roles.

Different religions are studied with different perspectives in mind and diverse goals in view. At first,

however, religious studies scholars studied each religion independently. Their work was rife with perceptions of the superiority of one religion over the others. For instance, when Christianity arrived in Africa, it assumed a position of superiority; Christians considered African religions to be barbaric and insisted that the true God was unknown to African. Such attitudes have been replicated in different nations where certain religions come to dominate others. Comparative Religious Studies aims to ameliorate this situation by fostering a deeper understanding of the fundamental philosophical concerns of religion such as ethics, metaphysics, and the nature and form of salvation, using selected methods that compare the structures of religions and identify their similarities and areas of divergence.

Comparative Religion

Comparative Religious Studies started with the efforts of German philologist Friedrich Max Muller⁶. Comparative Religious Studies have been defined as ‘that which examines similarities, differences and the way in which different religions interact and complement each other’⁷. It may also be defined as ‘that branch of the study of religions concerned with the systematic comparison of the doctrines and practices of the world’s religions’⁸. Comparative religion classifies religions in the world as Abrahamic, Indian and Indo-European, Taoic, and African. The Abrahamic religions comprise the three monotheistic religions-Christianity, Islam and Judaism- which claim Abraham as part of their sacred history. The India and Indo-European religions include Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Jainism. The Taoic religions are based

on the concept of Tao, i.e. 'the way' and these include Taoism and Confucianism. African religions comprise all indigenous religions of the Africans. As noted by Dopamu, comparative religion is not limited to comparison between religions but involves comparison of concepts, themes, elements, or phenomena of different religions⁹.

The scope of Comparative Religious Studies compels it to promote respect and understanding among adherents of various religions, especially as ignorance of intra and inter religious education has been identified as key to religious crisis and bigotry in the society. A key focus of Comparative Religious Studies is the promotion of equity among religions and the elimination of notions of superiority in any form among the different religions. This is similar to the area of the study of women in religion which seeks to engage three crucial tasks in its effort to present the stance of religion on gender equity in the sacred space.

Women in Religion

Mr. Vice Chancellor Sir, the study of women in religion developed as an offshoot of women's studies and feminism in the social sciences. As a concept, feminism emerged due to women's resistance to the way they were treated by their societies. However, it is important to remember that feminism means different things to different people and in different places¹⁰. For instance, whereas many feminists in Western societies consider man an ardent opponent, African feminism which has a humanistic focus recognizes men as partners in progress, though in need of re-orientation on salient issues concerning gender classification and social relations. This brand of feminism

recognizes that men are important but also that women must be allowed to contribute their quota in the quest to arrive at the ultimate spiritual truth for each society. When patriarchy and its attending social structures became normative and influences became universal, feminism had to emerge. Feminism has an unambiguous agenda and a sound methodology. It seeks to expose male privilege which has been taken as normative and universal; to search for alternative wisdom and uncover suppressed history; to challenge prescribed roles and risk new interpretations of what constitutes appropriate roles and life experiences for women; and to take deliberate actions to enlighten women about the dangers of the feminine mystique which encourages women to be passive. Religion more than any other phenomenon perpetuates the feminine mystique.

Three levels of Feminism may be identified:

1. As an academic method, feminism signifies a definite transition from andocentric to androgynous models of humanity.
2. As a value system and a social vision, feminism views sexism and patriarchy as immoral hence the need to foster alternative social arrangements that ensures equity.
3. As an insider's discourse, feminism is an attempt to move from the prescriptive to the descriptive, so that women's lives become the textbook for roles expected of them in society¹¹.

All three levels of feminism manifest in the study of women in religion in tandem with its stated agenda and goals. The role and status of women in religions in Africa also reflect these three levels at different times. It is worth

stating at this juncture that this lecture will focus on the study of gender in two religions: Yoruba religion and Christianity. These two religions have constituted my major areas of academic engagement over the last twenty-two years.

Yoruba Religion and Christianity

Yoruba religion is the indigenous religion of the Yoruba people of Nigeria, but it is also practised in Benin Republic, Cuba, Brazil, Trinidad and Tobago, North America, Germany, Switzerland and other communities in the Diaspora. Its nature and structure confirms the belief in God (personalized-names and attributes) known as Olodumare or Olorun, divinities (orisas-sixteen primordial and other deities), ancestors (*Baba* or *ìyá nlá*, represented by the *Egúngún* cult), spirits (*àwon èmí orisirisi*, numerous with different natures and manifestations) and magic and medicine (*oògun abenu gongóó*). Yoruba religion is a living and world religion with adherents and influence all over the world. The religion is based on oral tradition, though some significant documentation has occurred in recent times. Ifa corpus constitutes the major source of instruction and guidance for the religion¹².

Christianity came to Nigeria in three stages: through the Nubian or Berber Christians, through the Portuguese; and through English speaking freed slaves¹³. As a result of the development of Christianity in Nigeria, many churches are be found among the people today. Three main categories of churches exist in Nigeria presently: Orthodox/Mission, African Independent, and Pentecostal/Charismatic churches. The religion subscribes to the existence of God (personalized-names and attributes)

Jesus Christ (Saviour of the world) and the Holy Spirit. Christianity emphasises the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the only way for humanity to achieve salvation, and encourages all humans to embrace this work of grace. It is a world religion with present relevance everywhere. The Bible is the scripture of Christianity and is readily available worldwide as it has been translated in full to over 450 languages¹⁴. The brand of Christianity that is practised in Nigeria and other African countries is described as African Christianity because of the influence of African culture on the mode of transmission of the gospel message.

The study and teaching of religious traditions pre-date political independence in Nigeria. The background of the teaching of religious studies in Nigerian Universities is intertwined with the history of the founding of these departments. According to Jacob Olupona, these departments followed similar patterns as those in other British colonies modelled after and controlled by British metropolitan universities¹⁵. However, there was a change in the structure of these departments of religious studies when British colonies, including Nigeria achieved political independence. Presently, Nigeria has about 128 universities with over half of these running programmes in the study of two, three or more religions¹⁶. Jan Platvoet and Jacob Olupona have discussed the history of the study of religions in Nigeria¹⁷. To start with, the teaching of religions in Nigeria focuses on three main religions: African religions, Christianity and Islam. In addition, Asian religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Japanese religion) and New Age Movements (Grail Message, Rosicrucian order, Maharaja and Krishna Movements) are studied. Female African scholars have featured actively in the academic

study of religions in Nigeria. The first female Ph. D graduate in Christian Studies in Nigeria graduated from the Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan¹⁸. Academic works of female scholars of religion in the area of Christian studies and Yoruba religion concerning women in religion abound in local, national, and international outlets. The historical analysis of the study of Yoruba religion and Christianity in Nigeria reflects the recent involvement of female scholars, who nonetheless have been active since they came on board.

Statement of Problem

Religion is essential to human lived experience; both the practice and study, with worldwide contemporary relevance. This is in spite of the thesis about the decline of religion as human society progresses in scientific knowledge¹⁹. Furthermore, religion constitutes an integral ingredient for identity construction in many societies, especially in Africa, where its influence permeates all sectors of human endeavour. Women sustain religions by the different roles they play, in its practice and study, but their status in religions is still subservient. This is a great problem with grave implications for the human race because until balance in gender relations as concerns power and its utilization is ensured, true progress will continue to be elusive in the study and practice of religion. The task of this lecture is to unearth the how and why of this situation between women and religion and proffer solutions for human development.

The Paradox of Love

Mr. Vice Chancellor Sir, the relationship between women and religions in Africa is here described as a paradoxical bitter-sweet relationship, for how can a thing be bitter and sweet at once? Symbolically this situation is adequately captured by the bitter kola-orógbó (Garcinia kola) which tastes bitter when chewed but the taste turns sweet once water is taken²⁰. The three elements we will analyze in this lecture are derived from the above scenario: sweetness, bitterness, and water. Religion is sweet to women in Africa because it is the avenue for relief from diverse burdens in the face of numerous challenges in the family, market place and society.

Religion is also an integral ingredient of African women's identities; women spend so much time on religion, for religion and in religion, and yet, their situation therein leaves much to be desired. In addition, religions are sustained by women who are custodians of many oral genres and repositories of tradition and customs wherein ritual prescriptions are stored. Women ensure the continuous daily practices of religions through songs, dances, recitations and other performances²¹. But religion is also bitter to women because as can be rightly observed, women occupy the position of insider/outsider: insiders because they are crucial to the continuation of the current system, but also outsiders since they have little power within it. Consequently, the relationship of women and religion may be summed by the Yoruba saying that '*omó só si ní l'enu, ò tún bu iyo si, isó ò sé gbé mì béèni iyò kò se tu daànù*' i. e. 'a child pollutes the air in your mouth but puts salt in the same mouth, it's a challenge to swallow the bad odour just as it's difficult to spit out the sweet salt'.

Education in the broadest sense of the word constitutes the third element. For just as water changes the bitter taste of bitter kola to sweetness, so will education remove the bitterness of religion to women, because the base of this bitterness is subjective as will be highlighted shortly. Consequently, women love religion just as religion professes to love women, yet religion also appears to hurt women: how and why is this so?

My Major Research Findings

My findings as a researcher on women in religion have highlighted the unique role of cultural paradigms on the dynamism of women's status in Yoruba religion and Christianity in Nigeria²². The salient importance of women's spirituality in the practice and study of religion has long engaged my attention as evident in my publications. Women's spirituality in these two religions provides the framework for continuity and sustenance in religion. My research has established the fact, that women's spirituality is indispensable to a true representation of the divine, and the continuous denial of same will not promote the harmony needed for human development²³. More importantly, my work has helped in building paradigms and models that take African cultural sensitivities seriously when it comes to assessing women's roles and status in religion. Furthermore, I have been interested in exploring why women have been excluded from leadership roles in some religious institutions and my findings show that this is primarily due to patriarchy, which was actually imposed on African societies through Western culture. Clearly, patriarchal influences are evident in Christianity but these

influences have also been imposed on Yoruba religion, and the results are profound.

As far as Yoruba religion is concerned, in pre-colonial times, women's leadership was a given and constitutes no cause for tension as evident in the analysis of the scriptures of the religion²⁴. My research has made the important contribution of identifying the strong influence of the Yoruba cultural gender paradigm on women's understandings of their roles and status in all religions. As a result of this influence, Yoruba women have utilized their cultural heritage of mutual gender respect to negotiate their status and roles in Christianity and this is clearly analyzed in my first book²⁵. In that book, I emphasised the innovation of Yoruba women who have created alternative avenues of power. At the practical level, women continue to seek avenues of self-affirmation even within the constraints of the Yoruba Christian tradition. These occur predominantly in the ritual spaces where women assume the roles of prayer leaders, song writers, gospel singers, chieftancy titles holders and participate in women's groups (*Egbé*).

These efforts to operate from alternative spaces of power suggest that power is diverse, since it is not limited to the formal, coercive or domineering but encompasses the ability to influence and to act. Thus women are able to influence decision making processes in the church effectively, even though the ordination of women remains beyond reach. This clash between the subservient roles of women in Christianity and their roles in Yoruba religion which are marked with mutual respect are reflected in the controversy about the ordination of women as priests by Late Bishop Haruna in the Kwara diocese of the Anglican

Church in Nigeria few years ago²⁶. Unfortunately, this situation is complicated by the ‘woman against woman’ syndrome, which is characterized by the strong opposition to women in leadership on the part of other women. Research confirms that this stance is a natural result of the socialization process experienced by women, a process fraught with patriarchal tendencies. The ‘women against woman’ syndrome (WAWS) is also prevalent among elite women because the non-literate traditional Yoruba woman is unlikely to engage in WAWS, due to her firm belief in pluralism which results from her socialization, training and experience. Hence, the Yoruba say ‘*ojú òrún tó eye fò, lai f’ara kan ra*’ i.e. ‘the sky is wide enough for birds to fly without colliding’. What we learn from this is how important it is that women be allowed to participate fully in the relationship of humans with the divine. Only in this way can we ensure harmony and development.

Mr. Vice Chancellor Sir, my engagement as a scholar of religion in the areas of women in religion and feminism proves that the relationship between women and religion in Africa can be addressed on both the conceptual/scriptural level and the practical level. These two levels are intertwined, for what is conceived and prescribed by scripture always informs practice. Furthermore, three phenomena are crucial to the analysis of these two levels: culture, power, and scriptural interpretation. These are complex phenomena that have proven crucial to the structures that guide and guard the relationship between women and religion, and to this we now turn.

Culture

Culture has been defined severally from different perspectives; however certain features remain true of culture. Culture encompasses the entirety of a people's life and living experience. It has material elements (e. g. cuisine, dressing, arts and housing) and non-material ones (e. g. language, greetings and philosophy). The Yoruba religion exhibits close affinity with the Yoruba culture, as is true of other African religions. Lipner has identified two possible platforms for the relationship between culture and religion: the dialectic and the dialogic models²⁷. The dialectic model presents culture and religion as in perpetual conflict with each other and ultimately irreconcilable. The only way to resolve this conflict is for culture to yield to the demands of religion. Conversely, the dialogical model perceives culture and religion as compatible entities that should be reconciled and blended harmoniously through dialogue and mutual enrichment. The situation of religion and culture among the Yoruba predicates on the dialogical model, hence, gender prescriptions in religion are products of the template supplied by the people's culture. The Yoruba gender template emanates from the people's cosmological narratives which emphasises and entrenches complementary gender relations as exemplified in the relationship of Osun with the other fifteen male deities²⁸.

Thus, Olodumare-the Supreme Being-established the need for the male and female to work together if success was to be achieved. This is the template that informs the roles and status of women in Yoruba religion, including the idea that the leadership of women is a given. Females and males each have their areas of specialization and strength but the ultimate goal is the common good. The

socialization of Yoruba females reflects this reality as each girl is brought up to be assertive and economically independent. Traditionally, certain economic activities were the exclusive specialty of females as was also true of the males²⁹. Consequently, the strict oppression of women in traditional Yoruba communities would not have occurred. This is especially true because the Yoruba base multiple levels of theory on the concept of power: formal, informal, visible and invisible. This independent and assertive training of the Yoruba females is carried over into the church as these females encounter the gospel. Accordingly, notions of docility and ‘being seen but not heard’ as espoused by Christian theology at its arrival in Yoruba land created a shock both ways. Yoruba women found the prescribed roles for them in Christianity quite strange, just as the white missionaries were unsettled by the assertive dispositions and leadership roles of women in the society³⁰.

However, due to culture contact and influences, Yoruba woman like other African women can no longer rely exclusively on tradition in their quest for empowerment. Another factor that contributed to women’s enhanced awareness of Christianity for example, is the successful utilization of the Yoruba culture as a prism through which the message of the gospel is presented to the people, as evidenced in the rich cultural influence in liturgy, the clergy’s attire in the ritual space and the use of African musical instruments, in all churches among the Yoruba. Women’s tradition of leadership in Yoruba culture has also significantly influenced the process of expanding leadership roles for women in churches, especially in African Independent churches. Yoruba culture has thus

come to fore as a viable tool for negotiating the relationship between women and religion.

Power

Power refers to the ability to influence, and ‘the ability of an actor (or actors) to realize his or her will in a social action, even against the will of other actors’³¹. Power manifests at every level of social strata in the society irrespective of class, race, gender or professional affiliations. Power can manifest through coercive means but it also manifest as influence without coercion. Power as a concept is imbued with notions of difference, possession of exclusive knowledge and hierarchy. There are also different kinds of power including coercive power (fear), exchange power (barter) and integrative power (respect). But no matter how power is defined, it is always exercised by the minority over the majority. There are different conceptions of power, for instance, power could be visible or invisible, formal or informal. As wielded by political authorities, power is most often visible and formal, but esoteric knowledge and mystical practices result in invisible and informal power that can be equally potent. Oftentimes, power is construed as authority but there is a fine line of difference between the two phenomena. Max Weber distinguished three types of authority: traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational. Traditional authority is legitimized through heredity. The Charismatic authority is found in a leader whose mission and vision inspire others based on that individual’s perceived extraordinary characteristics. Finally, legal-rational authority is predicated on a formalistic belief in the content of the law (legal) or natural law (rationality)³².

Women experience issues of power and authority in religion severally, especially as concerns leadership positions. The Yoruba conceive of power as both visible/formal and invisible/informal: with females in charge of the invisible/informal structures of power, and males occupying the visible/formal structure of power. If an individual assumes that the visible is the whole story, it may be easy to conclude that if women are not visible in formal structures of power, they are oppressed and irrelevant; but nothing could be farther from the truth. In Yoruba religion, women's leadership in formal/visible structures is a dynamic phenomenon that continues to evolve and adapt to contemporary developments such as women's increasing levels of education and their growing economic independence. However, women's leadership position in the informal/invisible sector of power in Yoruba religion has yet to be challenged, and this is the purview of the 'mothers' (*iyà mi*). The esoteric knowledge and power in the custody of the 'mothers' is foundational to all endeavours in Yoruba land.

In Christianity, leadership on the part of women is a recent development focussing on the ordination of women into priesthood, clearly part of the formal/visible sector. Historically, there has been a threefold ministry in the church consisting of deacons, priests and bishops. At the 1968 Lambeth Conference, Resolution 34 stated that the theological arguments both for and against female ordinations are inconclusive. In 1974, the U. S. A. ordained women and in 1976 passed a resolution declaring that 'no one shall be denied access to ordination into the three orders of ministry on the basis of their sex'³³. In 1975, the Anglican church of Canada authorized female ordination.

In 1989, the Anglican church of New Zealand consecrated Penny Jamieson as the 7th bishop of Dunedin and in the same year, the Episcopal Church U. S. A. consecrated Barbara Harris, an African-American woman as a bishop³⁴. The example of the Anglican Church in African countries on women ordination would prove instructive here:

The chart below lists the dates for acceptance of each level of women's ministry in Africa.

Ordination of Women in Africa (Anglican Communion)

Province	Status and Level	Date of acceptance
Central Africa (= Botswana, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe)	None	-----
Nigeria	None	-----
Tanzania	None	-----
Burundi Kenya Rwanda Uganda	Diaconate and Presbyterate	1983/1992
West Africa (=Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Gambia)	-----	-----
		1983
		1987
Southern Africa (=South Africa, Namibia, Angola, Mozambique, Swaziland, Lesotho) Sudan	Diaconate, Presbyterate and Episcopate (Bishops)	1992 2000

- Sources: *The Eames Commission Report* of 1997, 2004³⁵.

From this chart, it is clear that 7 of this 10 African provinces for which we have information, or 70%, do

ordain women into the priesthood, and 2 of 10, or 20% to the episcopacy as well. It is worth mentioning that there are improvements on this chart presently, as the first female Bishop of the Anglican Communion in Africa was ordained by the Anglican church of South Africa on the 17th of November 2012. She is Bishop Ellinah Wamukoya, a sixty-one year old woman who, at the ordination explained ‘I am going to try to represent the mother attribute of God’³⁶. The church of Nigeria Anglican Communion has yet to ordain women into priesthood. The first attempt at women ordination in the Anglican Communion in Kwara State was under Bishop Haruna but this was truncated³⁷. Worthy of note however is the recent appointment of a woman-Barrister Adeola Kehinde-as the Diocesan counsel of Kwara Diocese at the third session of the thirteenth Synod, hosted by St. Peter’s Anglican church, Adewole, Ilorin between the 11th and 14th April 2003.

Scriptural Interpretation

Scriptural interpretations have proven to be crucial to issues of power and gender in religion. Biblical archaeology and the interpretation of scriptures were in the exclusive purview of men until around 120 years ago, hence patriarchal prescriptions have become the normative³⁸. Consequently, feminists approach the issue of scriptural interpretation with caution. Indeed, the interpretation of scriptures is marked with suspicion from the feminist perspective, especially as such interpretation is rooted in subjective agendas often laden with patriarchal tendencies³⁹.

Ifa oracular corpus constitutes the compendium of scriptures for Yoruba religion, though other oral genres

may be cited. The interpretation of Ifa verses is a science that is open to both genders, and verses are products of specific social settings. The male Ifa priest is known as *Babalawo*, while the female is called the *Iyanifa*. In Christianity, scriptures have been, until recent times, interpreted only by men and from male perspectives. Feminist scholars have highlighted the grave implications of patriarchal prescriptions in Christianity over the years, the common recommendation being a pursuit of equity between the two genders at leadership cadres. The main source used to understand the appropriate interaction between women and power in religion is the scriptures, specifically the Bible. Interpretation of scripture underlies Christian doctrines that attempt to limit, constrain or suppress women's roles and status. Recently, however, feminist interpretations of scripture have challenged these patriarchal tendencies in Christianity with an emphasis on female symbolism in the ritual space. One example is Isaiah 49: 15 where the portrait of God as a woman and her suckling child is used to illustrate the compassion of God to humans; and; another is Romans 16 where Apostle Paul lists women who contributed to his ministry in the propagation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Power is transmitted in religion through scriptural interpretation, because it is prescriptive and often times result in a normative paradigm for social stratifications.

A salient obstacle to women's access to power in religion is the monthly menstruation circle and this could be traced to scriptural interpretations. Though it is clearly stated in the Bible that the new covenant nullifies the old covenant (Matthew 9: 17), passages of the Old Testament that define menstruation as defilement continue to be

emphasised to the detriment of women's access to power in religion. In contrast, feminists lay emphasis on menstruation as potential for procreation and continuity of the human race. Mr. Vice Chancellor Sir, scriptures from Yoruba and Christian religions that express both the bitter and sweet possibilities for women in these religions will engage our attention presently.

SWEET-The 'Sweet' in the Relationship of Women and Religion

Scriptural Portraits of Women in Yoruba Religion

Scriptural prescriptions that show positive disposition towards women in the Ifa corpus include women as indispensable contributors to human affairs by divine prescriptions. These primordial divinities were sent to the earth by Olodumare, along with their exploits. The seventeen deities comprised sixteen male and Osun as the only female. The male deities ignored Osun and the result was chaos. According to Ifa:

*Wón gbimò
 Won kò fi' mò jé t'Òsun
 Wón pe Eégún ilé Eégún ò jé
 Wón pe orò orò kò fohùn
 Wón là 'nà tóóró olúfe won kò r'èni rìn in
 Wón gún 'yán iyán won l'émọ
 Wón ro 'kà okà won pa 'pètẹ
 Àse ò d'oyún àtò o d'omo
 Òjò kò rò ilẹ́ nṣá
 Wón se 'lé ayé títí
 Ilé ayé ò gún rárá
 Wón gbé 'ra páa*

Wón tọ Olodumare lo
 Olodumare kí won tán
 Ọ bẹ̀ẹ̀rẹ̀ ẹ̀ketàdínlógún won
 Olodumare ní “kín ni ó dé”
 Tí ẹ̀ kii fii kée si
 Wón ní “Nítórí pé ó jé obinrin láàrin àwon ni”
 Olodumare ní “àgbedò o
 Olodumare ní
 Ohun tí ẹ̀ kò tètè mọ̀
 Ni e wáà mà wàyí
 Ẹ̀ padà s’ílé ayé
 Kí ẹ̀ sì maa ké sí Ọ̀sun
 Fún gbogbo ohun tí ẹ̀ ba fěé se
 Ohunkóhun tẹ̀ẹ̀ bá dá wọ̀lé
 Yòò sí má tubà tùse
 Ìgbà tí won délé ayé
 Wón wáá n’f’imọ̀ jẹ̀ t’Ọ̀sun
 Ilé ayé wá n’gún⁶⁰

Translation

They planned
 They never reckoned with Osun in their plans
 They invoked *Eegun*, *Eegun* never talked
 They invoked *oro*, *oro* never responded
 They constructed a straight path for Ife indigenes
 The road was deserted
 They pounded yam, it was full of lumps
 They prepared oka (yam flour), it became messy
 Ovaries and sperms never fertilized
 There was no rain, the land was dry
 They tried to maintain the world
 There was no order into the world---

They rose up immediately
 And went to Olodumare
 Olodumare greeted them and
 Asked of their seventeenth person
 Olodumare asked them ‘why don’t you
 Consult with her?’ they replied
 ‘it was because she was the only female among us’
 Olodumare said, may it not be so!---
 Olodumare said ‘what you were ignorant of
 Is what you now know.
 Go back into the world, and consult Osun
 In whatever you embark upon
 Whatever then you lay your hands on
 Will continue to prosper’
 When they got to the world
 They began to consult Osun for their plans.
 Normalcy returned to the world---⁴¹

Thus, Yoruba religion espouses balance in all human engagements including gender construct. Women lead just as men do, each gender with its area of specialization. Another example from Ifa is the portrayal of women as mothers, whose role is vital to the attainment of the child’s potentials and destiny, according to the *Iretotura* chapter of Ifa:

Yèyé omo l’olórò omo
A díá fún iyá odíḍẹ̀rẹ̀
Wón ní kí ó rúbo nítorí omo rẹ̀
Yèyé omo l’olósi omo
A díá fún iyá olókosé
Wón ní kí ó rúbo nítorí omo rẹ̀
Yèyé odíḍẹ̀rẹ̀ rúbo omo dí olórò
Yèyé omo l’olórò omo

Yèyé olókosé kò kò rúbo

Omo di olósi

Yèyé omo l'olósi omo

Translation

The child's mother is the child's source of wealth

Divined for the mother of Odidere

They said she should offer sacrifice because of her child

The child's mother is the child's source of poverty

Divined for the mother of Olokose

They said she should offer sacrifice because of her child

The mother of Odidere offered sacrifice, her child became rich

The child's mother is the child's source of wealth

The mother of Olokose refused to offer sacrifice

The child became poor

The child's mother is the child's source of poverty⁴²

As this scripture attests, the mother's role is crucial to the socialization and development of any child and the Yoruba appreciate this. Consequently, motherhood guarantees a position of power in Yoruba religion. This is true on the pragmatic and mystical levels; for the council of wise women, the 'mothers' also manifest this attribute at the mystical level.

Also, women experience the goodness and sweetness of Yoruba religion through leadership roles that are based on the status and roles of goddesses such as Osun, Yemonja, Otin and Oba in Yoruba mythology. These goddesses provide a paradigm for gender roles depicting

Yoruba women as industrious, innovative and economically buoyant beings.

Yoruba women genuinely enjoy the indigenous religion as exhibited in melodious songs, dances and diverse recitations, and find in these activities an avenue for relief from tension points in their lives. This is especially true of Yoruba women whose identity construction derives from relationships. Indeed, most of the concerns from which women seek succour revolve around husbands and children. Therefore, in religion, women find joy, social networking, entertainment and psychological relief, in addition to a form of power. Consequently, religion is the core on which other aspects of the Yoruba woman's life is anchored: religion is sweet.

Scriptural Portraits of Women in Christianity

In the same vein, the Bible presents the sweetness of religion to women in some of its injunctions. For instance, Christianity has served as avenue for the relief of tension for Yoruba women since its inception among the people. This explains the large membership of women in churches in Yoruba land. The Bible presents two creation stories: Genesis 1: 27 and 2: 7, 18-23; feminists prefer the 1: 27 version because it presents a balanced picture of gender relations. However the Genesis 2: 7, 18-23 version has been predominant due to patriarchal tendencies and even taken as the normative from which paradigms of subservience are coined for the woman. Women have been the sustaining factor in the churches through their commitment to daily enactment of rituals and sacrificial giving. Examples of women's commitment and sacrificial giving in the Bible includes, the list of women who helped

the ministry of Paul in Romans 16, Pricilla, a prominent woman who contributed significantly to the propagation of the gospel with her husband Aquila and the giving of the widow's mite (Mark 12: 42-44).

Furthermore, female symbolism is used for the divine in the Bible, an example is Isaiah 49: 15-16 where God is compared to a mother suckling her child:

Can a woman forget her suckling child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee, behold I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands, thy walls are continually. Before me. (KJV Bible)

Thus male and female symbols were used to illustrate God's disposition to humans in the Bible. Again, Jesus' interaction and relationship with women is recorded in the New Testament and these records confirm that the divine is favourably disposed to equity in gender relationships. Jesus had women followers who ministered to him. Such women could be classified into two groups: those who were healed by Jesus, and those who followed him, listened to his preaching and experienced his miracles. Jesus talks frequently with tenderness about the everyday life of women and their anxieties and joys (Matthew 25: 1ff); contrary to traditional Jewish practices, Jesus speaks with a woman at length (John 4: 27) and teaches a woman (Luke 10: 39). He called a woman 'the daughter of Abraham' (Luke 13: 16) and helps women in times of diverse needs (Mark 1: 29ff, 5: 12-43, 7: 24-30, Luke 13: 10-17, 8: 2, 7: 11-17, John 11: 1-44). Jesus is said to have been surrounded by women (Luke 8: 2ff); they were with him

during his sufferings and glorification. Jesus considers male and female equal when it comes to spiritual privileges⁴³.

Furthermore, Paul's disposition to women and their expected roles are recorded in the scriptures and these have had profound influence on the plight of women in the church, through diverse methods of interpretation. Paul commended women who contributed to his ministry in Romans 16 and asserts that 'there is no distinction in the human race on the basis of ethnicity or gender in Christ Jesus (in Galatians 3: 28, and in I Corinthians 11: 11), thus eliminating all hindrances to gender equity in Christianity.

Practical Portraits of the 'Sweet' for Women in Yoruba Religion

Women are custodians of tradition and oral genres in Yoruba religion. The import of this is informed by the fact that the religion is based primarily on orally transmitted scriptures, both in daily practice and memory deposits. Women recite oral genres during ritual enactments in Yoruba religion such as festivals, and weekly or daily worship sessions. For example women chant during the annual Osun festival thus:

Solágbadé Ewújì mo kóré Yèyé f'Òsun
Solágbadé Abídebábo béeran
Ìyáá mi Pèrègún ilé Ìjamò
Òòsà t'ó l'Òkè Àyàn t' ó nidí àgbon
Mo kóré Yèyé f'Òsun
Èyàn tó bà tètè kóré Yèyé ní i j'ègbe
Èyàn tó bà tètè kóré Yèyé ní ó j'òsòsò
Èyàn tó bà tètè kóré Yèyé ní ó yà gbowó yà gbomo
Solágbadé Ewújì mo kóré Yèyé f'Òsun

Translation

Solagbade Ewuji, I salute the Great Mother, Osun!
Solagbade, the one who gives birth like a female
animal with ease and frequency!

My mother, the *Peregun* who hails from Ijamo!

The Deity who tops the *ayan* tree who is at the
bottom of the coconut tree,

I salute the Great Mother, Osun!

Only human beings who eagerly and quickly salute
the Great Mother will eat preserved yam;

Only human beings who eagerly and quickly salute
the Great Mother will eat yam cake;

Only human beings who eagerly and quickly salute
the Great Mother will receive money, will receive
children.

Solagbade Ewuji, I salute the Great Mother, Osun⁴⁴

Women are active participants in Yoruba religion as priestesses, custodians of tradition and officiating persons. Yoruba women serve as medicine women in charge of childcare, pregnancy, childbirth, and ailments in the society; women also feature as diviners in Yoruba land. Priestesses occupy leadership positions in the community, through counselling and the enforcement of societal norms. For instance, Iya Osun is the priestess of the Osun River Divinity (*ore yeye o*). She serves as the intermediary for Osun and devotees in daily worship, four days intervals (*ose*) or the annual festival. She resides in the palace of the king of Osogbo, the Ataoja and is usually the widow of a past king. As the priestess of Osun, she observes all the taboos of Osun, and it is her duty to bring up the Osun

Votary maid (*Arugba*) in the palace; she is also accorded the status of a leader in Osogbo.

In addition, women are custodians of traditions as exemplified in the cult of the '*Iya mi*' also known as 'Witches' among the Yoruba. The Yoruba believe in the *Iya mi* group as comprising powerful women who use their innate power to favour their own agenda. Let me state here that whatever is submitted concerning the *Iya mi* and their practices apart from their existence is purely theory, for the group operates at the level of the spirit as opposed to the physical. Their existence, however is indisputable, at least to the Yoruba person. It is assumed that members attend meetings as birds, cats or bats and that such meetings occur on treetops, at crossroads and in groves. The group exhibits a close affinity with motherhood and fertility, as reflected in the very title *Iya mi* (my mother). Members are therefore regarded as mothers to children and to the community as a whole.

The *Iya mi*, often expressed as *àjé* (witches), suggests a power that may be dangerous, destructive, and anti-social as well as extraordinary, developmentally focused and employed for good purposes. As a consequence, *àjé* cannot be equated with notions of witchcraft as conceived in other cultural milieu where it is completely malevolent, evil and destructive. *Àjé* is an art of the wise, utilized by people endowed with inherent psychic powers that may be employed for positive or negative purposes. These women wield tremendous power in Yoruba communities because the political, social and economic sectors of the community rest on the religious. Moreover, because the *àjé* power is from Olodumare the creator, its efficacy is beyond challenge. It is doubtful if

any ruler in Yoruba land could succeed except with the support of the *Iya mi*. Diviners and medicine men and women pay homage to the *Iya mi* to appease and placate them in order that rituals performed by these individuals may be efficacious.

The influence of the *Iya mi* also reflects at the level of individuals in the community. This belief has a strong moral implication for the Yoruba people. Not only does it explain the presence of evil, especially in difficult circumstances, but it also introduces the attitude of balance into the Yoruba life. People are enjoined to display their good fortunes with discretion because excessive display may attract ill will; this being a reference to the *Iya mi* group. Hence the Yoruba say, '*Ile eni l'ati je ekute onidodo*' meaning "It is in one's house that one eats the rat with big navel, i.e. avoid ostentation. It seems clear in the Yoruba community that these powerful women constitute the final court of appeal on any issue; neither the ruled nor the ruler could succeed in any venture except with the support of the *Iya mi*.

Practical Portraits of the 'Sweet' for Women in Christianity

In Christian churches, women constitute the majority of followers. Their roles include being members of churches, members of the choir or gospel singers, ushers and Sunday school teachers. Though some women can be found in the leadership cadre in the church, the percentage of such women is minimal. Different levels of leadership roles may be cited for women in the three basic classifications of churches in Africa: the Orthodox/Mission, the African Independent and the Pentecostal/Charismatic

churches. Although women are yet to be ordained in the majority of Orthodox/Mission churches, they are visible in leadership positions in the African Independent churches as prophetesses and church founders. More often, women function as leaders in the Pentecostal churches but on 'delegated' authority as 'mummy GO' than as commissioned Ministers of God⁴⁵. These women leaders encounter different challenges, but it may be submitted that the gender construct that Christianity presented at its advent in Yoruba land is no longer tenable. It may be surmised then that the equity in gender relations described in the Bible is not visible in leadership roles in the churches. Women sustain the daily practice of Christianity but are not found in appreciable numbers in the decision making structures of the church. This situation begs for balance but the crucial question is 'why is this so?'

BITTER

The 'Bitter' in the Relationship of Women and Religion

The 'Bitter' in religion for women manifest in unequal opportunities and privileges for men and women in the church, a situation that is informed by discriminations of diverse natures. Patriarchal prescriptions tend to prohibit the full attainment of women's potentials as active contributors to Christianity, especially at the leadership cadre. Reasons proffered for barring women from the leadership cadre of Christianity include, domesticity, emotionalism, menstruation, the normative male portrait of the divine, scriptural interpretations, and patriarchy-the driving force for all the positions. Mr. Vice Chancellor Sir, I would like to show a relevant excerpt from a documentary produced from a recently concluded research project in

which I collaborated with scholars from the University of Padova, Italy. ΩPatriarchy refers to autocratic rule by the male head of a family; it is an unjust social system that is oppressive to women. It has been described as a hierarchical understanding of difference, which is based on notions of dualism. It finds expression in the oppression of one group over another with a strong emphasis on separateness as a quality for holiness⁴⁶. In addition, it has been noted that:

patriarchy is not men. Patriarchy is a system in which both men and women participate. It privileges inter alia, the interests of boys and men over the bodily integrity, autonomy, and dignity of girls and women. It is subtle and insidious--- we have internalized patriarchy almost seamlessly⁴⁷

A clear pointer to patriarchy is the exclusion of women from leadership positions in Christianity. Biblical patriarchy submits that because God is masculine not feminine, leadership in the church should be male as a female cannot represent God. As noted

To us, a priest is primarily a representative, a double representative, who represents us to God and God to us---we have no objection to a woman doing the first; the whole difficulty is with the second—⁴⁸.

Thus some people have difficulty construing a woman, a female, representing a God perceived as a male. Menstruation is another ban on women's leadership in

church one that has been severally analysed in the academy. Some scholars submit that this is due to the conviction that blood is a symbol of death because the spilling of too much blood results in death; others counter that blood symbolises life, and is sacred because the birth of a baby is linked to menstruation. Still other scholars construe the ban to be a response of men's primal fear of the blood emitted by women monthly⁴⁹. Biblical verses are cited as the basis for the barring of women from leadership positions in the church, especially Pauline teachings. These include I Corinthians 14: 34, and I Timothy 2: 11-12, with the premise of the creation story, the version that subordinates the woman.

The observation of a renowned theologian is useful here:

Paul's advice about women, in a personal letter to Timothy, Bishop of Ephesus, written about A.D. 67 (see 1 Timothy 2:8–15), assumes importance to women mainly because its import has been greatly **exaggerated**. Paul merely states his own practice and gives his reasons, as a matter of advice. He does not command or exhort Timothy, or anyone else, to do the same. Yet this, familiar utterances by Paul on the “woman question,” has probably been more used than the others as a pretext for subordinating woman, ecclesiastically. But to exaggerate advice of this nature in a personal letter, into a law for the governance of all women throughout all time, means to destroy the naturalness of

this personal epistle. Because Paul says to Timothy, in this same letter, “Use a little wine for the stomach’s sake,” I Timothy 5: 23 and this is not generally understood as a command for all Christians for all time to drink wine. When Paul merely says: “I suffer not a woman to teach or to control a man” I Timothy 2: 11-15, certain expositors declare that all women must for all time be discounted as teachers of the Word and must not, on any account, have any place of importance in managing church affairs⁵⁰.

Paul enjoyed the support of women in his ministry and gave injunctions as occasion demanded but was not against the realization of women’s potentials in church ministry. This holds true when his teachings are considered holistically. The challenge to women’s role in the leadership cadre of the church is and remains the political interpretation of the scriptures in ways that perpetuate patriarchy.

Arguments that proffer on domesticity, emotionalism, and menstruation as reasons to bar women from leadership roles in the church have been debunked by science⁵¹. Scientists no longer subscribe, for example, to arguments that difference in biological components especially the brain accounts for the assumed inferiority of women to men. There is no cognitive basis for the assumption that certain aspects of nature or the human mind are predominantly male or female. Thus gender roles and classifications are social constructions that are informed largely by normative paradigms in every society.

Moreover, examples of women leaders in the Bible serve as proof that the divine encourages women to ascend to leadership roles in Christianity. In addition, women constitute majority of membership in the church and this translates to a high percentage of financial contributions to the church. Yet women seldom participate in decision making about how to spend the money.

Consequently, it may be submitted that the problems in the relationship between women and religion emanate from scriptural interpretations from the patriarchal perspective which has been perpetuated for centuries and has acquired the garb of the normative but which must be challenged for change to occur. Such change is imperative if gender equity is to be achieved and progress installed. Religion should promote positive roles in the society for both women and men especially since in Africa religion underlies social relations and the process of socialization. However, this function has been distorted by scriptural interpretations that present women as subordinates and inferior beings and the divine is named as the source of such pronouncements. The remedy to this untenable situation is education for both men and women, so that all can view the injunctions of religion correctly, and not through the lens of subjective, largely patriarchal considerations.

EDUCATION-The Proposed Solution to the Challenge Plaguing the Relationship between Women and Religion

Education refers to the process of learning and acquiring information. Education includes not only cognitive and intellectual learning, it is also the learning of

skills and work-related competencies. More broadly, it includes moral and ethical issues, values, attitudes, religion, spiritualism, art and more⁵². Education could be defined as ‘the process of bringing desirable change into the behaviour of human beings’ or as the process of imparting or acquiring knowledge or habits through instruction or study’, or as ‘the knowledge of putting one’s potential into maximum use’. Education should promote behavioural changes directed towards a desirable end, and result in a change in knowledge, skill, attitude and understanding. Mr. Vice Chancellor Sir, education is central to development, empowers people, strengthens nations, and can significantly improve people's lives. It benefits people, the society, and the world as a whole. It enables people to read, reason, communicate, and make informed choices about their lives.

As rightly noted, ‘behind all the differences of opinion about what it means to be educated is one very basic idea: an educated person is someone who perceives accurately, thinks clearly, and acts effectively on self-selected goals’⁵³. Over the years, education has taken many shapes: formal, informal and non-formal. Formal education is classroom-based, provided by trained teachers. Informal education happens outside the classroom, in after-school programmes, community-based organizations, museums, libraries, or at home. Finally, non-formal education is about 'acknowledging the importance of education, learning and training which takes place outside recognized educational institutions'⁵⁴. All three classifications of education have been and will continue to be relevant to rectify the challenges confronting the relationship between the woman and religion in Nigeria.

Efforts from the perspective of formal education include the re-interpretation of scriptures by feminist scholars to give voices to the women in text and to propagate gender equity in scriptural interpretations and applications. These efforts also encompass the drive for awareness of women's significant but not often recognized contributions to the growth and development of religions. Such efforts are undertaken through conferences focusing on women's roles and status in religions, including Yoruba religion and Christianity which have engaged the attention of scholars for the past two centuries in Nigeria, Africa, and the world. They are also realized through the formation of women groups of women scholars who are committed to research and publications on the three tasks of feminism in religion. This involves the training of women as theologians in Seminaries and in the Universities as scholars of religion. A good example is the African Women Theologians, who describe themselves and their mission thus:

To undertake research and publish theological literature written by African women with special focus on religion and culture. The Circle is the space for women from Africa to do communal theology. Musa Dube, one of the Circle theologians, asserts that "... a circle of women describes those who are seated together, who are connected and who seek to keep the interconnectedness of life" (Dube 2001:11). The Circle members are women who are rooted in Islam, Christianity, Judaism and African Indigenous Religions. They are indigenous

African women and also African women of Asiatic and European origins. These concerned women are engaged in theological dialogue of the cultures, religions, sacred writings and oral stories that shape the African context and define the women of this continent. The Circle members attempt to reflect together on justice across boundaries of gender, faith and belief⁵⁵.

In addition, to the goals they describe, there is of course the need for reinterpretation of scriptures in both Yoruba religion and Christianity from the feminist perspective.

In Yoruba religion, the process of reinterpreting scriptures takes the form of correct emphasis laying that promotes gender equity. These include efforts to increase the knowledge of women about the religion on the African continent and in the Diaspora through the organization of seminars, workshops, and mentoring. Groups such as the HATAF and Heritage groups hold annual programmes that facilitate education on different aspects of Yoruba religion to equip women with needed knowledge, resulting in increased visibility of women in leadership roles in Yoruba religion.

These groups explore the rich heritage of women's leadership in Yoruba religion, searching for models and paradigms to encourage women's participation at the highest levels within Yoruba religion⁵⁶. Worthy of mention however is the ban on menstruating women from certain sacred spaces in Yoruba religion, which is not due to

contamination as is true of some other religions. The ban on menstruating women from sacred space in Yoruba religion emanates from the conviction that menstruation is a conveyor of power just as sacred space is, and if the two were to meet, there would be a clash of powers which is best avoided. The current prevalence of goddess worship in Yoruba religion is another dimension of education on women's significant roles in Yoruba religion. These include the Osun and Olokun festivals in Osogbo and Lagos respectively. Furthermore, priestesses of different deities in Yoruba religion continue to play important roles in the society as custodians of tradition and ambassadors of the religion worldwide.

In Christianity, the reinterpretation of scriptures involves laying emphasis on feminine portraits of the divine. Certain salient principles have been unearthed by this innovative engagement of feminism with scriptural interpretation, including the notion of reading between the lines, which sometimes produces more information than focussing on what is written. In addition it has been observed that feminist engagement with the gospel in Africa brings to the fore the reality that 'text operates as a tool for cultural replacement' in the process of interpretation⁵⁷. The use of traditional oral templates in African societies to read and engage the gospel, including story-telling and sharing of experiences, has also served the goal of feminism well. A large percentage of women's experiences in Africa are linked to relationships in the society, as wives, mothers, daughters and sisters. This process of re-interpretation of the gospel by feminists also targets these relationships through the replacements of practices in new lights⁵⁸.

Again, feminists are analyzing Christian theology in Africa more in group settings, than as individuals. This is a direct influence of the African culture where the feminist impact is strongly felt when women operate in groups (*Cgb1*). Indeed, a viable historical memory of women's groups could be identified in many African indigenous religions and communities. The prominent group among the Yoruba are the '*Iya Mi*'-powerful women with tremendous influence on the polity, sometimes described as 'witches'. Women's groups serve as venues of networking, solidarity and shared experiences as women connect the gospel in Africa. Also these women groups could be found among scholars of religious studies and in the churches as they read, explain, and re-interpret the gospel from feminist perspectives⁵⁹. In the same vein, women's groups abound in each of the churches, though as highlighted in an earlier work, the agenda of such groups are not always necessarily feminist⁶⁰. It is however clear that women gravitate toward the feminist option in scriptural interpretation and discourse better in groups, no matter how minimal this difference may be. Again, the works of feminist scholars of religious studies on the correct gender perspectives of Yoruba religion and Christianity have served as a viable means of education on the appropriate relationship between women and religion.

Efforts from the perspective of non-formal education manifest at the practical level of religion in society. A noteworthy illustration of this is the African Independent churches which have been at the forefront of giving women leadership opportunities in the church. Gender practices are integrated into rituals of these churches with open avenues for women's empowerment,

including leadership roles. An example of such songs that highlights the female portrait of the divine is this one:

Apon 'mo ma we 'hin/2ce one who backs a child confidently
Pon mi Oluwa f'oja mu mi back me O Lord and hold me with
oja (sash)
Ma je nja lule do not let me fall to the ground
Lehen re Oluwa from your back, O Lord
Pon mi Oluwa back me O Lord
F'oja mu mi and hold me with *oja* (sash)⁶¹

Thus the African Independent churches have helped create a climate of acceptance of women in Christian ministry in the larger society today.

Relevance of my Research in Society

The need to integrate the formal and non-formal modes of education to address the challenges facing the relationship of women and religion in society motivates my research and its relevance to the Nigerian society. I have published three books, many articles in reputable journals and many chapters in books in the fields of Yoruba religion and Christian studies. Also, I have served as consultant and researcher to the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and Education Trust Fund (ETF) on projects of social relevance in Nigeria. Further, I recently concluded a research project sponsored by the Cariparo Foundation in conjunction with scholars from the University of Padova Italy. The research focused on women's leadership in Nigerian and Ghanaian Pentecostal churches in Italy⁶². Key products of the project included a book and a documentary film on the experiences of women Pentecostal church leaders in Nigeria, Ghana, and Italy.

In addition, I have trained and mentored many young minds in these fields who are now active contributors to shaping the study of these two religious traditions. Moreover, I am persuaded that any scholarship that lacks some form of advocacy and social consciousness is not the most useful, especially in a country like Nigeria where poverty and illiteracy are prevalent. Thus, my research on women, culture, religion and society has heightened my consciousness about the plight of women in the society and how religion has continually short changed women in the name of God.

My concerns culminated in the founding of a non-governmental organization-Women Counseling Initiative (WCI), an NGO focussing on devising and applying solutions to the suffering and poverty of women in Nigeria⁶³. In the future, my research on women in religion will seek to address critically the implication of the globalization of Yoruba religion in the Diaspora and the shift of the central core of Christianity from Europe to Africa. How would these two great phenomena impact the roles and status of women in Nigeria? What would the implications of these developments be for the political economic and political positioning of women globally?

Recommendations

Mr. Vice Chancellor Sir, these are my recommendations, that:

- the government of Nigeria reverses the policy of making religious studies optional at the secondary level. Religious studies should be a compulsory subject at this level to help build a formidable foundation in young minds against corruption;

- the leaders of Yoruba religion and Christianity should provide a gender equity atmosphere to encourage women attain their potentials in the leadership cadre of these religions;
- an Institute for the Study of Women in Religions should be established in the University of Ilorin;
- female interpretations and understanding of scriptures should be accorded respect and appreciation with the goal of moving women's issues from the periphery to the centre of discourse in the study of religions in Nigeria;
- scriptural interpretations should be done with full consciousness of gender balanced relations;
- orthodox churches, especially the Anglican Communion should begin the process of women ordination into the priesthood;
- women scholars of religion should be encouraged through sponsorships to conferences and postdoctoral programmes;
- women scholars should provide mentorship for younger women scholars to sustain scholarship from the female perspective;
- women should endeavour to support other women in order to eliminate WAWS-Women against Women Syndrome.

Gratitude

- I am grateful to the Triune God-Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit- for divine Love and preservation in the face of many challenges and I pledge my eternal loyalty to divine service.

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Thank You and God Bless

Notes and References

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