Secret strategies: Women and abortion in Yoruba society, Nigeria
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Citation for published version (APA):

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CHAPTER 3

YORUBA SOCIETY

"Yoruba" are not a homogeneous, sharply defined ethnic group. Nevertheless, in this book I use the term 'Yoruba' to refer to the persons and 'Yoruba land' to refer to the areas in Southwest Nigeria where 'Yoruba' live, because that is the way Nigerians refer to them. Therefore, I will omit the inverted commas from now on. Yoruba are considered to be clearly distinct from other people in Nigeria such as Ibo in the East and Hausa who live in the North. Numbering about 20 million, numerically they are one of the largest single ethnic groups in Africa and constitute about one-fifth of the Nigerian population of 106 million (Bellamy 2000:86).

I have had the opportunity of living closely with Yoruba for a considerable period of time. I worked in Lagos for seven years with many Yoruba colleagues; my work there also took me to different parts of Yoruba land. Additionally, I was married to a Yoruba for twelve years. I have learned to appreciate the Yoruba people as being resourceful, optimistic, ambitious, and proud of their history and their culture. They enthusiastically adhere to their traditions, against the pressures of modernisation and globalisation and despite widespread Christianity and Islam. This is not to say that it is a static culture. Yoruba are a pragmatic people, who adjust to modernity and assimilate parts of other cultures without losing their identity. The description of Yoruba society in this chapter is based on literature, explanations of Yoruba informants, and my experiences, of which some more personal observations and impressions are specified in boxes throughout the book.

History and religions

Yoruba history

The stories about Yoruba origins are tinted with both the legendary and the vague. Some stories trace Yoruba as a distinct ethnicity to migrations of people from the Middle East. Some regard their origin as the result of contact between
indigenous African forest people and people from the dry regions beyond the Niger River (Lawson 1984:50). However, the nearly thousand-year-old city of Ile-Ife (in present Osun State) is generally accepted as their common spiritual home, with Oduduwa as the founder of the Yoruba people. All Yoruba call themselves ‘sons of Ododuwa’. According to history, the different types of Yoruba originate from Ododuwa’s seven sons, who populated the different places from Ile-Ife (Peel 1968:19).

Yoruba were an important ethnic group by the end of the 15th century. They founded the old Oyo Empire that reached the height of its power in the 18th century. Yoruba speak a common language that belongs to the Kwa-group of West African languages (Eades 1980:4), but they actually consist of a number of sub-ethnic groups who live concentrated in different geographical areas, with their own (mutually understandable) dialects. Informants’ statements in exploratory interviews confirm the differences between the sub-groups:

The differences between Yoruba sub-tribes [Nigerians mostly used the term ‘tribe’ when indicating different ethnic groups] are the dialects and use of language, ‘tongues of speaking’, although all Yoruba can understand each other. There are also differences in the culture and traditions, such as different modes of dressing, the asoke [woven cloth] they wear and the ways of plaiting their hair. Some sub-tribes have specific tribal marks by incisions on the skull or cheeks.

Lagos Yoruba are arrogant, because their land is fertile. They have money and feel in charge of the world. They look down on others, that they are bush-people, not exposed to anything, even if they have gone to school. In Lagos everybody is well dressed, even if they are poor. Ijebu Yoruba are also exposed; they are hard working. Kwara, Ekiti, Ondo and Oyo Yoruba are more uncivilised, unexposed. You see it in the way they dress, and meet people in public; it is the same for urban and rural areas. People in Kwara are masters in preparing charms.

In Lagos State, the different Yoruba were originally Ijebu, Awori, Egba and Egun. When Lagos became part of the British colony in 1851, the Saro (slaves from Sierra Leone, who were originally Yoruba) and Amoro (Yoruba slaves from Brazil and Cuba) who returned to Africa also occupied the land. In 1914 Lagos was proclaimed the capital for the whole country and remained this after the colonial period ended in 1960. Many people from different origins, other than Yoruba, migrated to Lagos, which had developed as the main port of Nigeria. The oldest and most densely populated area of Lagos Island is Isale Eko, where most of the fieldwork for the present study took place; it resembles the towns all over Yoruba land and is inhabited mainly by Yoruba (Eades 1980:14-16).
Religions and world-sense

The Yoruba (traditional) religion acknowledges one supreme God, Olodumare or Oluron (literally: owner of the sky), and up to about 400 orisa (deities).\(^6\) Oluron is the chief source of power. He is also the most remote and can never be approached directly. There are no priests or shrines for Oluron and no sacrifices. The orisa represent the level that is approachable by humans through their priests. All orisa have their special priests and shrines all over Yoruba land. Orisa can be considered Oluron’s delegates (Lawson 1984:57). Each patrilineage has a specific orisa associated with it that all members have to worship. Besides orisa, lineage ancestors may also be objects of worship. Deified ancestorhood is conferred to those who have performed their duties to the society well, have attained a ripe old age and are considered to have lived successful lives. A life cannot be successful if the deceased has not left children (Babatunde 1992:50; Gbadege in 1991:88). Ancestors have their annual festivals and their descendants must honour them with specific ceremonies and offerings. If the descendants fail to do so, the protective and benevolent ancestors can turn on their descendants and cause misfortune, disease and death (Gbadeges in 1991:89; Lawson 1984:62-63). The ancestors are thus the guardians of morality in the family circle, because they are believed to punish deviant behaviour.

Yoruba believe in predestination, which is considered to be a combination of individual choice at birth and endorsement by the creator (Gbadege in 1991:47; Lawson 1984:60). Orunmila, one of the deities, is present at the creation of every human being. The spiritualists (babalawo) who can communicate with this deity can ‘see’ the destiny of a person by consulting the Ifa oracle through which Orunmila ‘speaks’. Often new parents will consult a babalawo to find out about their baby’s destiny. Imasogie (1985:51) explains that the Yoruba belief in destiny is not necessarily unchangeable predestination, but rather resembles a blueprint that requires effort to bring to fruition. Various forces that may thwart a person’s destiny include witches, orisa and sorcerers. A woman in an exploratory interview explained a person’s destiny as follows:

People pledge at birth to Olodumare, the supreme God, what they are going to do with their lives on earth. Orunmila, who is next to Olodumare, is the witness of the pledges, and thus he knows what is in everybody’s destiny. Evil people can block your destiny. The Ifa oracle represents Orunmila. When Orunmila lived on earth, he always used Ifa, a small God. Orunmila was then known as baba Ifa (father of Ifa). When Orunmila was leaving earth, Ifa stayed behind to represent him. People can hear from Olodumare through the Ifa oracle. Babalawo know how to consult the Ifa oracle. Orunmila left this oracle
that is always 16 in number, it may be certain wooden beads on a string or cowry shells. If you have any problem and consult the Ifa oracle, it will tell you if you pledged it [having the problem, for example infertility or bad luck] at birth or not. If you pledged it, it cannot be changed, if you did not, you can try to change it.

Yoruba also believe in reincarnation. The spirits of persons who have lived and died may come back in a new baby, usually to someone in the same extended family. The spirits seem to be gendered, because spirits of female ancestors usually come back to girls and male ancestor spirits to boys. Gbadegesin (1991:51) explains that with every reincarnation, the spirit chooses and acquires a new destiny. Several informants told me that the spirits of aborted babies would not reincarnate anymore. The family knows if an ancestor has returned because of a physical or character resemblance, dreams in which an ancestor makes his/her will known or through divination for the new born baby or the mother during pregnancy (Bascom 1969:71). A woman in an exploratory interview elaborated:

An old spirit can come back to the child to be born. You can recognise the old spirit by birthmarks on the baby’s body. The names given to these children indicate that an ancestor has been born again; for characteristics indicating the spirit of the mother Iyabode, Yetunde, Yewande, Yejide, Yeside, meaning ‘mother has come back’, and for father Babarunde, Babajide ‘father has come back’. When these children are young, between two to four years of age, they ‘remember’ that they were born again and would say things like, ‘Do you know who I am, I am your mother’. When they are over five, they have forgotten their past lives on earth. When a woman had a child that died before the new baby, the spirit of the older baby will come to new baby who would be called Omotunde, the child has come back.

Yoruba religion is inseparable from other areas of life. It pervades family affairs, politics, health care and the economy. Heads of families (olori ẹbi), of areas (baale), and towns (oba) all have ritual responsibilities at their respective levels. The oba are also invested with religious power because all such rulers are believed to originate from Ife (Lawson 1984:55). Unlike the world religions that have reached the Yoruba, the Yoruba religion knows no evangelisation. However, slaves and immigrants have exported Yoruba religion to places outside Nigeria, for example to Brazil and the United States. Scholars point out that the traditional Yoruba religion can assimilate other religious doctrines or parts of these because it is naturally open and syncretistic. It allows great variation of interpretation and individual choice and tolerates anything that promises benefit (Gbadegesin 1991:102-3; Lawson 1984:55; Peel 1968:26).
Two world religions, Islam and Christianity, are important in Yoruba area today. Islam probably came to Yoruba land around the middle of the eighteenth century through itinerant Hausa traders, and spread out from the mid-nineteenth century through traders and itinerant mallam. Mallam were wandering preachers, who also prepared medicine, performed divinations, taught Arabic and organised congregations of Muslims. Mallam nowadays are normally settled, but continue to perform the same activities.

Christian missions were established in Yoruba land from the middle of the nineteenth century (Peel 1968:46-48). Yoruba belong to different Christian denominations, orthodox mission churches, (including Catholic, Methodist, Baptist and Anglican), Pentecostal churches or African independent churches. One of the biggest of the African independent churches is the Yoruba Aladura (literally: owners of prayer) movement with more than a million members. These are syncretistic churches that combine elements of the traditional Yoruba religion with orthodox Christian dogma. Followers believe that God always answers their prayers and that dreams and visions are sources of information and direction (Lawson 1984:78). Aladura churches date from the end of World War I and gained in size following Nigeria’s independence in 1960. Aladura is a generic name for a number of churches including Cherubim and Seraphim societies, Celestial Church of Christ and the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star. These Aladura churches are important to the present study, because they offer healing services including treatment of infertility and impotency (Eades 1980:137-139; Haynes 1996:181-182). According to Lawson (1984:77), there has been considerable argument about whether these religious movements are Christian or not. Certainly the mission churches regarded and still do regard them with hostility.

New Christian denominations, especially Pentecostal ones, continue to sprout up and to flourish. The poor economy and lack of financial and personal security are a threat or a reality for most Nigerians, thus they seek comfort in church. The churches offer explanations for misfortune, give hope and make their adherents’ belief in miracles stronger. Unfortunately, there are always persons who misuse the needs of others, as one of the women in exploratory interviews explained:

Founding a new church is the quickest way to look for money. A person buys or finds a piece of land, even illegally under a bridge, calls out the name of Jesus Christ and will attract followers. The person may buy a powerful charm from the babalawo. With this charm he will perform the wonders of healing. But it may also be fake. The person may just make a deal with another person who says that (s)he has been suffering from a certain illness and asks for a cure.
(S)he will be 'miraculously' healed in the church. But this is all staged! Once a so-called miracle had taken place in a church, it will attract followers. With every service, people have to donate money. Pastors drive around in flashy cars. Many churches are not true!

The above story indicates that the narrator definitely believed in the existence of powerful charms, but that she doubted who was the creator behind the charms. Nearly all Yoruba believe that powerful babalawo can make potent charms.

Yoruba are a religious people. Religion and churches pervade everyday life and street scenes (see Box 3.1). Nowadays, about half of Yoruba adhere to the Christian faith and half to Islam (see also Eades 1980:128) and a debatable number adhere to traditional Yoruba religion. Many Christians and Muslims combine one of these world religions (or both) with the Yoruba religion, even though their religious doctrines officially do not welcome such a combination. Yet only very dogmatic Christians abhor the Yoruba religion and view it as satanic and evil. There are scholars and religious persons who call the Yoruba religion paganism and say it is deeply in decline. Peel (1968:29) indicated that the percentage of 'pagans' declined from 74% in 1921 to 6% in 1952. However, he qualified these numbers by saying that 'the traditional religion is, of course, more important still today than the figure if 6% would suggest' (Peel 1968:53). In my sample of community women, just 1% said that they were Traditionalists. I will not delve further into the discussion of the prevalence of adherence to traditional Yoruba religion, except to say that I have observed that the Yoruba world-sense with its belief in deities and ancestors who influence life on earth, who in turn can be manipulated and influenced, is a reality for many Yoruba no matter the denomination. My observations correspond with those of Eades (1980:118), when he highlights the two aspects of religion: '... its role as a basis for the formation of social groups and its role as an ideology and guide to individual action.' He postulates that the traditional Yoruba religion remains mainly active in guiding individuals in their activities.

Religion is not an inter-ethnic dividing principle in Yoruba society. First and foremost, Yoruba identify with being a Yoruba, rather than with their religion, Muslim, Christian or Traditionalist. I never heard of any inter-ethnic conflicts between Yoruba of different religions, whereas conflicts between predominantly Muslim Hausa and Christian Yoruba or with even any other Yoruba, are unfortunately common.
Box 3.1. Everyday religion

When walking or driving in Nigeria you meet Muslims washing their feet with water from a plastic kettle, rolling out their colourful prayer mats and groups of men kneeling and praying along the road. When travelling with Muslims by car, the journey stops at specific times for prayers. The mats are in the back of the car. During seminars and workshops one has to consider the prayer times, especially on Fridays. In the late afternoons, early evenings and on Saturdays one meets groups of people, young and old, walking along the road, dressed completely in white with white bonnets. They are on their way to an Aladura church. Additionally, one may meet a group in white dress, gathered at the seaside for prayer and water-blessing meetings. Driving along the highways you see persons gathering under bridges and flyovers, sitting on makeshift benches. These are usually new Pentecostal churches. As soon as the congregation has some money, it will buy a piece of land and build a more permanent structure. In every corner of the town and villages and along the highways one can observe unfinished structures where believers congregate, drawing attention to their soon-to-be houses of worship with big flashy signs like ‘Miracle Ministry’, ‘Fire of Hope’, ‘Miracle of Fire’.

The established mission churches have buildings in prime locations. On Sundays, women, men and children, beautifully dressed from the tip of their elaborate hats to the toe of their shiny shoes, flock to these places, preferably emerging from flashy cars. I know families who have a car, but who borrow a Mercedes from a more fortunate family member to go to church in order to impress others. Churches require a lot of energy and time from their followers. One service a week does not suffice. There are evening bible studies, special evening services twice a week and whole-night vigils. Often I found colleagues dead-tired in the office during the day, and when I inquired as to the reason they told me they had had something in church all night. It seemed to me that denominations and congregations try to impress on and compete with one another by building the most ostentatious structures for their congregation and by increasingly invading the daily lives of their members in order to attract more followers.

Along the streets one may also see traditional masquerades (parades of people wearing masks and special clothing), and in courtyards and houses persons pray in front of traditional shrines.

Most Yoruba strongly believe in evil spiritual beings and forces, including witches, sorcerers and the *emere* or *ogbanje* (evil spiritual beings). I want to pay some attention to the Yoruba belief in evil forces, because these feature in several parts of this book. Traditional healers may use magic to cure illness caused by evil spirits, witchcraft and sorcery may be explanations for infertility, *emere* may cause routine miscarriages and co-wives may use magic to secure the favours of the husband.
Box 3.2. Supernatural beings

I often came across strong beliefs in witches and evil spirits as part of everyday life. *My (Aladura)* research assistant told me that pregnant women wear a safety pin or tie a piece of stone in their *rapa* (wrapper) to protect themselves and their unborn babies from evil forces. When she told me this, I thought it was perhaps something women only did in the past. However, it is still a common practice, as I found when interviewing pregnant women in ANC clinics. Most women deemed it necessary to protect themselves in this way from evil, and showed me the safety pin or stone they were wearing. ‘I will use a pin later, when the pregnancy will show’, explained a 26-year-old Anglican small trader. She was two months pregnant, and already the mother of one. ‘Then I will need it when I walk outside in the afternoon sun, so that evil children will not go in and chase the natural child out’. Only a few women said that they did not really believe in the protective effect, but just followed the custom because their mother or aunt had advised them. They added that wearing such pins or stones would not do harm either.

*My* pet cats were another reason for persons to start talking about evil spirits and witches, since cats are associated with evil and witches. *My* (Anglican) Yoruba friend warned me several times not to have too many cats around my house. She was worried that they might be witches or be used by witches to do harm to my family and me. *My* (Muslim) brother-in-law always turned his head in dismay and fear when he saw our black cat, because witches especially like black cats.

Middleton & Winter (1963:1) state that beliefs about witches and sorcerers are almost universal in Africa, thus Yoruba beliefs are no exception in this regard. Misfortune or any abnormal event is often explained in terms of supernatural forces (Middleton & Winter 1963:2, referring to Evans-Pritchard 1937). The difference between witches and sorcerers is that witchcraft is part of an individual’s being, part of the innermost self, while sorcery is merely a technique that a person utilises under certain circumstances. A witch is innately evil and a potential threat to everybody, while a sorcerer uses his or her magic at a particular time for a particular purpose, possibly also with a good intention (Middleton & Winter 1963:3). Both witches and sorcerers may use the same magic, called *juju* in Yoruba.

*Yoruba* witches, *aje*, have the body of human beings, normally women, although they can change shape. Middleton & Winter (1963:9) explain that it is normal for witches to be associated with one sex or the other, but usually it is with women. Drews (2000:18-21), who compares witchcraft among the matrilineal Kunda of Zambia with the patrilineal Yoruba, theorises that witchcraft usually lodges in the sex of the outsider to the system, which would be men in a matrilineal society and women in a patrilineal one. The reason is that the outsiders represent the threat to the continuation of the system. Witches may render men and women infertile, eat children, seduce young men and women into only being interested in money or conspire with wives against their husband (see also Hoch-Smith 1978:265-6).
Although many persons believe in witches and sorcerers and give examples of the outcome of their practices, which is said to be the proof of their existence, the study of their practices is problematic. Middleton & Winter (1963:4) pointed out that witchcraft by its nature cannot be observed (because it is innate) and although sorcery could, it is usually (too) secret. Therefore, they state: ‘... the study of witchcraft and sorcery is almost exclusively about the beliefs that persons have about the capabilities and activities of others and about the actions persons take to avoid attacks or to counter them when they believe these attacks have occurred’. These beliefs are related to the social structure. Middleton & Winter (1963:6) cite Nadel (1952:28) who said that ‘witchcraft beliefs are causally as well as conspicuously related to specific anxieties and stresses arising in social life’. With education and urbanisation, new social relationships and tensions have arisen between persons and have taken the form of accusations of witchcraft and sorcery (Middleton & Winter 1963:21). This explanation suits the findings of this study well. Stressful situations in Yoruba society include, but are by no means limited to: the position of the wife in the patrilineal society, the threat of infertility, conflict in polygamous marriages and the declining economy in which competition for scarce resources becomes more intense. In all these situations witchcraft and sorcery accusations are common; either women are accused of being a witch or men and women are alleged to have used the services of a sorcerer to prepare juju.

**Emere or ogbanje** are evil spirits that can possess any human being, but they especially like to invade the bodies of unborn children. Everybody should take precautions to avoid places where emere meet, like certain crossroads, but pregnant women should be especially careful. They should take extra precautions by not walking around at the times emere are around, between 12 noon and 4 p.m. and at night (see also Oke 1996:61). My female informants in exploratory interviews talked about witches and evil spirits matter-of-factly:

Witches and sorcerers are believed to cause any type of deformity or miscarriage and even to turn the baby into a stone. Witches can see anything. They can communicate with each other and know your whereabouts if they have a hold over you. They eat meat, not the real meat, but the spirit-meat called *eleda*. When they take possession of a person they will divide the meat among each other. You cannot see from their looks who are the witches, they are usually very nice people; they are maybe too nice and sympathetic when you have problems. (...) Emere can go into a child. The evil spirit takes the place of the child and sends the real child out. The emere-child is an evildoer, (s)he can create misfortune, is stubborn. The spirit can leave the body at night and change into another shape to meet with other spirits.
I was an *emere* myself. My mother had eight children, all boys but me. I was the sixth born of my mother, but the first of my mother’s new husband. She had been married before and had five sons. She left her first husband and did not want another husband, nor a child. But finally she became the fourth wife of a man. After five years, I was born, her first daughter. When I was small, I used to have fits and my mother was afraid I would die, that I was an *abiku*. Then one day I stayed in the fit the whole day and my mother thought that I had died. Someone came who said that I was not dead. He took a broken bottle and made marks on my face, so that the *emere* would not recognise me again. After that I never had fits again.

The pervasiveness of the belief in witchcraft among Yoruba may also be proven by the comments of a biomedical doctor whom I interviewed:

Traditional healers give all sorts of medicines and tell patients these are against evil spirits and witchcraft. We modern doctors cannot give these. I do believe in witches and recognise them. I also meet them in the hospital. Some are in the delivery room. They take their *rapa* [wrapper, piece of cloth often used as a wrap-around skirt], turn it, fold it, and sit on it. As long as these women sit on their *rapa*, the woman in labour will not deliver. I send them out and as soon as such a witch is out of the room, the child comes out like that. In every group of women, like the ones sitting outside [he points at the women waiting to consult him], there are witches.

**Economy**

Yoruba were originally farmers. A peculiarity of their historical settlement pattern was the high degree of urbanisation. People lived in cities, and worked on farms at the outskirts (Pee 1968:21). Nowadays villagers are largely still farmers, but many are also involved in trading or crafts. Yoruba are enterprising people, especially the women, and they have a reputation for their skill in trade (see also Sudarkasa 1973:1-3). When you ask a Yoruba what (s)he does, you mostly hear the answer: ‘business’. ‘Business’ can mean private trade of some sort, from selling tomatoes bought on the wholesale market at the town’s outskirts on the street to selling home-cooked food to trading in expensive cloth and jewellery purchased abroad and selling it to affluent Nigerians. Both men and women may be in business, as a main occupation or as an extra source of income to supplement a salary. Just like in the present study, Di Domenico et al. (1987:122) found that very few married Yoruba women are full time housewives. They concluded that ‘being only a housewife’ is considered virtually equivalent to
idleness and therefore disparaged'. Men and women would (also) prefer to have a salaried job, but these jobs are scarce. Salaries are low and often too meagre to support a family, but they open opportunities, give status and provide a wider network to do 'business' (see Box 3.3).

Box 3.3. Working for government

I have worked in both Federal and State Nigerian government offices, for four years (1987-1991). When I no longer worked in the office anymore, I was working with government staff (also for this research project) and had friends working for the government (1996-2000). I was always amazed at how people could manage to live on a government salary alone. In fact, they cannot. They must supplement their salary in other ways. Their civil servant jobs give them a network and market for their small (or larger) businesses. To their co-workers and persons from outside who know about it, they will sell bread, cooked food, provisions, cloth, toiletries or any marketable item. These business wares are brought to the office. I found teachers bringing scones and drinks to the school to sell to students and fellow teachers. A co-worker offered me cloth to buy, which she had bought from a neighbouring country where she had gone for her work. When we went for fieldwork to rural areas, staff would always first try to contact villagers to buy produce of the area, both for their family and also to sell in town. On the way back from rural areas, the office car was always full with fish, bananas, yams, pineapples and gari (cassava flour).

Civil servants (and other employees for that matter) also try to get additional money by having persons pay for the services that should be free. The clerk has clients pay extra to receive the form they already have to pay for, or they must pay him money to find a 'lost' file or to not 'lose' the file. Some nurses pocket additional money for taking routine blood pressure and weighing pregnant women. These are just some of the small ways of making extra money that I observed. It is not proper, but understandable, considering the very low and irregular salaries. Dishonestly increasing one's salary can and does take more serious forms when higher-up civil servants insist on huge bribes for simple services. At the lower levels people take extra money to have enough to live, at the higher levels, it is out of greed for luxuries.

The economic situation for most Nigerians, including Yoruba, has become increasingly austere after the oil boom of the 1970s and early 1980s and the adoption of a structural adjustment program in 1986. The reasons for the problems are complex. They have been attributed to the colonial powers who had left a divided nation, to the greed of the various regimes who ruled the country, to mismanagement of national resources and assets and to multinational companies who have continued to suck the wealth out of the country. I will not further explore these causes, for their answers are not central to this book. It suffices to say that the everyday reality for the majority of Nigerians in the late 1990s is that they only sometimes have sufficient income for 'normal' expenses including food, clothing, housing, education and medical bills. Yoruba can ask one
another with black humour what ‘feeding regime’ for breakfast, lunch and dinner they follow: the ‘1-2-1’, the ‘2-1-2’, or the ‘0-2-1’. The ‘1’ stands for a snack or light meal, the ‘2’ stands for a proper meal and the ‘0’ stands for no meal at all.

Box 3.4. Cash

Living in Nigeria as a member of a Nigerian family, I was always surprised about the complex and informal ways of loaning and borrowing money. This takes place at every level of society, and in different amounts, from a few hundred naira among secondary school students or servants to hundreds of thousands of naira among big business people. It seemed to me that people never had money at hand for anything, and that they did not plan ahead for expenses. If a person had money, (s)he would loan it to others who needed the money at that moment. If the same person needed money urgently, (s)he would scout around for it among others whom (s)he had loaned money to before, or else try to borrow from other people.

A lot of time and stress is involved in trying to borrow money and trying to get loaned money back. Most Yoruba whom I knew had outstanding credit and debit with different persons—and remembered it all in their head. Hardly anything is written down, and even less is formalised in a contract. Coming from a country where children learn to save money from a very early age, this was a finding that amazed me, and it seemed that persons made life unnecessarily difficult for themselves.

More careful analysis and understanding of the situation in Nigeria made me understand why people act this way. Putting any savings one may have in a bank account is uncertain and time consuming. It is cumbersome to open a bank account and impossible if the bank believes you may not have enough money in the future. It is time-consuming to withdraw money from your account. Nigerians have learned from history that banks may close or be closed any time. In other words, people, especially poorer people, do not have much confidence in the banking system and may not even have access to a bank account. Thus, it makes more sense to ‘save’ money with other persons who need it and ‘withdraw’ from these persons when one needs money oneself. Even if a person is quite affluent, it is cumbersome and sometimes impossible to formally get a loan from a bank because sometimes even wealthier persons do not have any collateral.

The informal way of loaning and borrowing money is also a way to escape the very high interest rates asked by banks and moneylenders. To adapt to the difficulties of formally loaning money, there are also semi-formal saving societies of peer groups (e.g. company staff, market vendors, people originating from the same village, schoolmates). Each member contributes a certain amount of money monthly, and depending on the number of members, each member can have access to a lump sum of money every certain period of time. I often heard persons saying that they had ‘booked’ for the lump sum of their organisation such and such month, or that they would try to obtain money for an urgent expense. This system is known as esusu. There is also a special person, alajo, who is the keeper of part of someone’s money to protect this person from spending it. These alajo are around in markets. Both the alajo and the contributor keep a record of how much money is given and received. At the end of a certain period, the contributor receives this money, minus the fee for the alajo for keeping it safely. This system resembles a reversed banking system in which the bank is getting the interest and not the owner.
Given the weak economy where money is less and less available to the majority of Yoruba (and other Nigerians) who had acquired expensive tastes after the oil-boom of the 1970s and 1980s, it is not surprising that values in Yoruba land have changed. Babatunde (1992:234) states that in olden days, good character, strong principles and respect for elders gave one status, but nowadays money is the prime marker of status. I was amazed at the preoccupation with money in Yoruba society: people were always after money, constantly looking for business through which they could make (more) money and showing off what wealth they did have. At the same time, nobody seemed to have cash when they needed it most and many were trying to obtain loans (see Box 3.4).

Education

Yoruba value education highly. Education is considered an avenue to future success, to job opportunities and money. Compared to other ethnic groups in Nigeria, the education level of Yoruba is high. DHS figures for 1990 estimate that in Southwest Nigeria, which is Yoruba area, 30% of the population have primary education and 44% have both primary and secondary education (Makinwa-Adebusoye & Feyisetan 1994:47). In former days, education was a guarantee of a good job; nowadays it is a condition, but not a guarantee. Therefore, it is the ambition of secondary school students to continue their education after obtaining their secondary school certificate. They would like to study to become a doctor, lawyer, accountant or engineer, all of which are professions that would secure them a high income. It is not only the youths who have the ambition to continue their education; parents also want their children to study. Since children are the parents’ insurance for the future, they will try to send their children to school, even if it is a financial burden to do so. Although parents try to educate both their male and female children, they will choose to educate their sons over their daughters if they cannot afford to educate all of them. Educating male children is a better investment, because in the future they remain in the patrilineage, whereas girls will marry out, though they will still contribute to their parents’ care. Parents may also try to find a sponsor to help educate their children, such as a rich member of the extended family or an employer. The fees for the public school system are relatively cheap, but without additional money, no child can study. Because public schools provide few school supplies, students need to buy uniforms, pens, textbooks and exercise books. In many schools they even have to provide their own tables and chairs. Ironically, the dwindling Nigerian economy, which has made education even more valued in order to obtain a good job, has also caused attendance in both
primary and secondary schools to drop because of the financial burden of education (Ebigbola 1989:162-163).

Though the public school system was once of high quality, nowadays it is under great financial and organisational strain, as are all public systems. Only federal government colleges and ‘model’ state schools are able to more or less keep up their high standards. Many school buildings are not well maintained; some are dilapidated and even dangerous to students. Incidences of roofs blowing off and buildings collapsing are not unheard of. There is lack of qualified teachers and salaries are low and not paid regularly. With the public system crumbling, private schools, with higher educational standards, sprout up and are an additional drain on the pool of qualified teachers in public schools. Private school fees range in cost, but are always more expensive than public school expenses, such that only affluent families have access to the best (private) schools.

The Nigerian education system is very competitive, with entrance and progress exams (that have to be paid for). Students get a place in a secondary school, polytechnic or university according to their marks. Only top students (and sometimes students of high-class families through ‘networking’) can secure admission to a federal government college, which helps them to get a place at university to study one of the sought after subjects including medicine, law and engineering.

For children to have to stop their education halfway is a lost investment for the parents. I found it striking that many parents try to send their children through the school system as quickly as possible. They see the academic development of children as the only type of development they need; after school hours most children, starting as young as nursery school age, have private tutors if their parents can afford it. After primary five or even four, children sit for secondary school entrance exams. If they pass, they move on to secondary school, even though they may be only nine or ten years old. The rationale behind this, as parents explained to me, is that in this way they would economise on the overall cost of education, and there would be less chance that children will ‘mess up’ when they are adolescents, and become indifferent towards their studies.

The educational level of women in the present study was quite high, with many having attained their secondary school leavers’ certificate. In the ANC survey 59% of women had such a certificate, and in the community survey 45% did. However, this certificate just means that the student sat the final exam, but does not give any indication about the marks obtained. We did not ask consistently about whether the respondent passed and would have been able to continue studying at institutions of higher education, or not. Only 15% of women in the ANC survey and 10% in the community survey had continued studying after secondary school.
Family ties

Kinship

Kinship for the Yoruba is bilateral in theory, but in practice, it is predominantly patrilineal. This means that children belong to the patrilineage \( (\text{idile}) \) of their father. Children of a man’s daughter belong to her husband’s lineage, while those of his son belong to the man’s lineage. The lineage is the basis of traditional social structure, distinguished by special names for its members, special deities \( (\text{orisa}) \) to worship, taboos and sometimes also special facial scarification. The patrilineage is comprised of all the living and deceased descendants of the founder through the agnatic line \( \text{(Matory 1994:91; Peel 1968:25)} \). The patrilineage overshadows the nuclear families because the lineage is constant and nuclear families are not. The woman marrying into the patrilineage of her husband remains an ‘outsider’ or ‘visitor’; she does not become a member by marriage. This is a potential source of stress between the woman and her in-laws. Strong lineage ties may negatively influence the conjugal relationship. Oyewumi \( (1997:50) \) and Eades \( (1980:55-56) \) describe how the wife keeps her position in her lineage of birth, including rights and obligations even after marriage. These writers indicate that although there are variations between sub-groups, the general rule in Yoruba society is that property is passed between blood relatives. The property a man personally acquires is passed on to his children, while the property he inherits is passed on to his siblings. The property of a woman goes to her children. A woman inherits a share of her parents’ possessions.

The residence pattern is virilocal. Traditionally, patrilineal segments resided in compounds, with the hearth-hold (a mother with her children) constituting the basic unit of production and consumption \( \text{(Pearce 1999:71)} \). The husband was a member of various hearth-holds if he had more than one wife. Nowadays and especially in urban areas, couples do not reside with their extended families, but live with the conjugal family instead. Sometimes, if housing allows, hearth-holds of a polygynous marriage live in separate rooms of the same house, otherwise they live in separate houses. Often one or both parents of the husband live with their son and his nuclear family in town, for longer periods of time or even permanently. Even if nuclear families live separate from the patrilineage, they still turn to senior members of the lineage for guidance and decisions. There are regular meetings and reunions of extended families.
Marriage

As is the rule in most of Africa, virtually all Yoruba women and men are expected and willing to marry, and most adults are indeed married (see also Luchok 1993:74). Of women 30 years and older in the community survey in the present study, 93% of urban women and 93% of rural women were married. In the younger age groups, there were considerable differences between the two settings, with urban girls generally marrying at an older age than rural girls do (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1. Proportion of women in community survey married, by age group and location

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>age group</th>
<th>married in Lagos</th>
<th>N (100%)</th>
<th>married in Epe</th>
<th>N (100%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Below 20</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 and over</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>369</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Men marry to secure children for the patrilineage, women marry to have children, status and honour. Yoruba women carry 'Mrs.' as a title. In newspapers one reads advertisements to announce that from now on Miss A wants to be known as Mrs. B. Even when a Yoruba woman has many professional titles, the title Mrs. will still be carried as one of the most important ones.

Traditionally, a marriage was a family and not a personal affair; it was a 'contract' between families. Families would look for suitable candidates outside their patrilineage and matrilineage and would mutually investigate their in-laws-to-be. Any negative findings about the family, including hereditary diseases or diseases like leprosy and psychological afflictions, or even just problematic characters, could be reason to stop the marriage arrangements. If the investigation had a positive result, the families would ask a babalawo to consult the Ifa oracle about the potential success of the marriage (Bascom 1969:59; Eades 1980:57; Fadipe 1970:72; Taiwo & Olunlade 1998:2). Nowadays young adults usually choose their own partner for marriage, but still need the approval of the two families. Some families still consult the babalawo, but investigations into the in-laws have become superficial.

Marriages are contracted in traditional court, mosque, registry or church. Yoruba are used to paying bridewealth to the family of the future wife, a common practice in patrilineal societies. The bridewealth consists of some traditional ceremonial items such as kola nuts, salt, palm oil and honey, clothes and
jewellery for the wife and clothes and money for the in-laws. With the bridewealth, the husband’s lineage compensates the wife’s kin for the loss of her labour and simultaneously pays for the exclusive sexual access to the woman and the paternity of her children. According to Oyewumi (1997:51), bridewealth did not mean buying the rights over her person or labour. However, when getting a wife from a lineage, according to Oyewumi (1997:59), the groom’s lineage contracts bride services, which are lifelong obligations to the lineage of the wife. Nigerians told me that for a Yoruba man, one of the advantages of marrying a white woman was escaping from both the payment of bridewealth and the obligations of bride service, which Nigerian in-laws would expect from him.

Yoruba women marry relatively late, in particular in urban areas (see also Bascom 1969:64). DHS figures from 1990 give the mean age of marriage for Southwest Nigeria to be 20 years old (Makinwa-Adebusoye & Feyisetan 1994:46). In former days, when it was also common for girls to marry as late as at 20 years of age, the reason for the rather advanced age may have been that the parents wanted to enjoy a girl’s contribution to farm work for as long as possible. Nowadays, the relatively advanced age of first marriage may be attributed to the high value Yoruba place on continuing education. Another consideration for women is that they would like to secure some basic income before they marry and have children, because they know that they cannot rely on their future husbands to provide all of the income a family requires.

Traditionally, a woman should be virgin when she first marries. This is still the ideal nowadays. If, on the wedding night, she appeared to not be a virgin, symbolic messages would be sent to her family, like a half of a keg of palm wine instead of a whole keg. It would not be a reason for sending her away, but she would have lost prestige with her husband’s kindred and miss some of the presents she would have received from her in-laws. Her unfaithfulness would be a potential source of teasing and gossip whenever tempers would be aroused (Taiwo & Olunlade 1998:5). At present, in-laws do not ‘check’ a new wife’s virginity anymore; whether she was a virgin at marriage or not, is not made public. However, in poorer parts of Yoruba society, it has become customary for a woman to be pregnant or have a child first before the father marries her. The faltering economy of the country is partly responsible for this shift in norms, especially in poorer sections of society. Marriage is usually an expensive affair and when the family does not have much money, they want to be sure of getting a useful, i.e. fertile, wife (see also Karanja 1994:207; Makinwa-Adebusoye 1991:45; Pearce 1999:76). For women, this situation is ambiguous and may be to their disadvantage. Women may expect their stable partner to marry them once they
get pregnant, but the men may leave them instead. In Chapter 5, I will explain how this is one of the circumstances that make women decide on an abortion.

**Polygyny**

Yoruba men can traditionally have more than one *legal* wife. The traditional laws, Muslim laws and the laws of the African Christian churches all allow polygyny. However, at the registry or in Mission churches, a man can only marry one wife. If he wants to have more, he must marry subsequent wives traditionally. Most first marriages are contracted at the registry, in the church or mosque and traditionally. With subsequent wives, the registry and church are left out. In their study of Yoruba marriage, Taiwo & Olunlade (1998:7) wrote: 'Married life of many a young Christian begins with legal monogamy and ends with customary polygamy'. Caldwell et al. (1991:239) describe how often the choice of the first wife is a careful process in which the whole family is involved, while the family does not ‘examine’ second or third wives as much. These women might be divorcees or women with premarital children.

The rate of polygynous marriages is decreasing under the influence of modernisation, education and urbanisation, but findings of the present study confirm that polygyny is still common. Both in town and in rural areas, 31% of married women in the surveys were in polygynous marriages. One-third (33%) of 160 Yoruba secondary school students included in the education project in the present study reported they were from polygynous homes.

There is controversy between researchers and between genders about women’s opinion of polygynous relationships. According to female and male informants in this study, the *ideal*, that men more than women envision, is that co-wives assist one another in caring for their children and husband. Husbands usually try to convince the first wife that additional wives will decrease her economic and sexual duties. Polygyny also enables the woman to keep the traditionally prescribed postpartum abstinence from sex for as long as the woman nurses the baby, which is good for mother and child. Luchok (1993:69) who studied Yoruba in a rural area of Oyo State concluded that 'Co-wives often have a cordial relationship, sharing childcare (...), but sometimes co-wives compete among themselves to win favours for their children at the expense of the children of other wives'. I wonder how she came to this generally positive impression; perhaps in some agricultural communities, co-wives gain from co-operation (see also Baerends 1994:32). Sudarkasa (1973:147) who studied Yoruba in Awe, near Oyo, described a different situation, where co-wives had independent households and did not share in income generating activities.

Although opinions about polygyny were not a specific research topic in the present study, I tend to agree with the following common Yoruba saying, 'Orìṣa
A prayer to the gods to become two [wives] in a husband’s house is never from the heart of a woman’ (cited by Oni & Oguntimehin 1996:8). My female informants, women in both polygynous and monogamous relationships, had an overall negative opinion of polygyny. According to them troubles between co-wives outweigh the potential advantages for women.

A 40 year-old female schoolteacher, with four sons, is still the only wife. However, her husband, a university professor, threatened to take another wife if she refused to bear him any more children. “I do not like my husband to get another wife, because the peace in the house will be disturbed, even if the second wife would not live in the same house. Wives would put a charm on the rival [co-wife] or the children of the rival. They will charm as a result of envy, they would think why would she have it and I do not have it, why do things with her go well and things with me not so well?”

Women’s opinions of polygyny in former days might have been different and more positive. Older community women involved in FGDs for the present study indicated that women realised that polygyny was beneficial to the health of their children, because in this way they could space their pregnancies (see also Caldwell et al. 1991:235-237; Oyewumi 1997:55).

A man usually aspires to marry as many women as his wealth allows; the number of wives is a fairly accurate index of wealth and prestige. Peel (1968:26-27) states that having more wives is a passive mark of status as well as an active means of making connections. It enlarges a man’s influence by having more alliances with other families. Boserup (1997:509) explains polygyny in economic terms. In rural areas, men aspired to have more wives mainly because of economic calculations: With the additional labour of new wives men could cultivate more land. This, of course, only applied in places where land was abundant. With more wives, a man could also have more children, which would enhance his status and bring future returns. Perhaps in rural areas this still holds, but in urban areas, the situation is different. Men continue to have more than one wife, for social status, for pleasure and for economic reasons, although for the same economic reasons that Boserup discussed. The economic advantage of wives is that, in the long run, they are cheaper than girlfriends and mistresses (given the fact that Yoruba men ‘need’ more than one sexual partner). As will be discussed later, wives are expected to financially contribute a large part of the family income, whereas mistresses have to be ‘kept’, i.e. drain the family income (see also Karanj 1994:201-202). Women are aware that their husband may marry another wife once he can afford it, as the following woman in an exploratory interview explained:
A man will not think about marrying another wife as long as he does not have money. When he has the finances he will want to take another wife. If his first wife complains about it, people will say that she is selfish, that she wants to sit on all the man's properties on her own.

**Divorce**

Divorce rates may be on the increase. Hoch-Smith (1978:250) claims (without giving figures) that divorce rates are high among the Yoruba. Bascom (1969:65) also does not give figures, but states that in 1969 the rate of divorce had increased partly because of increasing economic independence of wives from their husbands. Caldwell et al. (1991:225) support the increase in the rate of divorce, and state that divorce is mostly initiated by wives who leave their first husband for a wealthier husband who can pay the bridewealth back to the first husband. Figures from the present study cannot conclude about an increase, but only give figures on present rates of divorce. Only 2% of the 652 community women interviewed were divorced and not remarried at the time of the survey: 3% in Lagos and only 1% in Epe. However, many more women had been divorced from their first husband and were now in their second or third marriage: 8% of married women in Lagos had been married before and even 15% of married women in Epe had been.

A deterrent to divorce for both wife and husband is the bridewealth. If a woman wants to divorce her husband, she has to give back the bridewealth (Luchok 1993:70). A man who sends his wife away will have difficulties getting back the bridewealth that he paid. For a husband, it is economically more advantageous to hold on to the 'unwanted' wife who will still financially contribute to his children while *at the same time* try to marry another wife (see also Drews 2000:11). Another reason why women with children are not eager to divorce is that they will have to leave their children behind with the in-laws. In my circle of female friends and acquaintances, those who were not satisfied with their marriage stated this as the main reason for not leaving their husbands. However, when a woman does not have children from her husband she is more inclined to divorce him and try to have children with another husband (see Chapter 8).

**Extramarital affairs**

Yoruba husbands who marry 'only' one wife often have poly-coital relationships, which is generally known and more or less accepted although not liked – by their wives. I use the term 'poly-coity' for 'sexual relations with more than one partner simultaneously, when these relations have not (all) been ratified by
legal customs’ (Bleek 1976:97, citing Goody 1973). Extramarital affairs may be casual or steady. Karanjia (1994:194-197) talks about ‘private polygyny’, to indicate a situation in which a steady extramarital relationship is not ratified by formal marriage. In her study among Yoruba in Lagos and Ibadan, she found that Christian elite men were especially practising private polygyny. They openly marry one woman, but most, if not all, have ‘outside wives’ (see also Mann 1994:174-175). These men consider polygyny ‘backward’ and ‘bush’, whereas they perceive ‘private polygyny’ as being more ‘modern’. ‘Outside wives’ and the children they bear are financially maintained by the men. Children of outside wives are legitimate (not only traditionally, but also according to national law), provided the father acknowledges paternity (Mann 1994:181). Although they are generally known to be the ‘outside wife’ to ‘so and so’, they are publicly ignored as a wife. These wives have no formal legal status and do not reside with their ‘husbands’. The women mainly have this sort of affairs because of the financial benefits and security it brings them. Bearing children for a rich man may solidify an outside ‘marriage’ and usually brings material gains through the child (Mann 1994:184).

Wives do not like the extramarital affairs of their husbands, but say they have to accept them as a necessary evil. Women are usually advised just to stay calm and concentrate on their own business and children, as informants in exploratory interviews explained:

All women are expecting their husbands to have extramarital affairs. Not much you can do about it. You should not love your husband too much else it will pain you. There are more women than men in Nigeria, therefore men have more wives. [This is a common argument used by men in favour of polygyny.]

If your husband has an extramarital affair, your friends will advise you not to get upset or to make troubles with him. A Yoruba proverb directed to women who complain about their husbands says ‘Ile ati omo ni oko re’. ‘Your work and your children are your husband’. In other words, women should just concentrate on their work and children, because they are more important than their husbands. Just let your husband go and enjoy himself, he will come back home when he is back to his senses.

Women also have extramarital affairs, but probably less frequently than men do. The real prevalence will be very difficult to determine, because these affairs are always secret. A husband will never agree to the promiscuity of his wife, because he will lose respect in society. Yet, a 1989-1990 study in Ekiti by Orobuloye et al. (cited by Caldwell et al. 1991:244) claims to have discovered
that one-third of rural wives and two-fifths of urban wives had at least one additional sexual partner at the time of the study. Female informants in the present study explained that women may have affairs for various reasons including for money to support their children, excitement, pleasure and to increase and strengthen their social network:

Also married women have boyfriends. The reason why married women have extramarital affairs is mainly for money. The economic situation is tight and maybe the husband is greedy or financially down. A woman may then decide to have a boyfriend to help her, just temporarily. When my husband did not have a salary for six months, I could have gone to my former boyfriend for assistance, in exchange for sex, but I decided I would just manage with the little we had, because such relationships can also cause trouble. It may be dangerous if the man or woman or both fall in love. If the boyfriend falls in love he may try to do harm to the husband. The boyfriend may put magun [literally: don’t climb, a type of juju] on the husband. He charms the woman and stays away from her for a few days, because the charm causes the first person to have sex with the woman to die. The woman may then either marry the boyfriend, or she may also hate the man for killing her husband whom she loved more than her boyfriend.

Extramarital affairs are common. Women have these affairs for pleasure, excitement, to meet with more people and for money when the husband does not provide enough. It happens at all levels of society. It is easy to pick up a friend: Just when you walk on the street and someone offers you a ride, or you go to a beer parlour, or see someone when you visit a friend. The man will ask your friend to ask if you are interested. Women friends talk amongst themselves about their boyfriends and boast. You have to keep it a secret from your husband though, because he will throw you out of the house if he becomes aware.

**Gender relations within marriage**

The conjugal relationship among Yoruba is characterised by ambiguity, as is the case in many sub-Saharan African societies (see also Baerends 1994:14). Yoruba wives are, to a large extent, economically independent of their spouses and they move in different social networks. However, a married woman is dependent on the patrilineage of her husband for her social status. Therefore, she must, at least outwardly, behave according to the rules and show subservience and respect to her husband. The relationship is often one of mutual suspicion and divergent interests, as Pearce (1999:76) described, 'Patrilineal society fosters
distrust between a woman and her in-laws as well as placing a wedge between husband and wife in favour of his extended kin to whom he has obligations’.

**Power and rules for behaviour**

The ideal way that wives should behave is well illustrated by common Yoruba proverbs. In addition to expressing general traditional values, proverbs may also be a suitable method for indirectly communicating sensitive issues to others (Owomoyela 1979:8-9). The ‘receiving’ person will understand what the other means, although the critique has not been made explicit. In this way proverbs may prevent ‘shame’. Some proverbs highlight the rule of subordination of wives and the importance of behaving well towards their husbands and in-laws in order to be ‘kept’ as wives.

*Okọ lọlọ oro ori aya, iyawo ẹ̀rẹ̀*—The husband is the owner of the wife, so his wife should behave well/respect her husband

*Obinrin to ba mo iwa hu, a pe ni ile oko*—A woman who knows how to behave very well will stay long in her husband’s house

*Obẹ̀ ti baale ile kii je, iyawo ile kii se e*—What the husband does not eat, the wife should not cook

*Iyawo to ba teriba fun oko, a pe loode oko*—A woman who honours her husband will definitely stay long in the husband’s house [If you do not know how to behave, you will lose your husband.]

*Obinrin so iwa nu, o ni oun o lori oko*—A woman lost good behaviour and she is still complaining that she does not have luck with her husband.

The following proverb advises women to be resigned to their fate when their husbands want to take an additional wife, and at the same time warns second wives to behave well towards the first wife.

*Paṣan ti a fi na iyale, o wa ni oke aya fun iyawo*—The cane that was used to beat the first wife is on the roof for the new wife

One would quote the proverb above to console the first wife who is neglected by her husband and to warn the new wife who is rude or proud that in the future, the man will do the same to her as he did to the wife before her. The fact that there are far fewer proverbs directing the husbands how to behave than there are for the wives is indicative of the higher status of the husband. We identified only two directed at the man; these were both related to the obligation of the husband to financially support his wife.

*Okọ to pawo ni iyawo maa yin*—It is the husband who makes plenty of money, the wife will always praise
Ati gbe iyawo ko soro, owo gbe lo soro — To have a wife is not difficult, but it is difficult to give money for soup [maintaining the wife is the difficult part]

Gbadegesi (1991:76) rightly states that proverbs can be regarded as signposts in ethics. Van der Geest (1975:50) pointed out that proverbs are ‘the pre-eminent way of expressing and reinforcing traditional values’. However he also warned that proverbs should not be taken as representing what happens in reality, but rather as descriptions of the dominant rule (Van der Geest 1975:51). In his study of the matrilineal Kwahu society in Ghana, he suggested that the rule of female subordination, as described in proverbs similar to those mentioned above for Yoruba, shrouded the reality of female power. Women do not see the situation as described in proverbs as the ideal, but have their ways of manipulating the rules to pretend subordination (Van der Geest 1975:62). The following quote of a married woman during exploratory interviews illustrates one way of manipulating husbands, i.e. using the dominant norms to their advantage:

The husband is the head of the family and has the final say. There are different types of husbands. Some are very authoritarian and it is hard to change their mind once they said something. The way to influence these men is to treat them with utmost respect, succumb to them, talk nicely, show him you love him, prepare the things he likes to eat. Even the educated men want their wives to worship them. Then you ask for what you want to have or ask permission for what you want to do.

Among Yoruba, I found the public compliance of women to the dominant rule of female subordination quite strong, although many women are economically self-supporting, or rather have learnt not to depend entirely on their husbands, as will be discussed later. However successful a woman may be in society, in her relations with her husbands, she is subordinate. A Yoruba wife is closely watched by her in-laws to make sure she conforms to the ideal behaviour of a wife: loyal, obedient to her husband and his family, respectful of senior wives, raising her children in the traditions of the society and contributing money to their upbringing. She is held ultimately responsible for the upbringing of the children. If both parents work outside the home, the mother is responsible for arranging childcare (Di Domenico et al. 1987:122). If the children publicly misbehave, the blame will be on the mother, while the father receives praise for well-behaved children and children who succeed in life (see also Babatunde 1992:10). Oni et al. (1996:8) quoted the proverb, variations of which I often heard, ‘Ọmọ ti o ba dara ni ti baba rẹ, eyi ti ko ba dara ti ọga rẹ ni.’ ‘A good child belongs to the father, while the bad one is for the mother’.
However, the ideal of male power and authority is not so clear-cut in reality. Except for infertility, a wife's flaws may be attributed to the shortcomings of her husband. For example, if she is unfaithful, others may gossip that the husband does not satisfy her sexually, or that he does not provide her with enough money to cover her needs, so she must have sex with other men to supplement her income. Therefore, Babatunde explains (1992:180), the husband has to secure the co-operation of the wife; wives should not be considered as merely passive wombs for impregnation. Husbands depend on their wives' fidelity because illegitimate children may threaten the purity of the lineage. Couples have to strike a balance between what is acceptable in terms of extramarital affairs, supplying money for the family and demonstrations of respect. Several times I heard wives who were firmly established in their husbands' patrilineage say that they would 'punish' their husbands for having extramarital affairs by having boyfriends themselves.

The most important source of power that Yoruba husbands hold over their wives is their right to the children. As mentioned above, children are an important reason why women will try to conform to the rules of proper behaviour. After a divorce, children will normally stay with the patrilineage of the husband, even if they cannot stay in the husband's household. Divorced women may take the very young breast-feeding children, but the father will claim them when the children grow older. In matrilineal societies, such as the Kwahu of Ghana, husbands cannot have such power over women because they are the outsiders and cannot claim the children (Van der Geest 1975:58).

**Social life of spouses**

Within marriages, women and men lead largely separate social lives, in their different networks of family, friends and business relations (see also Drews 2000:12; Marshall 1976:181). Caldwell (1976:80) states that with the rural-urban migration and nuclear families living together as a unit, husbands and wives have become more dependent on each other. I think this is a matter of gradation. One can observe husbands and wives publicly going out together. However, my impression is that this is the exception rather than the rule. Even if they go to certain places together, such as weddings, funerals or church, they will often participate in the occasion in separate gender circles.

**Household economy**

Yoruba women are famous for their trading abilities. In economic respects, husbands and wives remain independent of one another to a large extent (see also Di Domenico et al. 1987:121; Luchok 1993:60; Oyewumi 1977:55; Sudarkasa 1973:119-120). Yoruba husbands are traditionally responsible for the housing,
food and health care of the family and should at least contribute to school fees, school uniforms and books for the children. They are also expected to provide their wives with initial capital to start their own business (see also Drews 2000:12; Luchok 1993:69; Sudarkasa 1973:117-118). The wife is expected to work and contribute to the family income.

Boserup (1997:510) observed that Yoruba are exceptional compared to other ethnic groups for the large part that women must contribute to the family income. I did not investigate husbands’ contributions, but I think Boserup’s findings are indicative: Very few women in her study (only 3% in her sample of 144) received everything they needed in terms of food, clothing and cash from their husband. Only 2% of the 144 women performed only domestic activities around their own homes. Virtually all women had sources of income other than their husbands. Nearly one-fifth did not receive anything from their husbands, but still had to perform domestic duties for them, including cooking and washing clothes. I agree with Matory (1994:94) who states that, ‘The quality of children’s clothing, nutrition and education tends to reflect disproportionately the size of their mother’s income, especially in a polygynous situation’. The income of the mother will surely go to the children and the household, while that of the husband can be used to his liking, including for marrying another wife or supporting mistresses. In her study in Awe, a Yoruba town, Sudarkasa (1973:128) found that men counted the taking of an (additional) wife as their major expense, more important than building and repairing houses and sending children to school.

Some scholars such as Hoch-Smith (1978:249) consider the relative economic independence of women as a source of power. I tend to disagree, and see it rather as a necessary adaptation to a situation where men do not provide exclusively for their nuclear family, and sometimes not for their nuclear family at all. Men have many obligations, also financial, to their extended family and perhaps other wives or girlfriends. Moreover, because women stay outsiders in the patrilineage of their husbands and children, if anything would happen to their husbands, women are at the mercy of their in-laws. Women therefore keep receipts from the purchases of durable items that they bought with their own money (my Yoruba female friends advised me to do so as well) in order to avoid having these items claimed by the in-laws, in case their husbands die.
Children

The main reason for marriage is to produce children. Very few women would prefer to have children out of wedlock, because this would bring them and their illegitimate children many practical and social problems. However, as the saying goes, ‘Better to have a child and not be married than to be married and not have children’ (Taiwo & Olunlade 1998:8). Among my Yoruba acquaintances, some young educated women opted to have children on their own, because, they explained, they could not find a suitable marriage partner. They were disillusioned after former relationships or anticipated problems in future ones (see also Karanja 1994:202). Women who decide to have a child out of wedlock may either have the father acknowledge and financially support the child, or may decide not to disclose who the father is, because a father may at any time claim the child, since it belongs to his patrilineage.

Having children in Yoruba culture is one of the preconditions of a successful life. Children bring happiness, status and economic security in old age; a life without children has no meaning as various Yoruba proverbs, such as the ones below, confirm.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{Olomo lo ni aye} – People who have children own the world
  \item \textit{Omo nii pari ola} – Children are the end of the wealth
  \item \textit{Eni to ba wa si aie ti ko bimo, o wa lasan ni} – Somebody who comes to this earth without issue has got nothing
\end{itemize}

However, the following proverb ‘warns’ that the ‘value’ of children only really counts when they survive their parents.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{Omo o layole, eni omo sin lo bimo} – Children are not dependable or reliable, those who are outlived by children are the ones regarded as mother or father of children [Only when you die before your children die, you are considered a mother, i.e. when you can be buried by your children]
\end{itemize}

Children are valuable to parents both during the parents’ life on earth and after they die. Babatunde (1992:50) explains the great importance of procreation in terms of afterlife. According to him, deceased humans can only become ancestors when they have descendants who perform ritual obligations. Only then will they be admitted to the circle of ancestors. The more descendants one has, the higher the chance of becoming a respected ancestor. Only a few informants talked about the value of children when they are still young. A 33 year-old female schoolteacher who has two daughters, 6 and 8 years old, and who would like to have another child (preferably a boy) said:
I just love children; they give me joy. I learn so much from my own and other children around me. They tell me what happened to them and their friends, what they learned in school and the church. Children will also take care of you when you are old and will look after you when you are sick. My husband also wants more children, but maybe not for the same reasons, the joy they bring. He does not spend much time with the children. When he comes home after work, he goes out again and then comes home only when they sleep.

Young persons appeared to have the same views as adults concerning the importance of having children. When students answered the ‘finish the sentence question’: ‘The main reason(s) for having children is/are ... ’, most of them thought predominantly of the use of children when they themselves would be old or dead. Only a few students reported the use and pleasure of the company of children when they are still young (Table 3.2).

Table 3.2. Students' opinions about the value of children (multiple response, N=146)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>perceived value of children</th>
<th>percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>after death</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carry on my name, replace me, represent me when I am dead, continue my life</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone to inherit my properties and to inherit the care of the family</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To have someone to bury me</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>support function during life</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care and comfort in old age</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To give them a good education (so they can support me)</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They are useful for help at home, to send them around</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They can take care of my properties when I am old</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>emotional function</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children will bring happiness, are good company, I will be lonely without children</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to be proud of</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>precondition for useful existence</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children are most important in Yoruba culture, they are the reason for living, the reason for coming into this world</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not to be abused and called barren</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: self-administered questionnaire filled by 146 students in Ilupeju Secondary School

Traditional Yoruba culture pleads for an abundance of the good things in life: children, wealth, health and long life (Hallgren 1988:14). Although the average completed fertility of Yoruba women has decreased over time, it is still as high as 6.3 (Hollos & Larsen 1992). The present study found similarly high figures.
Caldwell and Hollos & Larsen consider the rationale for a big family with many children for the parents and the patrilineage from an earthly perspective. More children give higher status and form the potential for more affiliate ties with other families, which would expand the social and economic network of the family (Caldwell 1976:45; Hollos & Larsen 1992). Networking is of utmost importance in a society where social relations are at least as important as qualifications when securing jobs and opportunities.

‘For men, having many children is an ego trip. And then they do not take care of them, just put them on the head and show off how many they have’, said a well-educated 38 year-old business woman, wife and mother of two, during an exploratory interview for the present study. Husbands, more than their wives, place a high premium on having many children. Numerous children enhance a man’s status and the prestige of his lineage, as well as give him a stronger vote in family affairs since children are supposed to support their father. For a woman, having a child means that she has a place in the lineage of her husband as the mother of children born to the lineage; more children increases her status within the lineage, as in life in general. However, nowadays, women especially want to limit the number of their offspring, mainly for economic reasons, since they bear the brunt of the financial care of the children. Women may be torn between their personal preference (to limit the number of their offspring) and that of their husbands (who want to have many children). Not following their husbands’ wish carries the threat of him bringing in another wife, as a woman in an exploratory interview expressed. She is a 40 year-old schoolteacher and has three boys a 12, 10 and 8 year-old.

I was married 13 years ago, in a traditional Muslim wedding. I am the first and still the only wife. I told my husband that I do not want more children. Lately my husband told me that he wants more, and that I could still have them for him. If I do not agree, he said he could easily marry another wife. You never know with these Lagos men, tomorrow they may come and say they are marrying another wife. I will not agree with another wife, though. I will stay in the house but not have sex with him anymore – and I have told him this.

The continuously high value that Yoruba place on having many children could also be explained in the historical, political and economic context of Nigeria. Since independence in 1960, tensions have flared up again and again between Yoruba, Ibo and Hausa, the three most numerous ethnic groups in Nigeria. In the scramble for scarce resources in the stagnant economy, ethnic rivalries become more frequent and harsh. Yoruba do not want to become a numerical minority in the future by limiting the number of their offspring to only two or three, when the Muslim Hausa and the Catholic Ibo are having big families.
After all of this discussion of the high value placed on children, it is obvious why infertility is seen as a big problem for men and even more so for women (see also Hallgren 1988; Koster-Oyekan 1999:21-23; Maclean 1982:167; Pearce 1995:198). The life of an infertile woman is considered useless and void of happiness; she is considered not to be worth her bridewealth. She may even be suspected of being a witch who is a threat to others and be treated as an outcast. Infertility is traditionally a legitimate reason for divorce for both men and women. I met several women who had been divorced because they were infertile. The threat of infertility and how it affects fertility regulation practices will be discussed in Chapter 8.

**Socialisation of children**

Etiquette, honesty, discipline and respect are all issues that are particularly emphasised in Yoruba children’s education and training (see also Eades 1980:152). The most important virtue in a child is obedience. Parents and other adults try to inculcate this upon their children from an early age. Children are not supposed to question any command or instruction from adults and will be punished if they fail to obey. Children are expected to respect their parents, and not bring shame on them with behaviour that contradicts important rules and norms of society. Relationships between parents and children are affectionate when they are young, but become more distant when they are adolescents. Fathers especially can be very authoritarian and oblige their children to show formal respect (see also Babatunde 1992:9).

The socialisation of Yoruba children is changing over time. Traditionally, children grew up in extended families with different generations of the patrilineage living together in one compound. This fostered solidarity among the members and children were raised with a sense of community (Gbadeges in 1991:63). Nowadays, especially in towns, many children reside with their nuclear families, possibly with aged grandparents, but not with aunts, uncles and cousins as before. Many parents are away working most of the day and have to leave their children with domestic workers and older siblings. This has far-reaching consequences for their socialisation. Before, they had family age mates (cousins), and guardians (aunts and uncles) at hand, nowadays children often have few family members around. Without family members to supervise them, children have more freedom to do what they like, for better or worse.
Social and ethical values

Prestige, respect, and shame

Yoruba society is sharply stratified. Traditionally, the main determinant of high status was age, because older people (of both sexes) were considered to be wiser and ritually the most powerful (Peel 1968:26). Other determinants of status used to be traditional office (chieftaincy), family name (by descent and through marriage), sex, educational level and number of children. Over thirty years ago, Peel (1968:41) already indicated that the major indicator for high status was increasingly becoming monetary wealth. As I mentioned before, Yoruba today are preoccupied with making money. Social status based on money can only be attributed to persons when they publicly show they are living up to it. Thus persons will not keep their wealth a secret if they want to derive high status from it, but show it off and may even try to make their wealth seem more than it actually is. They show their affluence in extravagant dress, paraphernalia (such as watches and other jewellery), cars and houses. Status regulates interpersonal behaviour; the hierarchy is strict and one should not openly question the authority of persons who rank higher in status.

‘Respect’ (owo) is a central value in Yoruba society and is closely related to status. Warren et al. (1996:11) explain that before showing and paying respect, one must determine one’s status relative to others, both within the family and the larger community. Showing respect to older persons and those of higher socio-economic status, in the way of addressing, salutation and in obeisance is compulsory. Living with Yoruba, I was struck by the importance that they attached to outward appearances and proper behaviour. From childhood, all Yoruba internalise how they should behave in public, showing respect by properly addressing and greeting others is one example thereof. A wife should show respect to her husband and his family, a younger sibling to the older siblings, children to their parents and especially their father, juniors at a workplace to their seniors, junior wives to senior wives married in the extended family and people to their chiefs and oba (kings).

Respect is, primarily, something that has to be shown; it need not necessarily be felt. Disrespecting someone in public to whom one owes respect is a grave offence. At the same time, showing someone disrespect is a way of establishing one’s higher status in relation to the other, relatively subordinate person. ‘Luckily’ almost all persons have someone who must show them respect and whom they can thus treat as a subordinate. This is fortunate in a way, because it takes away some of the strain of always being a subordinate, but it is unfortu-
nate for the persons lowest in rank, who must suffer a lot of humiliation. Daily life is full of this ‘power game’ revolving around respect (see Box 3.5).

It is difficult to determine what happens with power relations when nobody is watching. That which is not seen, including improper behaviour, officially did not happen (see also Bleek 1981:206). Women may have high status because they are wealthy or high in professional ranks, and wives hold ‘unseen’ power over their husbands. Though they may have some status, I agree with Drews (2000:12) that ‘whatever status a woman might have achieved in society, it will never allow her an equal or superior position with regard to her husband’. I would add to this sentence ‘at least publicly’.

**Box 3.5. Respect**

It seemed a tiring and frustrating power game to me: the demonstration of respect and disrespect. One cannot let someone of a higher rank wait in one’s office for long, but one can keep low status persons waiting for days. You do not have to greet a person lower than you. You do not even need to see him/her. A subordinate person would try to get the positive attention of a person higher in rank through excessive respectful greetings, so that maybe the eye of the superior person will fall on him or her and some favour may be granted.

In my Western view, the ‘wrong’ persons often had higher status. By this I mean they did not deserve the high status they were accorded; they did not achieve the status because of merits that I value, such as professional capabilities. I respect high status based on a person’s age, but age is not the ruling determinant of status anymore. In the first place, it is money, followed by name and then office, and in Nigeria money can buy name and office, and office and name can generate money.

Because of my husband’s name and my skin colour, I was quite high on the hierarchical ladder. I sometimes felt embarrassed by the rude way subordinates were treated. At the same time, I was advised to not be so polite and friendly to everybody, especially subordinates who would try to use my friendliness against me. I was also warned not to forget to show respect by properly addressing seniors in the family or in the office. That was sometimes difficult for me to feign especially when I could not feel respect for them. I am not good at pretending.

Shame is a feeling that all Yoruba detest. It implies losing prestige in one’s own eyes and in the eyes of others. Owomoyela (1979:6) points out that Yoruba are extremely concerned about *asiri*, which means ‘secrets will cause embarrassment if revealed’. Thus the feeling of shame is mainly aroused when the reprimanding, lecturing, disrespect, failure or misbehaviour is made public (see also Owomoyela 1979:8-11). Not many Yoruba would make the mistake of punishing someone in public, unless they feel very superior to the person. Instead, they would rather talk to or advise a person in private, or use proverbs in public. Shaming a person publicly may arouse anger and may even lead to revenge.
There are terrible stories about subordinates having killed their ‘masters’, including white people, because the ‘masters’ had humiliated them in public. (Likewise, health educators have to be careful in their approach and wording, so as not to let the persons they talk to feel ashamed to have done something ‘wrong’.)

Persons will try to avoid behaviour and situations that could cause shame such as doing something that contradicts the rules of proper behaviour, not living up to the expectations of others, being associated with someone immoral or failing in an effort. However, sometimes their potentially shameful behaviour is enjoyable or the only way out of a problem, as may be the case with premarital sex, women’s extramarital affairs and abortion. In these and other cases, a person will try to hide her or his behaviour in order to prevent shame.

Gossip and hearsay

While no Yoruba likes to be the subject of gossip, most Yoruba seem to enjoy gossiping. Individualism and dissident behaviour easily lead to gossip. People watch one another’s actions closely and carefully listen to each other’s words. Any abnormality in behaviour or manner of talking will be the object of gossip. There are many opportunities for gossip in daily life. There is enforced idleness because people often have to wait: for customers to come to your stall at the market, in offices for the person you need to see, for a job, for transport, for the teacher to come to class, for the food to be ready. The object of gossip may be about what a person has actually done, but more often it is hearsay about what the person has supposedly done. To be gossiped about is a source of shame. Therefore, persons like to appear to conform to the norms and if they do something against the rules or public values, they will try to do so secretly. Joining in gossip about a person’s behaviour, even if one has secretly done the same shameful thing, is a way to publicly distance oneself from the condemned behaviour.

Hearsay not only concerns persons, it can also concern attributes of certain items, including the effectiveness and side-effects of methods for abortion and contraception, and about the causes of diseases. Yoruba get a lot of information from hearsay as opposed to written sources and audiovisual media, and they seem to really trust hearsay. I came across many stories that can only have been started by hearsay. Stories circulate that white men who took dogs to the beach and forced them to have sex with girls caused the spread of AIDS in Nigeria. Women know from hearsay that drinking a bottle of bitter lemon soft drink after intercourse can prevent pregnancy, and that babies are born with the contraceptive pill in the palm of their hand, which proves that the pill is not effective in preventing pregnancy.
**Ambiguity and envy**

Fortune and luck are ambiguous issues to beget. Of course everybody would like to be fortunate and lucky. However, Yoruba are often jealous of others’ luck and everybody is aware that any demonstration of fortune that befalls them may evoke another person’s envy. A rather poor woman in an exploratory interview told me:

> People do not like others to have more than they have. They ask themselves why they do not have what the other person has. They hate a person when he or she acts big, shows expensive clothes and jewellery.

Yoruba have to deal with many ambiguities related to status, respect and envy. On one hand, Yoruba like to show off and establish their higher status, with clothes, money, cars, jewellery and displays of disrespect to subordinates. On the other hand, they like to hide their fortune in order not to make others envious and provoke actions against them, such as the use of *jẹjẹ*. People are normally jealous of their more fortunate community members, be it relatives, age mates, classmates or co-wives, and will try to outsmart them. At the same time they will try to get close to them and get favours from them by ostentatiously showing them respect.

I was puzzled by people’s ambivalence about seeking the company of others and trusting others, including close relatives. Gbadegesin (1991:58) wrote that Yoruba are expected to have a well-developed sense of community and to contribute to the continued existence of the community. I had problems recognising this ‘community sense’. Yes, Yoruba like to identify with a group. Warren et al. (1996:10) observed, like I did, that most adult Yoruba belong to a wide variety of associations including occupational, age groups, religious and community groups. Younger Yoruba mainly belong to religious groups. People do not like to move as individuals. They like the company of others, and moving in a group is also safer in places with general security problems. A final reason why persons do not like to be seen doing things on their own is because this may make them the object of suspicion and gossip (see also Peace 1999:75).

However, at the same time, Yoruba seem to be suspicious of the community they want to be a part of. Gbadegesin (1991:66) theorises that the increasing distrust between individuals may be inevitable when resources become scarcer, whereas originally there was communal ownership of abundant land, which allowed individuals to obtain portions for individual use as required (see also Fadipe 1970:170). In non-agricultural environments, resources are also increasingly scarce. I heard and saw instances of siblings, parents and children trying to outsmart one another in getting hold of all resources, instead of trying to obtain
resources in a communal effort and sharing them. The person getting a bigger share of the resources is envied.

Envy is often not merely passive. Persons may try to harm others they are jealous of, by asking a babalawo to make a charm that will bring misfortune. Misfortune can come in any form: routine miscarriage, failing exams, losing money in a business deal, bad health, sickness of children or not being liked by others. I found it striking that I never heard stories of a Yoruba person being jealous of someone of the other sex; jealousy only of those of the same sex is common throughout African societies (Middleton & Winter 1993:9).

Sexuality

Box 3.6. Sensuality

I was amazed at the sensuality men and women exposed towards the other sex in their dressing, behaviour and allusions. I remember that in the beginning I often felt embarrassed when my rappu (wrapper of cloth, tied around the waist) would slide down. I would try to fix it unnoticed. Then I saw that some Yoruba women at parties would ostentatiously tie their rappu many times, even without obvious necessity, showing their underskirts. Women explained to me that this was to attract attention of men and that it was a sensual message. The seemingly casual but often well-considered throwing up the shoulders of the sleeves of the big agbada that men wear could be regarded as a similar sign. However, I never saw adults, including husbands and wives, being affectionate towards one another in public.

Yoruba society is permeated with sensuality between the sexes. From a very young age, boys and girls are made aware of gender differences. They are raised to recognise and respect roles and behaviour appropriate to their sex. Small boys and girls are teased if they have friends of the other sex. If small boys behave like ‘real’ men and small girls like ‘real’ women towards the other sex, it is publicly sanctioned by adults and laughed about approvingly.

Pre-adolescent youths are teased about their gender roles, and adults often playfully challenge the other sex. Yet, adolescents, especially while in secondary school, should not exhibit sensual behaviour, and sexuality is a taboo subject, not to be discussed with adults and especially not with parents. Secondary school youths should dress as asexually as possible in school. For girls, the skirts of school uniforms must be long, hair must be cut as short as boys’ hair and be simply styled. Extensions and weaving, except for the simplest plaiting, are not allowed. They cannot wear make-up or other adornments except for simple earrings and a watch. Boys’ school uniforms often include short trou-
sers, which imply childishness; hardly any adolescent boy would prefer to wear short trousers.

**Information and communication**

Youths are hardly educated on sexuality by their parents or by schoolteachers. They do not get enough information on their changing sexuality, neither about the physical changes in their body nor the emotional changes that adolescence brings. Adults generally believe that teaching adolescents about sex (which they equate with sexuality) and contraception would entice these youths to try it out immediately. There are no specific initiation ceremonies or rites for Yoruba girls. The absence of such ceremonies is an exception (Bascom 1969:56), for they are important in many African societies, such as the Lozi in Zambia with whom I worked. Traditionally in Yoruba society, aunts are the confidants of their nieces and younger cousins. They educate the girls on sexuality, including sex, only when they are about to get married. By then, youths have often already got themselves into trouble (unwanted pregnancy), as the present study reveals. Moreover, aunts and cousins are often not around in town settings, and thus adolescents in need of information on sexuality rely mostly on information from peers and popular magazines, which may not be the most reliable sources.

The sexuality education project in Ilupeju Secondary School, which was begun for the present study, revealed much about the students' lack of sex-related knowledge. I was surprised about how little students knew about sexuality issues, and how eager they were to learn more about them. In response to a self-administered questionnaire, three-fifths of the 174 student felt they had not received sufficient information on sexuality. Relatively more girls (70%) than boys (54%) felt they did not know enough. They had many questions related to their sexuality that concerned not only their changing bodies, but also about their feelings and emotions. The following questions capture the youths' uncertainty: 'How can we discipline our emotions so that we do not make a nuisance of ourselves?', 'Is it a disease or infection when the sexual organs of an 18-year-old boy are small when they are supposed to be big?', 'Is it good for a girl under 17 to have intercourse with a boy?' and 'What pain does a young woman get during childbearing as a result of not getting disvirgined [deflowered] in time?'.

Girls reported that their most important sources of information on sexuality were their mothers, aunts and magazines, while boys said they relied mostly on television, magazines and their mother. It was striking that the father did not feature as a source of information. When asked why the fathers were not a source of information, the youths explained that their fathers had very little time for them and that they were very strict. For these reasons, they felt too shy
to ask their fathers questions. Youths in search of information hardly got what they needed; mothers usually just told their children to stay away from the opposite sex because it would bring them in contact with diseases and with unwanted pregnancy (of themselves or their girlfriends) which would mean the end of their education. Some said their mothers specified that a girl can get pregnant especially when she has sex close to her period (a general misunderstanding of confusing safe and fertile period) and very few said their mother advised them to use condoms. Aunts were said to give the same messages as mothers. Youths received more in-depth information on diseases and how to prevent them by using condoms from radio and television, while in magazines they read more about emotions related to having sexual relations with the opposite sex.

Since information offered by adults is not enough for youths with so many questions, we also asked them if they ever asked their mother and father questions related to sexuality. Table 3.3 shows that very little two-way communication ('ask and received') on sexuality issues takes place between parents and their children.

Table 3.3. Communication on sexuality with their parents reported by secondary school students, by sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication</th>
<th>Boys (N=85)</th>
<th>Girls (N=83)</th>
<th>All (N=170*)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>with mother</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask and received</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask only</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received only</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No communication</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with father</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask and received</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask only</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received only</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No communication</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total**</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: self-administered questionnaire filled by 170 students in Ilupeju Secondary School

* Two students did not indicate their sex
** Figures do not add up to 100% due to rounding

Although close to 30% of the girls had two-way communication with their mother, more than one quarter of the girls did not have any communication with their mother on sexual issues whatsoever. For boys, 12% had two-way communication and 66% had no communication with their mother. More than three-quarters of both boys and girls had never asked or received any
information from the father. Questions put to their mother mostly related to the development of pregnancy, how menstruation works and how they can prevent pregnancy. About one-fifth (21%) of the girls and half of the boys (46%) said they never asked anything about sexuality from adults, or got any information from them. They said they discussed these issues with their peers instead. Considering the lack of information and the unreliability of what they hear, it is not surprising that so many youths get into trouble with an unwanted pregnancy.

**Premarital sexual relationship**

It is still ideal for Yoruba girls to remain a virgin until marriage, but nowadays the reality is different from the ideal. Statistics from several studies show that many youths are sexually active, although the societal norm still condemns it. Figures from the different studies can hardly be compared because of the differences in age range, in residence and in sex composition of the samples; the percentage of sexually active youths ranged from 15% to 90%.

The school youths in the education project in the present study were between 14 and 22 years old. Boys in particular, but also some of the girls had started having sexual relationships (see Table 3.4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>boys (N=74)</th>
<th>girls (N=67)</th>
<th>all (N=141)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ever had a serious friend</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never had a serious friend</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ever had sexual intercourse</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never had sexual intercourse</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: self-administered questionnaire filled by 141 students in Ilupeju Secondary School

Table 3.4 indicates that youths may have serious friends of the opposite sex without necessarily having sexual intercourse. They explained that serious friends are friends they discuss a possible future together with. Stories that students wrote (discussed in Chapter 7) will show, however, that it is difficult to keep these relationships at the level of only platonic love.

Unmarried sexual partners, especially young ones, will normally keep their relationship secret to adhere to the societal norm. If nobody knows about it, it did not happen. Thus, it cannot be a subject of gossip and reason for feeling
ashamed. However, as indicated before, rules about premarital abstinence are publicly eroding mainly among poorer parts of society: A single woman may agree to have a sexual relationship with a man who promised to marry her after she got pregnant or got a child. In this way she proves her fertility and her worth as a wife (see also Makinwa-Adebusoye 1991:45; Pearce 1999:76).

Nowadays, in town, some educated single young men and women (but not secondary school youth) may have sexual relationships, casual and more regular, which are not necessarily secret. Men enjoy the attention of young women and young women enjoy the financial support, since men are supposed to prove their affection by giving their mistresses and girlfriends money and presents. However, this type of relationship is not a permanent state for most women and men. They will eventually get married, possibly with a completely different partner, and have legitimate children (Taiwo & Olunlade 1998:6).

**Health-care providers**

Yoruba use different types of health-care providers, all of whom are present throughout Yoruba land: Yoruba traditional medicine providers (in this study also called 'ethnomedical providers'), healers trained in the biomedical tradition, spiritual healers in *Aladura* and other spiritual churches and Muslim traditional healers. Generally, Yoruba use providers of all types, which illustrates both the pragmatism and syncretism of the Yoruba world-sense. The provider they use for a certain health problem depends on many factors, including the type of health problem, the perceived cause, finances available, privacy, availability and perceived effectiveness of different treatments. Maclean's (1982:177) statement about Yoruba women's utilisation of different health care providers for maternal and child health holds for most Yoruba, 'Yoruba mothers are empiricists, prepared to accept methods that are patently successful'. Thus the methods do not need to be scientifically proven to be considered successful, but rather persons must believe they are successful through hearsay, know others who have supposedly used the methods successfully or they believe the advertisements of providers.

The perceived nature of a health problem will, of course, influence the choice of provider. Yoruba will always try to explain and look for the causes of any particular occurrence, including illness. In the case of illness, they first look for possible natural causes, including germs, and psychosocial disturbances. After all the natural possibilities are exhausted, they look for supernatural causes, including malicious spiritual beings, witches, or angry ancestors or deities (Gbadegesin 1991:115-128). Since Yoruba accept that most diseases have a purely
natural cause, many of the remedies to treat these diseases are also natural and not supernatural. However, because supernatural agencies including witches, orisa and evil spirits may interfere with the efficacy of natural medicines, a non-natural element may be added to the cure. Diseases caused by evil spirits call for action to conquer them, while disease sent by God and orisa can only be cured by the moral repentance of the sufferer, i.e. by praying for forgiveness for committing a sin (Peel 1968:128-129).

Many of the ethnomedical beliefs and practices remain strong, but Yoruba also assimilate new ideas from biomedicine and integrate the two (see also Pearce 1999:73). In the following paragraphs I examine the biomedical and ethnomedical providers because these are the categories that women use most, in particular for reproductive health care. In different chapters of this book the health-care providers for the specific fertility regulation practice will get attention, i.e. those providing abortion services, contraceptives and infertility treatment.

**Biomedical services**

The public health-care system includes federal and state-owned hospitals and health-centres and LGA health-centres and clinics. (Hospitals are larger in structure and more comprehensive in terms of available services than health-centres, and health-centres are larger and more comprehensive than clinics.) Although services are no longer free, clients pay only a small fee, because the government subsidises the services. As with many public services, the public health-care system has problems with frequent drug shortages, run-down physical structures, outdated and broken equipment and shortage of skilled staff (see also Ogunbekun et al. 1999:175).

An ever-increasing part of biomedical health-care is provided by the private sector, where there is a system of fee-for-services. In this private sector, there is no clear distinction between physician's practice, clinics and hospitals (see also Henshaw et al. 1998:157). Thus, these private institutions range from proper hospitals with resident specialists to small clinics with possibly a visiting general practitioner. The quality of these private institutions varies enormously and cannot be controlled by the government since, as Ogunbekun et al. (1999:174) stated, a sizeable number are believed to be operating without an appropriate licence by State Ministries of Health. Another problem with private health-care that Ogunbekun et al. (1999:177) cited was that since the private hospital market is competitive, providers might resort to charging very low fees, which cannot cover good quality care.
Many public and private hospitals, health-centres and clinics are not fully equipped and do not have qualified staff, or qualified staff is only available part-time. Moreover, it is very difficult to maintain hygienic conditions in a hospital when there are frequent (daily) power cuts, lack of water and shortages of diesel (for electric generators). Only a very few private hospitals in Lagos can afford to have a constant power supply (with electricity provision backed up by their own generators) and water (by buying from commercial water sellers).

**Ethnomedical services**

There are a variety of Yoruba ethnomedical service providers, each with their own specialities. Some know how to control non-human forces that cause illness, while others treat natural causes and others can do both. I do not believe that the expansion of biomedical services will phase out the traditional health-care providers because these have specialities that Yoruba highly value. Yoruba believe that some health problems, which biomedical doctors may not even acknowledge, can be prevented or solved exclusively by traditional healers. Examples are prevention of miscarriage and treatment of infertility that result from certain ethnomedical conditions, as will be explained in Chapter 8.

Maclean (1982:163) distinguishes two main groups of Yoruba traditional healers, the onisegun (herbalists) and the babalawo (diviners). However, when she explains their practices, it becomes clear these are really two extremes of a continuum. Both may use the other’s methods, with the ‘pure’ babalawo using divination only and the ‘pure’ onisegun only herbs. When I asked informants (community members and health providers) to name the different traditional health providers they came up with a long list. The two important groups for the present study were the olomo wewe (traditional birth attendants) and the babalawo (Ifa priests).

**Olomo wewe**

Olomo wewe are the Yoruba traditional reproductive health specialists offering maternal health and fertility regulation services. Their name literally means ‘owners of small children’ and they are also known as agbebi (owner of babies) or alagbo ọmọ (owner of herbal medicine for children). In English, they call themselves traditional birth attendants (TBAs). I think ‘traditional midwives’ would be a more appropriate name for them, because they provide many of the same services as a midwife trained in biomedicine. However, the problem with the term midwife is that most Yoruba TBAs are male; about three-quarters of the 42 TBAs involved in the present study were men. Their explanation is that men generally have more spiritual power to deal with the many evil supernatural
forces that tend to tamper with fertility, pregnancy and delivery. TBAs inherit the spiritual powers necessary to practise their profession from their fathers. A Yoruba matron in a public hospital offered another rather plausible explanation why most Yoruba TBAs are men, in light of the patrilineal system:

It is a way to keep the knowledge within the family. If they [male TBAs] would tell their sisters or daughters, it would go to other families when they marry. If men say that menstruation spoils the medicines it is their way to push women from the job.

A female TBA explained that women might be hesitant to take up the TBA profession on their own, without being backed by their husband or father. Since most TBAs are believed to possess mystical powers, people may consider female TBAs to be witches. This is something no woman would want to be accused of.

Some TBAs apply only natural medicines while others use both natural and spiritual remedies. Strangely enough, Luchok (1998:77) and Maclean (1982:169) state that most Yoruba towns have no special class of traditional midwives. I wonder if this is really true for the areas where they did their research; in Lagos State there definitely is a very distinct class of TBAs, complete with their own associations, separate from the associations of traditional healers (see Box 3.7).

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Box 3.7. *Olomo wewe*

One of the most important and most satisfying activities in the project was working with the *olomo wewe*, the Yoruba traditional birth attendants. I was introduced to one of them, Baba Rashidi, who had his clinic in the heart of Lagos Island. During many days I sat in the compound where his clinic is located, simply observing what was happening and talking to him, his helpers, his clients and the neighbours. Some Sundays I would go to his special ANC clinic, when he asks all pregnant women who are registered in his clinic to come. He examines the women and they get tetanus vaccinations from two LGA nurses who are present on these special days. The first time I went there, I was surprised to find over 200 women. They sat on benches and chairs rented for the occasion. Baba Rashidi introduced me to some other *olomo wewe* and I found out that there is an association of traditional birth attendants of Lagos Island. They invited me to come to their meeting and made me feel welcome. Most of them were interested in participating in the project. What struck me most when visiting many *olomo wewe* in their clinics was the relaxed but also mutually respectful interaction between clients and *olomo wewe*. 
Top: Clinic of Baba Rashidi (standing), TBA on Lagos Island
Bottom: Herbalist (elewe omp) on Lagos Island
Most (three-quarters) of the 42 TBAs I worked with, said they were born into the profession and have learned it from a family member, usually their father. The others had been apprenticed with an established TBA for between three to six years before they were ‘free’ to open their independent clinics. Yoruba (and non-Yoruba) residents both in towns and rural areas continue to use their services. I found that about three-fifths of women in the community survey had used them for ANC services, more than one third of women had delivered with them and more than half of the women with infertility problems had consulted them for treatment. Their utilisation for abortion and contraceptive services is lower, and will be discussed in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. My experiences with Yoruba TBAs were very positive. TBAs seem to be sensitive to the conditions of their fellow Yoruba, good counsellors and skilled mediators between parents and children, husbands, wives and other family members. Women and men said they liked their respectful attitude, empathy, familiarity and the time they take to listen to clients’ complaints.

**Babalawo**

*Babalawo* (literally: father of mysteries) are priests, usually male, who consult the Ifa oracle by divinatory casting. The cast will direct the *babalawo* to certain verses of the Odu, the verses of Ifa. The Ifa oracle is the way to approach all deities. The *babalawo* applies the outcome of the casting to the client’s problems (including the cause of the disease) and directs the person what to do (including which treatment to take). Clients do not only consult the *babalawo* in case of illness, but also if bad luck or other problem has befallen a person or family, or when they would like to know which decision to make. The *babalawo* has undergone a lengthy training from a master. He also has knowledge of medicines, *ogun*. *Ogun* range from herbal preparations for natural illnesses to charms, *juju*, for preventing ill luck or frustrating one’s enemy (see also Maclean 1982:165; Peel 1968:33). Many persons (and especially biomedical providers and orthodox Christians) call all Yoruba traditional healers *babalawo*. The term *babalawo* often carries negative connotations of being a fetish worshipper and providing dangerous treatments.

**Relationship between ethnomedical and biomedical health-care providers**

The relationship between biomedical and ethnomedical providers in Yoruba land can be characterised as antagonistic (see also Ventevogel 1996:43). The different health-care providers are generally uncooperative, distant and full of mutual distrust of each other. TBAs in the present study accused biomedical staff of negligence, a careless attitude towards their patients and delay in
treatment. Biomedical health staff described the practices of TBAs as ineffective, unhygienic and dangerous, and the TBAs themselves as being fetishists. However, at the same time, about one-third of the participants in the seminars with biomedical health staff both in Lagos and Epe ‘admitted’ that they or their family consulted traditional healers for certain health problems that biomedicine cannot treat. Likewise, traditional healers consult biomedical providers. Hospital staff often blamed the traditional healers for the abortion complications of women who came to the hospital. However, as indicated before, the findings of the present study show that traditional healers performed very few of the abortions, although relatively, many of the abortions performed by TBAs and other traditional healers resulted in complications. A female TBA in Lagos explained how health staff could get the impression that traditional healers perform many abortions:

When doctors are complaining about traditional healers who do bad abortions, often it was the women themselves who bought something. Women can just get medicines for abortion, like seeds and herbs from herb sellers in the market. When they get complications and go to the hospital they would say that some baba [old man, title of respect] gave them to her. Hospital staff members then assume that this baba was a traditional healer.

The Nigerian government as well as international organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have conducted training for TBAs to bridge the gap between ethnomedical and biomedical services. Most of the TBAs in the present study had been involved in some training. However, from the stories of TBAs, I get the impression that the training was mostly intended to utilise TBAs in the biomedical health-care system at the lowest level, and not to explore their experience (see also Ventevogel 1996:45-50). Understanding central values in Yoruba culture, i.e. the importance of showing respect and avoiding anything that could cause shame, made me understand that many training programs had not succeeded precisely because the trainers did not pay due attention to these central values. During the seminars held for this study, we approached TBAs as professionals and always firstly explored their views, knowledge and practices before gradually introducing any new (biomedical) ideas. The TBAs proved to be eager and quick learners of new ideas and knowledge, when they saw the advantage of them.
Conclusion

Like all Yoruba, Yoruba women are ambitious and entrepreneurial. Single women strive to be educated and improve their chances for a well-paid job or for making money through business. Married women are largely economically independent of their husbands and move in their own separate social networks.

This chapter has shown that the patrilineal kinship system in which bride-wealth is paid, in which children belong to the father’s patrilineage and which allows polygyny, conditions and constrains women’s agency. There are many rules in Yoruba society, of which there are more for women than for men. Since women remain the outsiders in their husband’s lineage and their loyalty cannot be guaranteed, these rules and the punishment for violating them, serve to ensure proper behaviour, of women more than of men.

A girl is socialised and conditioned to become a wife and a mother; it is in everybody’s interest, especially her own and her parents’, that she would be worth having as a wife. Her worth as a wife is jeopardised if she is known to have behaved badly, by breaking prevailing rules. Married women are also inclined to follow the dominant rules, because they are dependent on their husband and in-laws for their own and their children’s social position. Being found out to have broken dominant rules will lower one’s prestige and be a cause for shame, a feeling that Yoruba detest and try to prevent in any way possible. We will see that some of the decisions women make regarding abortion are inspired precisely by this avoidance of shame.