

Redefining Power: The Role of Women in Governance and Cultural Influence in Ondo, Nigeria – A Comparative Analysis of Traditional and Contemporary Perspectives

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Abstract

This paper explores the cultural construction of power among women in Ondo, a prominent Yoruba kingdom in Southwestern Nigeria, highlighting the dynamics between traditional and modern influences. Despite the pervasive patriarchal structures that often limit women's rights and opportunities, Ondo's cultural heritage reveals an interplay of power where women, particularly through figures like the *Lobun* and historical rulers such as Oba Pupupu, have played significant roles in governance and community leadership. The study employs a qualitative research design, utilising in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to gather rich, contextual data from women across various age groups and socio-economic backgrounds in Ondo. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of experiences. Additionally, archival research was conducted to explore historical documents and records that shed light on women's roles in governance throughout Ondo's history. This study critically examines how traditional norms shape women's perceptions and expressions of power, while also addressing the impact of modernity on these constructs. By investigating the strategies women employ to negotiate and assert power within their cultural context, this research aims to deepen the understanding of women's agency and illuminate the intersections between traditional and contemporary dynamics. Ultimately, this work contributes to the broader discourse on women's empowerment, offering insights that can inform policies and interventions aimed at fostering equality and enhancing the status of women in Nigeria and beyond.

Keywords: Women, Power, *Lobun*, Roles, Cultural influence, Ondo

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Introduction

The status of women across different cultures and societies has been a subject of interest for researchers and scholars. While there are differences in the experiences of women worldwide, research has revealed commonalities in their subordination. Women have faced subordination in many societies, with men holding positions of power and authority. This phenomenon is not limited to specific cultures or regions but is a widespread issue that transcends geographical boundaries. The subordination of women is often rooted in the patriarchal nature of societies, where men are seen as the dominant sex. This is evident in various cultures, including ancient India, where the Law of Manu states that a woman's protection is entrusted to her father, husband, and sons at different stages of her life. Similarly, in medieval English society, women were held in subordinate positions, with limited rights and opportunities. The situation was not different in other parts of the world, such as Chile, where patriarchal societies often positioned men as the head of the household, with women having limited rights and autonomy. The fight for women's rights has been a lengthy and challenging journey, with milestones like the 19th Amendment in the US marking significant progress. Similar struggles have played out in various cultures, including in Nigeria, where women's roles have evolved. Similarly, in Britain, women did not have equal voting rights with men until 1930. Even today, women continue to face challenges and barriers in various aspects of life, including politics, the economy, and social spheres.

In Nigeria, the situation of women is not different. The country is largely patriarchal, with men holding positions of power and authority. Women are often seen as subordinate to men, with limited rights and opportunities. The preference for male children is a common phenomenon, with women who bear male children being accorded more respect and dignity. This is evident in the way women are perceived and treated in different cultures, including the Igbo and Yoruba cultures. The works of scholars such as Olabisi Aina and Achebe's literature serve as a powerful reflection of Nigerian society, bringing attention to the often-overlooked struggles of women.

Ondo, as described by Olupona (1980), is a vibrant Yoruba kingdom in south-western Nigeria, boasting a fascinating cultural heritage and a rich tapestry of history. At the heart of Ondo's traditional society is its unique monarchical system, where power is shared among the king, chiefs, and, notably, women. Women hold a vital position within this power structure, especially through the *Lobun*, a traditional female monarch whose influence extends well beyond the palace walls. The *Lobun*'s role highlights the contributions and leadership of women in Ondo, shaping both the community and its traditions. However, the advent of colonialism and Christianity disrupted this balance, eroding women's traditional powers and roles. The legend of Oba Pupunu, the only female ruler of Ondo, is one that brings to life the vital role women have played in the community's history and traditions. Even though her reign was marked by some controversy, her legacy shines a light on how important women are in shaping Ondo's cultural and social landscape.

Much has been written about sub-Saharan African women power holders, queens, queen-mothers, chiefs, titled women, and others. There has been some contention in the past few decades among left-wing and right-wing, colonial and post-colonial scholars over the social and political position and roles of sub-Saharan African women. Post-colonial writers postulate that the colonial experience stripped African women of their pre-colonial political status. They highlight this by exploring the role of female chieftaincy institutions in sub-Saharan Africa, as well as various forms of political involvement by women both during the pre-colonial era and afterwards. For some, the presence of female chiefs in the pre-colonial period was evidence of sub-Saharan African women's enhanced social and political status (Odotei, 2011).

This study explores the role of women in governance and cultural influence in Ondo, examining the interplay between traditional and modern dynamics. It investigates how traditional norms shape women's perceptions of power, how modernity influences their understanding and exercise of power, and the intersections and tensions between these dynamics. The research also identifies strategies women use to negotiate and assert power within cultural contexts, aiming to deepen understanding of the complex nature of women's power and agency, and how cultural constructions shape and are shaped by their experiences. This study will contribute to the body of knowledge by advancing our understanding of women's power and agency through an exploration of the cultural construction of power. It will shed light on the intersections and tensions between traditional and modern dynamics, informing policies and interventions aimed at promoting women's empowerment.

Literature review

African women's cultural construction of power

The role of women in African culture is a rich and complex story that spans generations. Historically, women have played an essential part across diverse cultures; they contribute greatly to various aspects of life. They have been the backbone of their communities, acting not only as caretakers and farmers but also as entrepreneurs (Alexander, 2003). Women's involvement has been vital in preserving cultural heritage and fostering community development. Ngoma (2023) emphasised that traditional African women have taken a central role within their communities, managing households, raising children, and contributing to agriculture. Many women engaged in trade, selling goods in local markets and ensuring the economic resilience of their communities. In traditional African societies, gender was not a barrier to participation; everyone had an important role to play within their families and the wider community. Men and women worked together, each bringing their unique perspectives and skills to the table. Women's roles were seen as complementary to those of men, with both contributing equally to the community's survival and growth. This collaborative spirit meant that gender inequality was not a characteristic of pre-colonial African societies but rather a disruption caused by colonialism (Agbaje, 2020). However, the arrival of colonialism dramatically reshaped these roles. In Nigeria, traditional gender roles have often positioned men as leaders and women as

submissive. However, Nigerian women have consistently defied expectations, making significant strides in various fields, including politics. Many have taken on leadership roles, breaking barriers and challenging societal norms (Ogunmusire, 2021). Today, we see women making significant advances in many fields, including politics, business, and education. An increasing number of women are standing for political office, leading organisations as CEOs, and pursuing advanced degrees to establish themselves as leaders. The leadership roles women have played in shaping African societies are truly remarkable. Their contributions to social, economic, political, and educational development are invaluable.

The concept of power has long fascinated scholars from various fields, such as sociology, anthropology, and gender studies. Power fundamentally refers to the ability to influence and shape the world around us. Unfortunately, this power is often distributed unevenly, with women historically marginalised from positions of authority. In many cultural and religious settings, women are expected to work behind the scenes, which raises questions about equity and the roles women are allowed to play in society. Yet, this narrative often overlooks the agency and influence women wield in diverse contexts. In the vibrant societies of pre-colonial Africa, women played a pivotal role in their communities, usually working behind the scenes as the backbone of families and local economies. They managed farms, ensured food security, and participated in trade, acting as merchants and economic players who cultivated connections and influenced local markets. When colonialism swept across the continent, the lives of African women changed dramatically. However, they displayed remarkable resilience and adaptability; while some were forced to step back from traditional public roles, many found innovative ways to support their communities from behind the scenes. They became crucial figures in resistance movements, organising and mobilising their people, while preserving cultural practices and ancestral knowledge. Through their unwavering dedication to caregiving and tradition, women sustained the very fabric of their communities, ensuring that their cultural heritage endured against the tides of colonial disruption.

Feminist Critical Theory

Feminism has been a powerful force for change, advocating for women's rights and benefits since its emergence in the late 19th century. At its core, feminism is about equal opportunities and treatment for women, who have historically been marginalised and excluded from positions of power. In Nigeria, women's participation in politics has been limited by various obstacles, including the economy and society, with limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Feminist scholars like Nussbaum (1995) argue that women's rights are human rights and that women should have equal opportunities to men in all spheres of life. The feminist movement has evolved from social clubs demanding political rights to a global movement pushing for gender equality. Despite progress, women still face significant challenges, including pay inequality, limited access to education and healthcare, and societal expectations that restrict their potential. In Nigeria, cultural and traditional norms perpetuate gender inequality,

with women expected to prioritise domestic roles over leadership and decision-making positions. Feminists in Nigeria face resistance and criticism, with some viewing feminism as a foreign concept that challenges traditional values. However, the reality is that women in Nigeria face unique challenges that require a subtlety and responsive approach to feminism.

African feminism, as Nkomo and Ngambi (2009) argue, requires a contextual understanding of the local conditions and cultural norms that shape women's experiences. In Nigeria, women face oppression and abuse in various forms, from domestic violence to economic marginalisation. The expectation that women should prioritise domestic roles over leadership and decision-making positions limits their potential and perpetuates inequality. The discourse surrounding African feminism highlights the importance of understanding feminist movements within their specific cultural and historical contexts. Scholars like Gabeba Baderoon and Alicia C. Decker argue that African women have been leading feminist activism, pointing to examples like Nana Asma'u and the Yan Taru movement as key instances of indigenous feminist thought. This perspective positions African feminism as a distinct tradition of thought and action, rooted in African women's experiences and agency.

Application of the theory to Ondo women

Undeniably, in traditional Ondo society, seniority played a significant role in determining social hierarchy, but it's clear that other factors like social status and gender dynamics were also at play. The complexities of Ondo's social structure are fascinating, and it's interesting to consider how feminist perspectives have been part of Ondo traditions. Recognising these dynamics is not about creating conflict, but about understanding the nuances of Ondo's history and culture. The Ondo tradition presents a complex understanding of feminist thought, rooted in its foundational mythology. The story of Pupupu, the female twin who was the first monarch, highlights the tension between patriarchal dominance and female agency. Iluyemi's analysis of Pupupu's sidelining due to her domestic inclinations emphasises the societal expectations placed on women, even in positions of power. Oyewunmi's work suggests that Pupupu's initial rise to power was a moment of recognition for womanhood, but her subsequent exclusion reveals the entrenched nature of patriarchal structures. Tsaaior James Tar's concept of "exclusion within inclusion" is particularly relevant in describing how women's contributions are acknowledged, yet ultimately marginalised, in Ondo society. (Goodman. 1992). In Ondo's traditional politics, women have often been sidelined, but the introduction of the roles of *Lobun* and her *Upoji* (cabinet) offered them a new opportunity. The *Lobun*, in particular, holds the unique privilege of crowning the new *O'emeawe* (king), which might seem like a step towards empowerment. However, it appears that this role was actually created to reinforce existing patriarchal structures. Through the *Opopade* tradition, the system effectively bars women from ascending to the obaship of Ondo, keeping male authority intact. It is quite ironic when you think about it; oral traditions tell of various male Obas who committed serious transgressions, much more serious than the domestic issues associated with Pupupu. Yet,

these actions did not result in their removal from power, highlighting the uneven standards at play. This situation sparks an important conversation about gender roles and power dynamics within the community (Iluymi, 2003).

Feminist dynamics within Ondo society present a detailed relationship of roles and authority that can often seem contradictory. In the context of a typical polygamous family structure, men frequently hold power over multiple wives and large family units, which allows them to exercise considerable authority. Within this framework, the Iya-Ile, or Iyanle as she is referred to in the local dialect, stands out as the most senior wife. Her position grants her a degree of influence, particularly among the younger wives. Nevertheless, it is vital to recognise that her authority is still circumscribed by her subordination to her husband, the head of the household. An Ondo proverb poignantly reflects this intricate hierarchy: “Opa yi a mu na Iyanle, O ghoke aja hun iyawo,” which translates to “The cane used for flogging the senior wife is kept in the ceiling, waiting to be used on the younger wife.” This saying encapsulates the prevailing attitude towards women in this patriarchal society, highlighting their systemic subordination. Research indicates that, irrespective of their age or status within the family hierarchy, women often endure similar abuses in these male-dominated settings. This reality challenges the perspective that feminist hierarchies within households and broader social and political institutions stem solely from colonial influences. Rather than being a novel construct introduced by colonialism, this research argues that colonial interventions have merely amplified pre-existing frameworks of gender inequality.

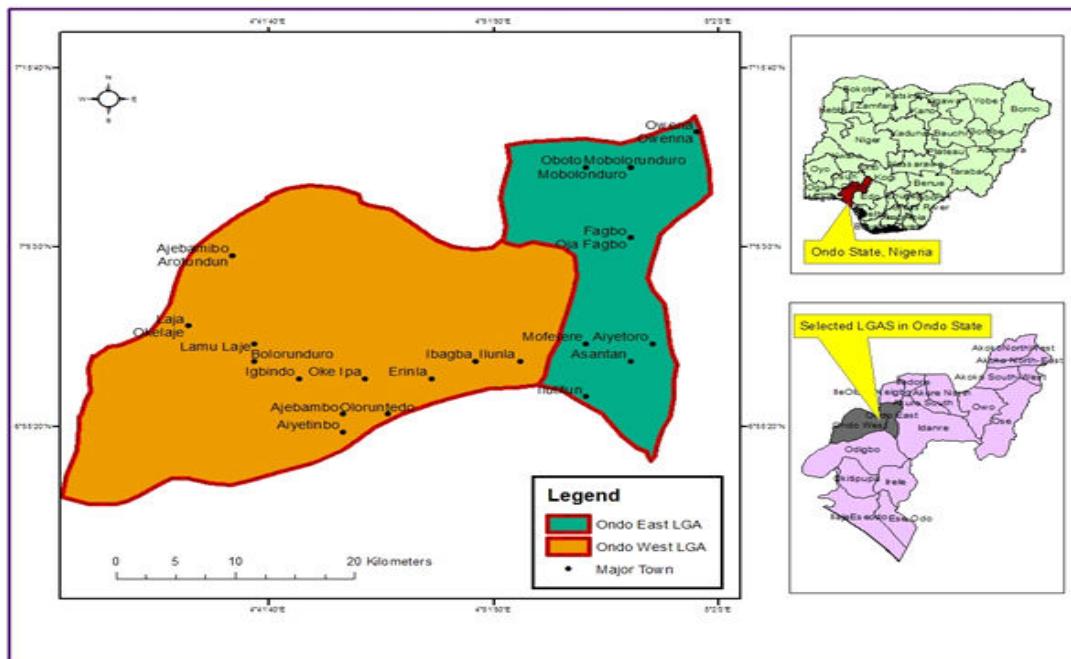
Methodology

This study uses an ethnographic design and qualitative method. The design was preferred as it captures the women’s own voices, perspectives, and meanings, which provide rich, detailed insights into women’s experiences. Being qualitative, the study employed In-depth Interviews (IDI), Focused Group Discussion (FGD) and Key Informant Interviews (KII) to elicit information from participants on the role of women in governance and cultural influence in Ondo, Ondo West LGA, Ondo State, Nigeria. The choice of the method hinged on its ability to guide the researcher to capture and describe the participant’s personal experiences of a given situation in their own words. The methodological choices were suitable for probing deeper meaning people’s perceptions of the cultural role of women. The study relies on primary sources, which include oral data, such as oral traditions and testimonies, along with archival materials, missionary papers, and government publications. Secondary sources, which consist of books, magazines, newspapers, journal articles, pamphlets, online resources, magazines, theses, and dissertations, are used to reinforce findings and conclusions. The sources enriched the primary data that were collected from the study population.

Additionally, this study was conducted in the ancient city of the Ondo kingdom, located in the Ondo West Local Government Area of Ondo State, Nigeria. This region is rich in cultural heritage and history, playing a significant role in the broader context of Yoruba civilisation. The

Ondo community is characterised by its diverse composition of various settlements, which include not only the primary Ondo group but also several indigenous groups such as the Idoko, Ifore, Epe, and Oka. Each of these groups contributes its unique cultural perspectives, customs, and traditions to the fabric of the Ondo community. The research centres on the Ondo kingdom, which serves as the heart of the kingdom, showcasing the intricate blend of traditional practices and modern influences. This study utilised a stratified sampling technique to capture the diverse perspectives of women in Ondo. The population was divided into subgroups based on characteristics such as age, socioeconomic status, and community roles, ensuring comprehensive representation of diverse experiences. Participants were systematically selected from each category, including market women, female politicians, traditional leaders, and older women. This approach not only deepened the analysis but also revealed variations and commonalities among groups, providing a deeper understanding of how women's roles have evolved. The stratified sampling technique enhanced the validity of the findings by ensuring that all relevant segments of the female population were represented. This allowed for meaningful comparisons regarding perceptions of the roles of women. For instance, comparing the experiences of younger women with those of older generations provided significant insights into shifts in cultural values and societal expectations.

Additionally, purposive sampling was used to select participants with specific characteristics or insights closely aligned with the research objectives. This technique enabled the researchers to gather rich, relevant information from individuals who could provide unique perspectives on women's identities and roles in the community. The rigour of purposive sampling contributed to the study's overall validity by ensuring that the voices of underrepresented groups, such as older women and craftswomen, were included in the data collection process. This method enabled the researcher to draw upon the specific expertise and experiences of participants, enriching the quality of the insights gathered.

Figure I: MAP OF ONDO KINGDOM

Source: Geography Department, University of Ibadan

The Complexities of Gender Dynamics in Yorùbá Society

The Yorùbá people of southwestern Nigeria are part of a culturally rich and complex society, with a history that spans centuries. Within this intricate cultural milieu, women have played a vital role in shaping the social, economic, and cultural fabric of Yorùbáland. The pantheon of Yorùbá deities includes revered female figures such as Oya and Osun, highlighting the significant position of women in Yorùbá spirituality. However, despite their contributions, women in Yorùbáland have frequently encountered marginalisation and exclusion from positions of power and authority. The Yorùbá society is fundamentally patriarchal, with gender playing a significant role in social stratification. This patriarchal framework confers various privileges upon men, including enhanced opportunities for employment, higher educational attainment, and a broader range of social benefits. Within this cultural context, males are perceived as independent entities capable of self-sustenance. In contrast, women often encounter significant limitations regarding their privileges, though the nature of these restrictions may vary across distinct native cultures (Oyewunmi, 1997).

Women in Yorùbá society hold significant positions of honour and status, underlining their integral role within the community. Historically, women have been involved in various economic pursuits, such as trade and manufacturing, and have played a crucial role in the social and economic dynamics of Yorùbáland. However, their roles have often been relegated to secondary

status, with men holding positions of authority and power. The onset of colonial rule introduced European ideologies that confined women to the home, assigning them the role of nurturing their families. Concurrently, while societal expectations continued to recognise women's work as complementary to that of men, the state and the colonial administration initiated a transformation in women's roles through legislation that restricted their rights, thereby reinforcing a male-dominated colonial economy. (Johnson, 1982)

The traditional political organisation of Yoruba society was characterised by a monarchical system with a clear separation of powers and checks and balances. Notably, women's associations played a crucial role in mitigating the king's power and preventing potential abuses. In Yoruba culture, women held esteemed positions across various domains, including governance, religion, and industry. The recognition of female offices such as *Iyalode*, *Iya Abiye*, and *Yeye Osun* shows the importance of women's roles in Yoruba society. These positions not only commanded reverence but also granted women the ability to seek social benefits and influence societal dynamics. (Makinde, 2004)

The economic roles of women in Yoruba society were diverse and significant. Women engaged in various economic pursuits, including trade and manufacturing, and contributed materially to their families. While women's roles were often domestically oriented, they also held positions that were complementary to those of men. The emphasis on women's familial responsibilities, including providing material resources for household sustenance, highlights the importance of their economic contributions. (Dennis, 1987)

Power, Tradition, and Cultural Evolution in Ondo (Women and Traditional Politics)

Culture in Ondo is a finely woven web that embraces the entire people, both male and female. However, in the particular case of Ondo, the peculiar and significant placement of the womenfolk within the ambit of tradition and culture is such that it clearly justifies a special analysis and discourse. According to Chief Iluyemi:

Ondo women have, from time immemorial, been known to be very industrious, egalitarian, and committed to communal development. But more important is the fact that the incidents of Ondo history have combined peculiarly to confer on the womenfolk certain well-defined roles and positions in the traditional and cultural practices of the kingdom. (Oral interview on 12/4/2021)

The history of Ondo's dynastic rule began in 1516 with the ascension of Oba Pupupu, a daughter of Alaafin Oluaso of Oyo and a female ruler who defied traditional expectations of leadership, marking a significant milestone in the involvement of women in Ondo traditional politics. According to historical accounts, Pupupu's arrival in Ifore marked the beginning of the Ondo dynasty, with her being accorded due respect and welcomed by the local community due to her lineage from the Alaafin of Oyo. Notably, Pupupu's sovereignty over the local community and her eventual reign had far-reaching implications for the traditional and cultural evolution of the Ondo people. The warm reception she received from Ekii and the Ifore

community stands in stark contrast to the challenges she faced from other groups. Pupupu's reign as the ruler of Ondo was characterised by both peace and controversy. While she settled into her role and governed the area that would become Ode-Ondo, her feminine inclinations often clashed with the expectations of her subjects. According to Iluyemi, Pupupu's prioritisation of domestic duties over state affairs led to a significant incident in which she interrupted a crucial cabinet meeting to tend to her animals. This breach of protocol was met with severe criticism from her chiefs, who viewed it as an unforgivable lapse in leadership. The incident ultimately led to a consensus among the people that Pupupu should be replaced by her son, Airo, and that no woman would ever again hold the throne of Ondo. This decision has had a lasting impact on the tradition and culture of the Ondo people, excluding women from the *Osemawe* throne to this day (Iluyemi, 2003).

The legacy of Oba Pupupu continues to shape the cultural narrative of the Ondo people. Akinjogbin's account of Pupupu's reign underscores the significance of this female ruler in Ondo history, while also revealing the patriarchal norms that ultimately led to her removal from power. The enduring impact of the "Pupupu affair" is evident in the continued exclusion of women from leadership positions in Ondo, serving as a reminder of the historical and cultural forces that have shaped the distribution of power in the region. Consequent upon the above historical progression, the Pupupu legacy to the Ondo has precluded women from the *Osemawe* throne, even as regents. However, the same tradition that restricts the *Osemawe* throne to males only has also established a suitable and unique compensatory arrangement for the women. This is the *Lobun* title. As the highest status a woman can attain, the office of *Lobun* is shrouded in mystery and hedged by taboos. The office holder is ritually pure, dangerous, and ambiguous, and aged people are appointed to the office.

This position was created to give women a voice in governance, with the *Lobun* serving as a representative of women's interests and referred to as "Oba Obinrin," meaning "the female king." The *Lobun*'s role was not only symbolic but also carried significant responsibilities, including overseeing women's affairs, managing markets, and performing various religious ceremonies as the priestess of Aje, the god of money. The *Lobun*'s influence extended to the economic well-being of the kingdom, given her authority over markets and her role in establishing new ones. Moreover, the *Lobun* played a crucial part in the coronation of the *Osemawe*, the king of Ondo, highlighting the importance of women's participation in traditional politics. Despite these significant roles, the actual decision-making power rested with the Oba and his cabinet, while the *Lobun* and her cabinet, known as the Upoji or Eghae, performed important but largely advisory and ritualistic functions.

The *Lobun* is a specific title in Ondo. In effect, the *Lobun* title compensates the daughters of Pupupu and their female descendants for their exclusion from the throne. Thus, *Lobun* takes charge of women's affairs, including the markets located in the city and in the farmsteads. Some of such markets, which held at intervals of five days, nine days, or seventeen days, included Obunloja, Umonjolu, Odojomu, Erinketa, and so on. Indeed, *obun* means market

in the Ondo dialect, and *Lobun* literally means the Controller of the markets, the one who establishes markets, and has authority over them. By extension, therefore, the economic well-being of the kingdom is also the *Lobun*'s concern. A direct descendant of Pupupu, the *Lobun*'s title makes her "Mother" to all *Osemawes*. Since it was Pupupu's two sons who reigned directly after her, and *Osemawes*, they therefore have a common lineage from her. (Iluyemi, 2003). The *Lobun*, and head of the female of the Pupupu lineage, is thus regarded as the ceremonial mother of the *Osemawe*. In this unique position, the *Lobun* plays a vital traditional role in the Ondo kingdom. Thus, the *Lobun*, like the *Osemawe*, is a hereditary title open only to the female descendants of Oba Pupupu. At the installation of an *Osemawe*, it is the *Lobun* who "presents" the Oba to the people as "her son" whom she has provided to ascend the throne, a ceremony reminiscent of Pupupu's presentation of *Airo*, her first son, to reign in her place when she became too old to perform. *Lobun* is the head of the female chiefs, and her cabinet also consists of the female high chiefs, namely, Lisa *Lobun*, Jomu *Lobun*, Odofin *Lobun*, Adape *Lobun*, Orangun *Lobun*, Supou *Lobun*, Sasere *Lobun*, Erelu *Lobun*, Ologbosere *Lobun*, Seran *Lobun*, Sama *Lobun*, Opotu *Lobun*, Wajayo *Lobun*, Eno *Lobun* (Oral interview 10/04/2021)

The Revered Role of Female Chiefs (*Opojis*): Custodians of Tradition and Cultural Heritage in Ondo

In the vibrant cultural landscape of Ondo, apart from the *Lobun*, female chiefs also hold a significant position in the traditional polity. The female chiefs are called *Opojis*. The *Opojis* are regarded as custodians of the tradition and cultural heritage in the community. *Opoji* offers advice to the *Osemawe*-in-council on issues affecting the community, especially those that directly concern women. They hold a position of great esteem as titular heads and custodians of the people's tradition and cultural heritage. These highly respected female chiefs embody dignity and decorum, working tirelessly to promote domestic and communal harmony within the community. As advisors, the *Opojis* play a crucial role in addressing issues that affect women and the broader community. Their duties extend beyond the council chamber, as they also perform ritual roles that are essential for the peace, harmony, and prosperity of the town and its inhabitants. The *Opojis*' connection to the *Aje* shrine is a significant aspect of their role. Each *Opoji* is expected to have her own *Aje*, a portable shrine dedicated to the goddess of wealth and fertility. The annual public propitiation of the *Aje*, which takes place on the eve of *Odunmoko*, is a highlight of the *Opojis*' ritual calendar. On this day, the *Opojis*' *Aje* shrines are carried with great pomp and pageantry to *Obunoke*, the central arena for the ritual. Here, devotees and ritual priests perform the required rites, offering traditional prayers for peace, plenty, and fertility among the womenfolk.

The *Opojis*' role as intermediaries between the *Aje* goddess and the womenfolk is deeply revered. They are expected to maintain the purity and chastity of true womanhood, ensuring the efficacy of their prayers and the well-being of the community. The *Opojis*' dedication to

their duties and their commitment to upholding the community's mores are essential to their role. By performing their traditional duties and remaining true to their oaths, the Opojis bring joy and peace of mind to the womenfolk, who see them as caring and concerned leaders. The celebration of Odun Aje is a testament to the importance of the Opojis' role in Ondo's cultural heritage. On this day, the Opojis' prayers and rituals bring assurances of good health, well-being, fecundity, prosperity, peace at home, and success in business to the womenfolk. The Opojis' position as custodians of tradition and cultural heritage is a sacred trust, and they work tirelessly to uphold the values and customs that are essential to the community's identity.

Generally, women are also accorded a special place during chieftaincy ceremonies. The wife of an incoming chief, for instance, is expected to witness her husband's hair-shaving. Hair shaving for an incoming chief symbolises the end of hard times and the dawn of a new lease of life. As the shaving progresses, the wife prays. She stands at the occasion as an embodiment of the collective struggle of the couple over the years, and a major contributor to the enhanced social status of her husband, as confirmed by the conferment of the chieftaincy title. As a further recognition for women, princesses who, by virtue of their gender, cannot become king are compensated by being made *Otunba*.

The Evolving Role of Women in Contemporary Ondo

Cultural change has generated wide-ranging discussions and debates amongst social scientists, particularly anthropologists and sociologists. The likes of Ibn Khaldun and Herbert Spencer argued that socio-cultural changes follow an evolutionary pattern of birth, growth, maturity, decline, and death: a pattern of growth, from a state of simplicity to complexity and generalisation to specialisation. Since the 1920s, William Ogbum's cultural lag theory has influenced much of the discourse on socio-cultural changes in societies. Modernity and change have seeped into Ondo's cultural construction of power. Women's participation in politics is a game-changer. They bring a much-needed sense of balance and perspective to the table, allowing for more sustainable solutions to societal issues. Having women in leadership positions leads to a more equitable society.

The colonial era had a profound impact on Ondo women, introducing structural gender inequalities that persist to this day. The British system of education, commerce, government, and wage employment created new opportunities, but also limited the potential of women; for example, women's traditional roles were altered as they became increasingly involved in the cash economy and interacted with European traders. The educational curricula during colonialism disadvantaged the girl-child, and the colonialists used education to determine certain privileges regarding women. This led to a significant change in the roles of women in society, with many moving to cities in search of better opportunities. The introduction of Western education and the emergence of expatriate firms altered traditional occupations and created new opportunities for women in trade and commerce. However, this also led to the creation of a class system in Ondo society, with women who had access to education and

economic resources holding more power and influence. Despite these challenges, Ondo women played a crucial role in the development of their societies during the colonial era.

In Ondo, women's voices are often silenced in the world of politics. While they are expected to excel in domestic roles, their participation in decision-making is alarmingly low. Ironically, women are actively involved in grassroots activities, enthusiastically supporting campaigns and attending rallies. However, this enthusiasm does not translate to leadership positions. Deep-rooted socio-cultural norms, limited financial resources, and a lack of support systems hold them back. The rising costs of campaigns, fuelled by vote buying, further exacerbate the challenge, making it difficult for women to break into the political arena. The barriers are multifaceted. Women often lack access to the financial backing that men take for granted, relying on personal wealth or influential patrons. Moreover, damaging stereotypes persist, with some believing that women who engage in politics are morally compromised. These misconceptions need to be challenged, and opportunities created for women to participate meaningfully in politics. By empowering women to take on leadership roles, Women's participation in politics is a game-changer. They bring a much-needed sense of balance and perspective to the table, allowing for more sustainable solutions to societal issues. According to research, having women in leadership positions leads to a more equitable society. For instance, studies have shown that women in politics can help reduce inequality, foster cooperation across party lines, and prioritise crucial social issues like healthcare, education, and family welfare. When women are represented in decision-making roles, it positively impacts their communities, boosting female voter turnout and ensuring public services are more responsive to women's needs.

The importance of women's representation in politics cannot be overstated. It is not just about fairness, but ensuring that women's unique experiences and perspectives are taken into account. Women make up half of the population, so it is only logical that they should occupy half of the seats in public office. However, in many African countries, policies often overlook women's needs. For example, community meetings might be scheduled at times that clash with family responsibilities, making it difficult for women to attend. By giving women a voice in politics, we can create policies that truly serve everyone. When women represent themselves, they can advocate for their own interests, which may differ from those of men. This leads to more inclusive and effective governance.

Ondo women are also driving economic growth, entrepreneurship, and innovation. They are taking advantage of new opportunities, asserting their political status, and pressing for economic and social advancement. Many women belong to aid groups and unions, actively participating in agriculture and contributing to agricultural development. In academia, women are making significant contributions, occupying positions like Vice-Chancellors, University Registrars, Professors, and Doctors. Notable examples include: Hon. Justice Helen Moronkeji Ogunwumiju, OFR (Justice of the Supreme Court of Nigeria), Prof. Ronke Ogunmakin (The Chairperson of Eki 100.9 FM), Dr Mrs Ethel Adunni Adeloye, MB, BS (The CEO of Agape

Specialist Hospital, Ondo), Pastor Mrs Aralola Surulola Fatuotu (The proprietor of Hallmark Secondary School and St. Raphael's Kiddies School, Ondo)

Conclusion

The subordination of women is a universal phenomenon that transcends cultures and societies. While there have been efforts to address this issue, more needs to be done to promote gender equality and empower women. By understanding the root causes of women's subordination and working towards creating a more equitable society, we can build a brighter future for women and girls around the world. Despite facing numerous societal challenges, including gender inequality in politics, academics, and socio-economic spheres, Ondo women are making significant strides in reshaping their roles in society. The trend denotes a revolution towards a brighter future for the state, with the writing boldly on the wall. Amidst these challenges, Ondo women remain determined to turn their dreams into reality, striving to positively impact their generation and those yet to come.

As society witnesses more of these evolving trends, it's essential to recognise the efforts of Ondo women in breaking down barriers. Women's groups in Ondo have been advocating for increased participation in politics, demanding deputy governorship slots in major political parties and pushing for gender-sensitive policies. With the 2024 Ondo state governorship election highlighting the lack of female representation, there's a growing call to action for policymakers, advocacy groups, and citizens to prioritise gender inclusion and support women in governance.

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