

Ifá, Polygyny and Gender Politics: Interpreting Ambivalence in Yorùbá Marriage Culture

Yetunde S. ALABEDE ¹ and Temitope Lanre BELLO ²

Abstract

This paper offers a critical reframing of polygyny in Yorùbá society by examining Ifá not as a doctrinal authority but as a philosophical archive that illuminates the coexistence of moral ambiguity, gendered power, and cultural hybridity. Rather than treating polygyny as a fixed “tradition,” this paper positions it as a site where religious syncretism, patriarchal politics, and modern identity-making intersect. Through analysis of Odù Ifá, literary texts, oral histories, and popular music, we demonstrate how competing interpretations of culture emerge from selective invocation of Yorùbá epistemologies. Ifá’s ambivalence, we argue, is methodologically generative as it invites an understanding of polygyny inherent in orí, circumstance, and shifting social imaginaries rather than as a uniform cultural mandate. By juxtaposing Ifá’s nuanced portrayals with the distortions reproduced in popular culture, this paper reveals how musicians, novelists, and public discourse often mobilize “culture” to legitimize male privilege, commodify women, and elevate hierarchical domestic arrangements. However, the same cultural field contains women’s counter-narratives from literary critiques to feminist resignifications that unsettle patriarchal readings and articulate alternative moral frameworks. Thus, this paper advances the scholarly conversation by neither romanticising nor pathologising Yorùbá heritage. Instead, it traces polygyny as a dynamic institution shaped by religious hybridity, gendered negotiations, and the enduring Yorùbá philosophical principle of Ìmílúwàbí (Motadegbe & Ibiyemi, 2025), which holds that virtues and vices coexist. This repositions Ifá as a critical lens for interpreting contemporary gender debates, while offering culturally grounded framework for understanding how Africans themselves grapple with entanglements of tradition, modernity, and justice.

Keywords: Ifá divination; Polygyny; Gender politics; Religious hybridity; Popular culture in Yorùbá society

1. Teacher Education Department, Michigan State University; alabedey@msu.edu, <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-2466-4821>
2. Department of English, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria; topelanrebello@gmail.com

Introduction

The Yorùbá societies of the twenty-first century have been heavily westernised and Islamised, and these influences can be seen in the systems of marriage being practised. Monogamy is becoming the norm, and those who practise polygyny are mostly Muslim men, whose religion permits them to marry up to four wives (Oladiti, 2014) if they will treat all the wives equally. A reason adduced for the widespread acceptance of Islam in Yorùbá land was its non-antagonistic view of certain aspects of Yorùbá ways of being and knowing, including the notion of personhood (Lawal, 2024) and polygyny. Some Yorùbá Christians (converts) who find solace in polygyny invoke the indigenous Yorùbá culture as their reference and often affirm that Christianity is not opposed to polygyny. They attempt to separate Western culture from Christianity by citing examples of prominent Biblical figures who married multiple wives and still found favour with God. However, they appear disconnected mainly from Yorùbá identity, except in instances when invoking it to legitimise polygyny, often referred to as polygamy. In this paper, we ask the question of how valid the claim is that the Yorùbá culture promotes polygyny? We draw on conversations with an Ifá priest in Southwestern Nigeria and review relevant literature, including various Odù Ifá, popular culture, and socio-legal materials. In what follows, we highlight the Odù ,Íwé from the Ifá corpus and its connection to polygyny, especially in relation to trends in religious and matrimonial beliefs.

Literature Review:: Polygyny, Ifá, and Gender Politics in Yorùbá Studies

Ifá as Text, Archive, and Epistemology

Scholarly engagements with Ifá have consistently emphasised its centrality to Yorùbá cosmology, ethics, and systems of knowledge. Foundational studies by Abímbílá (1975, 1997) and Bascom (1968, 1969) establish Ifá as an extensive poetic and philosophical corpus that thematises diverse aspects of human existence, including morality, destiny, family, marriage and women's power-position in society (Akanni, 2025). Rather than functioning as a rigid code of conduct, Ifá operates through narrative, analogy, and divinatory interpretation, offering situational, contingent guidance. Subsequent scholarship has reinforced this view by foregrounding Ifá's dialogic structure and its resistance to singular or absolute meanings (Frisvold, 2016; Oluwole, 1996).

Within this body of work, Ifá is increasingly understood as an epistemological archive rather than a prescriptive religious doctrine (Balogun, 2024). Scholars writing from philosophical and literary perspectives argue that Ifá does not issue universal moral injunctions but instead describes social realities and ethical tensions, leaving interpretation to individual orí (personal destiny) and circumstance (Irele & Irele, 2010; Frisvold, 2016). This interpretive openness is particularly evident in Odù that address marriage and gender relations, where prosperity, conflict, blessing, and danger often coexist within the same narrative frame. Such internal

ambivalence challenges essentialist claims that present polygyny as either inherently endorsed or rejected within Yorùbá culture.

However, despite extensive documentation of Ifá's literary richness and metaphysical depth, relatively little scholarship has examined how its ambivalence is mobilised or distorted in contemporary gender debates. Existing studies tend to treat Ifá either as a cultural authority legitimising social practice or as a repository of patriarchal ideology, without sufficiently accounting for its descriptive and situational logic (Adekoya, 2021). By foregrounding *Odù Ìwí* alongside other contrasting *Odù*, this study builds on and extends Ifá scholarship by demonstrating how moral ambiguity functions as a core philosophical feature, complicating gendered claims about marriage, power, and cultural authenticity in Yorùbá society.

Gender, Patriarchy, and the Commodification of Women

Feminist and womanist scholarship on African societies has consistently identified patriarchy as a structuring force that shapes marital relations, sexual ethics, and women's social positioning. Within this literature, polygyny is frequently examined as a gendered institution that normalizes male entitlement while rendering women's bodies, labour, and reproductive capacities subject to control and competition (Kolawole, 1997; El Saadawi, 2007; Oriaku, 2012). Literary scholars have further shown how narratives of marriage in African fiction often expose the psychological, emotional, and material costs borne by women in polygynous households, even when such arrangements are culturally rationalised (Emecheta, 2008; Ba, 2008; Shoneyin, 2010). In Yorùbá-specific contexts, gender scholars caution against readings of culture that conflate descriptive traditions with moral endorsement. Irele and Irele (2010), for instance, interrogate Ifá representations of women to argue that certain *Odù* deploy ridicule and exaggeration in ways that reflect patriarchal anxieties rather than ethical prescriptions. Similarly, contemporary feminist analyses emphasise how cultural narratives are selectively invoked to legitimise male privilege while obscuring women's resistance, negotiation, and agency within marital structures (Kolawole, 1997; Jemiluyi, 2025). These studies collectively underscore that patriarchy in Yorùbá society is neither monolithic nor uncontested but operates through layered cultural, religious, and symbolic practices.

At the intersection of gender and culture, scholars also draw attention to the commodification of women within polygynous systems, where wives function as markers of status, wealth, and masculine success. Literary depictions in works such as *Things Fall Apart* and *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* reveal how women are symbolically aligned with property, productivity, and prestige, reinforcing hierarchies that privilege male accumulation over relational ethics (Achebe, 2008; Shoneyin, 2010). This body of scholarship provides a critical foundation for the present study's interrogation of how polygyny, when framed as cultural inheritance, reproduces gendered inequalities while masking the philosophical ambivalence embedded in Ifá discourse.

Popular Culture, Law, and the Politics of Cultural Representation

Beyond philosophical and literary scholarship, studies of African popular culture and legal frameworks have drawn attention to how “culture” is publicly narrated, simplified, and mobilised in everyday discourse (Oyetimi, 2024). Scholars argue that popular music, media, and performance often function as sites where patriarchal values are normalised through cultural rhetoric, even when such claims lack grounding in indigenous epistemologies or legal realities (Izegaegbe, 2024; Jemiluyi, 2025). In Yorùbá popular culture in particular, representations of marriage and masculinity frequently invoke tradition to legitimise male sexual entitlement and hierarchical domestic arrangements, while silencing the interpretive complexity embedded in indigenous knowledge systems.

Legal scholarship further complicates these cultural claims by demonstrating that contemporary Nigerian law does not uncritically endorse polygyny as a cultural right. Statutory provisions in the Marriage Act and the Criminal and Penal Codes frame bigamy as a punishable offense, irrespective of gender, revealing tensions between legal modernity, religious practice, and cultural self-representation (Durojaye et al., 2014). Yet, as scholars observe, legal norms often coexist uneasily with popular and religious discourses that continue to frame polygyny as culturally authentic or divinely sanctioned. This disjuncture highlights how cultural authority is selectively constructed, frequently privileging male-centered interpretations while marginalising women’s experiences and legal protections.

Taken together, scholarship on popular culture and law underscores the need for critical interrogation of how Yorùbá culture is cited, performed, and politicised in contemporary contexts. What is often presented as cultural continuity is, in fact, a negotiated and contested field shaped by modern media, religious hybridity, and patriarchal interest. This insight provides an important backdrop for the present study’s engagement with Ifá, as it reveals how philosophical ambivalence is flattened into moral certainty in public discourse, thereby reinforcing gendered inequalities under the guise of tradition.

Ambivalence, Moral Reasoning, and Indigenous Philosophical Hybridity

Recent scholarship in African philosophy and humanities increasingly emphasises ambivalence, contradiction, and hybridity as defining features of indigenous epistemologies rather than as conceptual weaknesses. Yorùbá philosophical thought, particularly as articulated through Ifá, accommodates the coexistence of virtue and vice, blessing and danger, harmony and conflict within the same moral universe (Abímbílálá, 1997; Oluwole, 1996; Motadegbe & Ibiyemi, 2025). This orientation challenges Western moral binaries that seek explicit endorsement or rejection of social practices and instead foregrounds ethical reasoning as situational, relational, and negotiated. Within this framework, marriage and gender relations are not governed by universal prescriptions but by contextual judgment informed by *orí* (personal destiny), circumstance, and communal consequence. Scholars have argued that (Yorùbá) moral concepts

such as Ìmílúàbí emphasise character, responsibility, and relational ethics over rigid social rules (Lawal, 2024; Ogunmusire, 2023; Oyetimi, 2024). However, these philosophical insights are rarely brought into direct conversation with feminist critiques of polygyny or with analyses of popular culture that present marriage practices as culturally fixed (Motadegbe & Ibiyemi, 2025). As a result, indigenous moral philosophy and gender scholarship often operate in parallel rather than in dialogic spaces. This gap is particularly evident in debates on polygyny, where ambivalence is frequently misread as endorsement and cultural flexibility is reduced to patriarchal license. By overlooking Ifá's descriptive orientation, existing literature risks reproducing the very essentialisms it seeks to critique. Attending to ambivalence as an epistemic principle rather than a moral failure enables a more nuanced understanding of how Yorùbá communities negotiate marriage, power, and gendered obligations amid religious hybridity, legal constraint, and cultural change.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology, grounded in textual and discourse analysis (Adegbngbin, 2010). Drawing on close readings of Odù Ifá verses, literary texts, and popular music, the analysis examines how polygyny is variously represented, contested, and re-signified across religious, cultural, and socio-political contexts. Rather than treating Ifá as a prescriptive doctrine, the methodology approaches it as a philosophical archive whose internal ambivalence enables a comparative reading of gender politics, moral reasoning, and cultural authority across texts and social contexts. The literature review establishes that polygyny in Yorùbá society has been examined across philosophical, literary, feminist, popular cultural, and legal domains, yet often in fragmented or reductive ways. While Ifá scholarship foregrounds interpretive openness and moral complexity, public and scholarly discourses frequently collapse this ambivalence into fixed cultural claims that naturalise gendered hierarchies. Building on these insights, the analysis that follows turns to Odù Ìwílì as a focal case through which to examine how Ifá's descriptive logic complicates dominant narratives of polygyny, and how its philosophical ambivalence is reinterpreted, distorted, or contested across literary texts, popular culture, and socio-legal contexts.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Contexts from Odù Ìwílì

Odù Ìwílì is a verse extracted from Òyìlkú Méjì of the Ifá corpus. The Ifá corpus is central to unlocking the cosmology and worldview of the Yoruba people. It is a collection of poetic verses that thematises several issues in life, including religion, character, home, family, knowledge, and marriage. Odù Ìwílì in particular is one of the verses of the corpus that thematise polygyny. It says:

Ọkan pórópóró lobinrin dùn mọn nílẹ́ ọkọ ré	The wife is best behaved when she is the only one
Bí wọn bá di méji wọn a di Èsù	When they become two, they turn to Èsù
Tí wọn bá di méta wọn a d'ajé	When they are three they become witches
Bí wọn bá di mérin wọn á di iwo lo rí mi kí n tó tí o	When they are four they become you saw me before I saw you
Tí wọn bá di māàrún wọn á di iyá lágbájá ló run okọ wa súúsú	When they are five they become Lágbájá's mother has turned our husband to something else
Tí wọn bá di méfá wọn a díkà	When they are six they become wicked
Tí wọn bá di méje wọn a d'ajé	When they are seven they become witches
Tí wọn bá di méjo, wọn á di iyálátári bamba ló eléyí ran ọkọ wa	When they are eight they blame one another for their husband's misfortune

(Abimbola, 1975: 112-113)

It continues, stating the negative implications of a man marrying more than one wife. This verse states that the best form of marriage is one in which only one man and one woman are united. Anything else will cause problems within the family. The home could be a haven for the couple, particularly for the husband, when there is only one wife. However, as more wives are added, the atmosphere becomes increasingly chaotic and conflict-ridden. In this article, we focus on the dynamics of relationships between co-wives and explore the verse's deployment of exaggeration to convey the challenges and conflicts that can arise in a polygynous household.

Ifá, Popular Culture and Polygyny

With the different representations and interpretations of polygyny, we argue that Ifá does not categorically denounce polygyny, and the divination system is premised on lot casting. Indeed, Ifá does not prescribe but describes. It will guide the individual by using analogies and by stating the implications of each step taken, thereby individualising the guidance (Balogun, 2024). Hence, while *Odù Ìwí* can be divined for an individual, thereby warning him to avoid marrying more than one wife, other *Odùs* may be cast for another individual, charging him to marry more wives. Indeed, many *Odùs* subtly encourage men to marry many wives. Frisvold (2016, p.218) records how *bàngó*, the Alààfin of Ìyí Empire of yore, had “great appetites for women” as well as food and beauty. *Ìwòrì Méjì*, as recorded by Bascom (1968, p.271), tells of how, consequent upon heeding the instructions of Ifá, the individual shall receive “the blessing of visitors, the blessing of money, the blessing of wives, the blessing of children, and the blessing of a title.” According to this verse of Ifá, a man having multiple wives in his harem is seen as a sign of blessing. Bascom also records *Odù Ìlsà Ògúndá*, in which an already married hunter is told that he will have the blessing of a new wife in the same year. This is akin to what

the narrator says of Nwakibe, Okonkwo's benefactor, in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Thus, the same *Odù Ìyì'ìkú* from where *Ìwílì* is extracted tells another story about the anonymous narrator who walks into a wedding in the city of Aro and he blesses the ceremony thus:

Then, I said, “Accept my greetings.
 You will marry more wives.
 You will bear many more children.
 You will marry more and more maidens...
 (Abímbílá, 1975, p.115)

Hence, *Ifá* is giving a warning against the dangers inherent in a polygynous marriage system and simultaneously portraying a polygynous marriage as a blessing for the man. *Ifá* does not, therefore, frown at polygyny but merely describes the reality of the marriage system. It is left for the man and his *Orí* (destiny) to choose what works for him. The concept of *Orí*, which literally translates to “head,” is much deeper in meaning and metaphysical essence. Frisvold (2016, p 32) defines it as the individual’s “personal divinity. *Orí* is the individual’s internal divine spark, serving as the inner guidance system that constantly strives to synchronise the person’s life with their intended life path. This inner compass intuitively navigates them towards a journey that harmonises with their soul’s deeper purpose. So, *Ifá* is ambivalent in its portrayal of polygyny.

Interestingly, while *Odù Ìwílì* can be interpreted as a case for a man to stick to only one wife, Irele and Irele (2010) argue against this interpretation, averring that the verse ridicules women, as it states that the number of women will be the ruin of the man. This view cannot be refuted, as it is evident in the verse. However, this perspective does not contradict the other, which holds that the verse presents a progressive approach to marriage predicated on a man and a woman. Hence, we argue that the tendency to be polygynous is rooted in the desire to possess women. This becomes evident in *Odù Ìwílnrín Méjì*, recounted by Frisvold (2016). The story features *òwìwi* (owl), who is said to be “a handsome, wealthy and debauched man” (2016, p 199) and is never in want of beautiful women to sleep with. Despite this uncommon access to beautiful women, he still schemes to court and eventually sleeps with the king’s wife, and they both ultimately live together. All the other birds scorn them, and they treat them like pariahs. The moral lesson in the oral story, as highlighted by Frisvold, is that a man should not steal another man’s possessions, particularly his wife (Frisvold, 2016). Here, it exemplifies that women are categorised as possessions that can be stolen, objectified, and commodified.

Nexus between *Odù Ìwílì*, Nigerian Popular Culture, and Polygyny

The first line of the verse suggests that a woman’s behaviour is influenced by her circumstances, specifically the presence of co-wives. When the number of wives increases to two, the house

becomes chaotic, disorderly, and conflict-ridden as symbolised by the presence of Ècù, the Yorùbá òrìcà of chaos and crossroads (Frisvold, 2016). At number three, they become witches. The witches here are more closely aligned with Abímbálilá's (1997) portrayal, which states that witches offer nothing beneficial to humanity. The witchcraft occasioned by the presence of three wives here will cause the household to be dysfunctional and prone to conflict. When there are four wives, rivalry and competition intensify in the tense atmosphere. With five wives, the household becomes completely chaotic, and the husband is utterly bewildered. The chaos worsens when the wives are six, as they become increasingly wicked. Seven wives will turn the household into a hotbed of supernatural conflicts, and the home becomes a jungle for the survival of the fittest. If the verse had stopped at seven, there might have been some excuses for polygyny. The number seven is often associated with perfection, but there is no perfection in the philosophy of Ifá (Ofuasua & Sunday Layi, 2021; Oluwole, 1996). The final line of the verse shows that the atmosphere becomes one of mutual recriminations and blame-shifting, with each wife accusing the others of being responsible for their husband's misfortunes. This is like what obtains in the religion of Islam, whereby the husband is admonished to treat the co-wives equally; but it has been recorded that equality, just as perfection, is only an ideology that barely materialises (Abdul-Rauf, 1977; Bunza, 2024; Durojaye et al., 2014).

This verse does not endorse polygyny as a way of life for any man. This view is contradicted by what obtains in many products of Yorùbá popular culture. For example, Ebenezer Fabiyi, popularly known as Ebenezer Obey, aka Chief Commander, is a retired Yorùbá Jùjú musician who is now a professed Christian evangelist; he was among the leading stars of the music genre between the 1960s and early 1990s. His album, "Óyá Ká Jí Jó," first released in 1978, is of particular interest to this study. Some lines of the song go thus:

Àwa Íkùnrin le l'áya m'ifà, kòburú	We men can marry up to six wives, no qualms
Íkùnrin kan 'so l' Íba Olúwa mi yàn	God has destined only one man for a woman
f'óbìnrin	
To bá j'ì Íkùnrin tó bá níyàwó kan	If you as a man had a wife
T'áya na ò gbílì tir ¹ , tó ñ cè cekúse	Who is wayward and promiscuous
Tó f'ì kílì 'i síl'lì	And threatens you with separation
Ó y ¹ kó le sífun pé	You should be able to tell her
Íyàwó tó ló hun ò ce míñ	The wife who threatens divorce
Bí ò ce míñ kó máa lí	If she is tired, she should go

The lyrics above from his song serve as evidence of the misrepresentation of the Yorùbá culture by creators of the people's popular culture. When the singer says men are permitted to have up to six wives, but only one man is permissible for a woman by God, one would wonder where he got the injunctions from. Who grants the permission? Was the permission obtained from his Yorùbá cultural background or from his Christian background? Apparently, it could not have been Yorùbá culture, as he does not use any verses from Ifá or Yorùbá

proverbs to support his claim. That he mentions Ìba Olúwa further supports this point of view, as it is a term for God, popular among adherents of Abrahamic religions in Yorùbá land. Yet, the Christianity practised in Nigeria came from the West, where monogamy is rooted. Hence, one interrogates what Chief Commander relies on in the Christian religion to advocate for polygyny.

Prior to saying these lines in the song, Obey compared gender privileges around domestic infidelity by advising the woman caught cheating on her husband to apologise with contrition. For the monogamous man caught cheating on his wife, however, he is not to apologise but to cunningly settle the issue with his wife. When cunning fails, the husband is expected to maintain a stoic demeanour and find a way around the issue without offering any form of apology. This act is not only patriarchal (Jemiluyi, 2025) but also serves as the background for stating that it is culturally allowed for a man to marry as many wives as possible, while only one man is permissible for a woman. Because it is ‘culturally permissible’ for a man to marry many wives, there is no reason for him to lose his composure in begging his wife to tolerate his cheating nature.

Wasiu Alabi Pasuma, also known as Pàsó, is another Yorùbá musician who speaks of polygyny as if it were a Yorùbá cultural prescription. He did this in a Fuji music collaboration he had with other artistes in 2002 titled Fuji Gyration where he has the lyrics, “Mo lè l’áya púpíl, kò sí hun tó burú; b’óbìnrin bá l’fíkí m’íjí, ó d’ac’íwó; b’óbìnrin bá l’fíkí m’íjí, illegal ni ... [that is: I can marry as many wives as I desire, there is nothing wrong in it; if a woman had two husbands, she would already become adulterous; indeed it is illegal for a woman to marry more than one man]. Pasuma, here too, could be assumed to rely on Yorùbá culture for this pronouncement. Unlike Ebenezer Obey, Pasuma is a Muslim whose religion permits him to marry up to four wives if he can treat the co-wives equally (Surah An-Nisa 4:3). However, he does not mention four wives but many wives, showing that he does not rely on the injunction of his religion but seemingly on “his Yorùbá culture”. He, therefore, asserts that it is illegal for a woman to marry two husbands. Perhaps, he is unaware of the fact that the Nigerian customary laws under which the marriage ordinance is found also forbid a man from marrying more than one woman at a time.

Popular Culture, Polygyny, and the Commodification of Women

Section 33 (1) of the Nigerian Marriage Act prohibits any person who is currently in a legal marriage with his or her spouse from getting married to another. Section 370 of the Nigerian Criminal Code and Section 384 (1) of the Nigerian Penal Code consider bigamy, which is the act of marrying someone while already married to another person, a felony, and anybody found guilty of the offence is liable to imprisonment for up to seven years. It must be clearly stated that the laws do not discriminate between the sexes. Hence, one agrees that Pasuma’s song deserves more interrogation, especially as he sings further: , wo hun tí baby wíl s’áyà /

B’ÍwÍ mi bá t’ straw/Máá fi cè ‘gbádùn ni [meaning: look what this baby worn on her chest/ if I got hold of a straw/I’d suck to my heart’s content]. “What the baby has worn onto her chest” is a euphemism for saying that the lady is heavily breasted. Moreover, because she is heavily breasted, the man has the entitlement to grab, possess, and satisfy his lust with the breasts without any consideration for the lady’s feelings. Rape, sexual molestation, and assault are by-products of men’s sense of entitlement to women’s bodies. This notion is rooted in a broader feminist critique that men often view women’s bodies as objects to be possessed and exploited. Oriaku (2012, p.148) supports this argument by submitting that it is “the man’s craving for the woman’s body that is at the root of her exploitation” by referencing Saadawi’s Woman at Point Zero (1983). Oriaku (2012) states that Saadawi expresses her strong disdain for the pervasive societal attitude that reduces women to objects to be possessed, flesh to be ogled and devoured. As it happens to Firdaus of Woman at Point Zero, so it happens to Morayo and Morenikeji in Yejide Kilanko’s Daughters Who Walk this Path (2012). The two ladies walk the same path as victims of rape, sexual molestation, and assault, and their traumatic common experience gives the novel its title.

While polygyny, therefore, is not in the same category as rape and sexual assault on women, it evolves from the same ideology that produces the latter, positioning women as beings created for the pleasure of men. This is not an uncommon situation in a patriarchal society, where men turn women into “objects of beauty for consumption and a point of power” (Irele & Irele, 2010, p. 303). An instance of rape is also euphemistically presented in *Odù Ìlfún Ìrosùn* where Ifá advises that if a man desires a woman, he should ‘steal’ her and have intercourse so that she will become pregnant. Then she will become his wife” (Bascom, 1969, p. 505). The point here is that makers of popular culture in Yorùbá land often mislead the unsuspecting public about what constitutes the culture of the Yorùbá people, misrepresenting and misinterpreting it, as David Izegaegbe submits in The Nigerian Observer as a continent-wide problem in Africa (Izegaegbe, 2024).

Women as Commodity and Status Symbol in Polygynous Practice

The motif of women as men’s possessions also appears in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. In introducing Nwakibe, the narrator says he has “three huge barns, nine wives and thirty children” (Achebe, 2008, p. 15). Views like this encourage feminist preoccupations against the patriarchal societal tendency to see the woman as a possession, a trophy to be owned, bragged about, and displayed. That Nwakibe has nine wives must be clearly stated to foreground his importance in the village. The mention of the number of wives in the same breath as the size of the man’s barn reveals a patriarchal ego, implying that the number of wives is a status symbol analogous to material wealth. This subtle ranking of importance, from most to least, underscores the use of anti-climax, also called bathos. The same can be said of Okonkwo, who takes enormous pride in his harem of three wives. His maternal uncle, too, Uchendu, expresses nostalgia for

having had six wives earlier in life, reinforcing the foregoing notion. Interestingly, Uchendu downplays his current marital situation, saying he has no other wife, “except that young girl who knows not her right from her left” (Achebe, 2008, p. 107), implying that his previous multiple marriages were a source of pride and status. Indeed, Okonkwo plans to marry two more wives upon reintegrating into the Umuofia community after serving his seven-year banishment. Moreover, the marriages are not occasioned by any failing on the part of either of the three wives he presently has; it is merely a statement to show that he has the financial capacity to marry as many women as his heart desires and to increase his standing in society. Hence, the mention of wives comes along with the mention of enlargement of his barn in the same sentence: “He would build a bigger barn than he had had before, and he would build huts for two new wives” (Achebe, 2008, p. 137). This inadvertently symbolises women as property for men and reinforces the patriarchy that is seemingly inherent in society.

Other literary works have thematised polygyny, and very prominent among them is *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* (2010) by Lola Shoneyin. Like Nwakibe, Okonkwo, and Uchendu, Baba Segi’s assemblage of wives and the attendant brood of children is a badge of honour reflecting his prosperity, prestige, and ‘virility’. The word “virility” is put in scare quotes because the man is not truly virile. However, the subject of virility is outside of the scope of this section of this paper (See Author forthcoming for context of virility). Indeed, polygyny and women’s struggle for survival as they share one husband amidst masculine ego, infertility, and infidelity is the subject matter of the novel. Baba Segi, the illiterate principal character of the novel, already has three wives with the same educational background as his own, and he has just married the fourth, a university graduate, as a trophy wife. Odù ,Ìwí’s reservations about the consequent problems of polygyny manifest as the wives set out to kill one another to safeguard their position in the man’s household. This domestic struggle eventually leads to the death of Segilola, Baba Segi’s first child, and for whom he is rechristened, in a typical Yorùbá cultural sense. Baba Segi’s real name is Ishola Alao, but he is addressed as Baba Segi the moment he has his first child.

One major setback of polygyny is the manner in which it sets women up against one another as they struggle to compete for the man’s attention and love. Two of Baba Segi’s wives, Iya Segi and Iya Femi (the first and third wives, respectively), conspire against Bolanle, the fourth and only childless wife of Baba Segi, to drive her out of the house. Odù Ìlwínrín Méjì gives an account of two co-wives fighting over the cause of the illness of the younger and junior wife’s child. The younger wife’s intuition is correct because it is later revealed that the senior wife had reported the junior wife to the conference of witches, and they had imposed what they deemed appropriate punishment on her child (Frisvold, 2016, p. 32), a fact Odù ,Ìwí also foregrounds.

In the same vein, Bascom (1969) recounts the story of a Gidigidi who became a woman and married a hunter in Odù Ìlsà Ògúndá. The hunter is already married, and the marriage to

the Gidigidi-turned-woman is meant to make him polygynous. Gidigidi, according to Modupe Apoola (2024), is the Yorùbá word for Yellow-backed Duiker. The animal sheds its hide as it transforms into a very beautiful woman. Unknown to her, a hunter is observing her transformation and how and where she keeps her hide. After she leaves to sell her wares in the market, the hunter takes her hides and goes to show her that he knows her secret and uses this to blackmail her into marrying him. She acquiesces on the condition that the hunter would not reveal her secret to anyone else. She bears two children for the hunter. However, the hunter's first wife is unhappy about sharing her husband with a stranger. Hence, she inquires about the origin of the second wife, first from her husband, who is not forthcoming in giving a clear and coherent answer. Then, she engages her husband's brother to help her find the truth. The brother tactically makes the hunter drunk before making his enquiry, and when he finds out the truth, he relays the same to the first wife. She, in turn, mocks the second wife with the secret, telling her that her hide is kept in the storehouse. The latter goes to the storehouse, finds her hide there, and wears it to transform herself back into the Gidigidi. Thereafter, she attacks and kills the first wife. She approaches the hunter, intending to kill him, but he quickly explains how his first wife acquired the information about her. Hence, the Gidigidi spares the husband and charges him with the responsibility of caring for her children (Bascom, 1969).

The hunter's trap: Manipulation, rivalry, and the politics of polygyny

The foregoing Gidigidi narrative is engaging overall but tragic from the African womanist and humanist perspectives, reminding us to support fellow humans and women. Gidigidi kills her fellow woman, who has been suffering the indignity of sharing her man with another woman, but spares the man who is the architect of the whole trouble. First, she does not voluntarily marry the hunter; she only consents to his proposal because he keeps her hide and knows her secret. Hence, it is a marriage founded on manipulation and blackmail. When she eventually has the opportunity to escape the unpalatable yoke of marriage, she kills the agent of escape but pardons the real culprit. This is also demonstrated in the relationship between Nnu Ego and Adaku, and, to a lesser extent, Adankwo, in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979). Nnaife, their husband, symbolises marital irresponsibility, yet the women are compelled to compete for his love. Adaku finds herself at the epicentre of resentment and mistrust from her rival wives, Nnu Ego and Adankwo, until she is forced to leave her matrimonial home. The manner of her leaving the house bears some semblance to Aissatou's in Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1979) as both women boldly defy patriarchal norms by leaving their marital homes, a powerful gesture of resistance against oppressive societal expectations. It is, however, Aunty Nabou who symbolises the agent of women oppressing fellow women in the novella. She insists that her son, Mawdo Ba, must marry another wife, thereby frustrating Aissatou and driving her out of the marriage. Another point worth noting in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* is that, while Nnu Ego dislikes sharing her husband with another woman, she takes pride in dreaming

of seeing her son marry multiple wives. Indeed, she has not yet become a mother, and the sex of the baby in her womb has not been determined when she already fancies the baby to be a boy child who will grow up to practise polygyny, which she detests. Perhaps she detests it only for herself yet does not see anything wrong with it when others are the victims. Thus, the twist of fate leads women to antagonise one another in a polygynous household, leaving us with the entanglement that Ifá poses regarding whether to be polygynous or not. Hybridity depends on the outcome and individual circumstances.

Significance and Contribution of the Study

This study advances existing scholarship by repositioning Ifá as a philosophical archive that describes, rather than prescribes, marital practices, thereby foregrounding moral ambiguity as a core feature of Yorùbá epistemology. By placing Odù Ifá in sustained dialogue with literary texts, popular music, oral narratives, and Nigerian socio-legal frameworks, the paper offers an integrated, culturally grounded analysis of polygyny that bridges Yorùbá philosophy, gender studies, and cultural critique. In doing so, it challenges masculinist appropriations of “culture,” highlights how women’s commodification is normalised through selective cultural interpretation and demonstrates how indigenous knowledge systems can be read critically without romanticisation or dismissal. This contribution not only refines scholarly understanding of polygyny in Yorùbá society but also models a method for engaging African epistemologies as dynamic, contested, and ethically generative frameworks.

Conclusion

A Yorùbá proverb which says: Òrìcà j’lì n pé méjì obímrin kò dé’nú, meaning women do not genuinely like sharing their husbands with their fellow women, is apt. This proverb accounts for the perspective of women on polygyny. It shows clearly that if polygyny was a Yorùbá cultural practice, it was imposed by an oppressive patriarchal order on the women. It was not a cultural practice that initially received women’s endorsement. Polygyny clearly breaks the bond of sisterhood and solidarity that could and should exist among women (Kolawole, 1997). However, in an undated interview posted on [YouTube](#) by MeMsie Africa on the twenty-third of September, 2021, Buchi Emecheta makes a strong case for polygyny, which she says “gives more independence for the woman.” According to her, polygyny allows senior wives much freedom, as they do not have to look after the husband since there are junior wives who will be more than willing to take up such responsibilities. This situation will enable the woman to develop herself as she aspires to become whatever she wants, without compromising her marital responsibilities. Hence, this paper illuminates the complexities of polygyny in Yorùbá society by foregrounding the ambivalence embedded in Ifá philosophy and contrasting it with reductive portrayals circulating in Nigerian popular culture. Its unique contribution lies in demonstrating that polygyny, far from being a static or inherently Yorùbá

institution, is a historically hybrid, interpretive, and deeply contested practice. The implications for gender discourse in Yorùbá studies are profound because this work challenges the dominance of masculinist cultural interpretations that normalise women's commodification, competition, and disposability in polygynous households. It calls for a reorientation of Yorùbá gender studies toward reading indigenous texts critically, attentive not only to what they reveal about social arrangements but also to how they are reinterpreted or distorted to maintain gendered hierarchies. It also highlights the need to foreground women's perspectives, resistances, and alternative moral imaginaries as central to understanding the lived realities and cultural politics of marriage in Yorùbá contexts.

Future research can extend these insights by examining how contemporary Yorùbá communities across Nigeria and the diaspora navigate polygyny in relation to shifting economic structures, Christian and Islamic reform movements, feminist ideologies, and digital popular culture. Engaging ethnographic work, women's oral histories, Ifá divination in practice, and comparative African marital systems would further deepen our understanding of how individuals reinterpret cultural scripts amid changing social conditions. Such research would continue to challenge essentialist narratives and affirm the dynamic, negotiated nature of Yorùbá gender philosophy.

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