

Ethnic Identity and Sex

Stereotyping as Adaptive Strategy Among the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria

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Introduction

It has been pointed out that within Yoruba marital relationships "seniority" is of crucial importance (Bascom 1942; Eades 1980) and that the senior wives are respected and deferred to in matters of decision making. There is, however, a relative dearth of literature on the relationship between ethnic identity, sex, and social change among the Yoruba – even though Bascom (1942) hinted that the opposite of senior, i. e., junior, is used by the Yoruba to categorize other ethnic groups as inferior. The words "senior" and "junior," in matters of social usage, can be linked to sex relationships (Bascom 1942) and can, therefore, serve as connective links between ethnic identity and sex relations.

From the knowledge of Yoruba culture gathered as a native growing up in Iwo, Oyo State, Nigeria, from library research and semantic analysis of stereotypifications, I will argue that ethnic identity, sex, and social change are interrelated. Indeed, the changes in sex relationships which had taken place in Yorubaland increasingly question the relevance of "seniority" but continue to emphasize the importance of age to the social classification among the Yoruba. The changes are indicative of the extent to which traditional values can hold themselves alive in the minds of the Yoruba when there are several opportunities for role playing and, hence, identity creation.

1. Ethnographic Context

To the outsiders the Yorubas of Southwestern Nigeria may appear as an homogeneous group. That is because, in spite of the cultural diversity that exists (Eades 1980), the fundamental com-

ponents of shared identity is present: a common history, a shared myth of origin, perceived blood relationship, and similarity in religious tradition (Fadipe 1970). The Yoruba settlements range from poor and depopulated conglomerates to big urban centers with economic links to the world metropolis (Eades 1980). The population, now over 15 million and representing one of the biggest for any single ethnic group in Africa (Eades 1980), is spread over a variety of geographic vegetations. The demographic distribution covers such vegetational areas as the forest, mangrove swamp, and savanna. This spread, in traditional time, brought about a lot of variations which created a number of subgroups or clans with minor differences in language, social organization, and customs. So that, for instance, because of differences in language an Egba will have to listen carefully to understand what an Ondo is saying.

The different Yoruba subgroups have always exploited the resources peculiar to their geographical habitats as farmers, hunters, or fishermen (Lloyd 1973). The animals hunted for meat include squirrels, rabbits, antelopes, and elephants. These are not evenly distributed over the various vegetations. Rather, animals such as elephants are peculiar to the open grassland whereas the squirrels and rabbits are common in the forest zone. Hence, depending on whether one is located in the savanna or the forest, the animals served with meals tend to reflect their abundance in the particular locality.

As farmers though, the Yoruba plant crops such as okra, beans, cassava, vegetables, and yams. There is sexual division of labor – between husband and wife. Farming is principally a male occupation. Women are only partially involved as harvesters and "small scale" farmers. Often the women have small plots of land close by their husbands for the planting of peppers, onions, and vegetables. And at harvest season, they collect and sell their products as well as that of their husbands in the market.

Aside from being involved in the trading of farm products, women also cook for the family. The preparation of food involves the chopping of wood, the grinding of pepper and onions and other condiments for the soup to be served. It is