

Church Missionary Society evangelists and women's labour in nineteenth-century Abéòkúta

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Women's economic independence in precolonial Yorùbáland has been extensively documented. Historical enquiry into Yorùbá women's work dates back to the mid-twentieth century and the start of second-wave feminism, which generated a new interest in women's studies and women's history. As Western feminists first attempted to rescue history from the normative androcentric paradigms pervasive in academia, they also sought to discover the origin of women's oppression in society. They traced this oppression to patriarchy and tried to uncover the global dynamics of this repressive male force (Jayawardena 1993: 11; Yuval-Davis 1993: 3). Western feminists soon discovered, however, that in non-European societies, gender and patriarchy functioned in distinctive and often dissimilar ways. In certain areas, such as Yorùbáland, women were largely economically and financially independent of their husbands. Consequently, Yorùbá women were used as examples of women's economic and political empowerment in pre-industrial societies. Social historians including Judith Brown and Alice Schlegel, for example, described the position of Yorùbá women as enviable when compared with those in many other societies of the same period. They argued that Yorùbá women's significant economic contribution to the region conferred political clout to an extent that was absent in many European societies (Brown 1970; Schlegel 1977: 1–40). Through the decades, African and Yorùbá historians such as Bọlanle Awẹ, Niara Sudarkasa and Nina Mba continued to emphasize women's economic independence and proposed further that the relationship between men and women in precolonial Yorùbáland was one of mutual gender complementarity and balance rooted in Yorùbá cosmology, the significance of which 'obliterated oppression' – in essence, negating Western understandings of universal patriarchy (Awẹ 1977: 144–60; Mba 1982; Sudarkasa 1986: 91; Olademo 2009: 44). However, the question of how women's work functioned on the micro-level, its connection to Yorùbá indigenous concepts of gender and polygyny, and how these ideals were perceived and influenced by Christianity in the nineteenth century is yet to be examined.¹ This article aims to shed light on these issues.

Before exploring women's work in nineteenth-century Yorùbáland, one must first ask if sex-based gender differentiation existed. Did 'women' actually exist in the nineteenth century? Some scholars argue that asking the 'woman' question in the context of precolonial Yorùbá society is an ahistorical Eurocentric imposition on Yorùbá history. In *The Invention of Women*, Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí argues that 'woman' as a social category did not exist in precolonial Yorùbá indigenous

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¹H. U. Beier and H. Ware have examined women's work and its links to polygyny and religion in Yorùbáland in the 1950s and 1970s respectively (Beier 1955; Ware 1975).

culture before ‘sustained’ European contact. She considers gender differences based on sex in Yorùbáland as ‘European cultural baggage’ and an ‘alien distortion’ (Oyèwùmí 1997: xi). Using the Òyó-Yorùbá as a case study, she contends that although the Yorùbá recognized biological sex differences, sex carried no social value, and she writes that, ‘unlike [in] the west, physical bodies were not social bodies ... and the presence or absence of certain organs did not determine social position or ... social hierarchy’. Rather, she suggests that precolonial Yorùbáland was a gerontocratic society where rank, status and hierarchy were determined by age and seniority (*ibid.*: ix–xiii).

Oyèwùmí’s theory has been frequently challenged and refuted. J. D. Y. Peel and Lorand Matory, for instance, argue convincingly that social constructs based on sex existed in precolonial society. Matory’s book, published before that of Oyèwùmí, shows that, in the nineteenth century, bridewealth payments and polygyny were common occurrences while dowry and polyandry were inconceivable (Matory 1994: xxiv). Furthermore, women’s consanguineal and conjugal residences were both patrilocal. Seniority in these patrilocal residences was determined not by actual age, but by the length of one’s attachment to it. Peel argues that, regardless of her age, a new bride was considered younger than every child born into the lineage before her wedding. Women consequently experienced a mid-life social demotion at marriage to which men were immune (Peel 2002: 139). Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, however, offers the most vocal and in-depth critique of Oyèwùmí’s work, contesting her tendency to view language and meaning as static instead of fluid, shifting and mutable. She also critiques Oyèwùmí’s emphasis on gerontocracy and seniority as the only forms of power relationships existing outside other hierarchies such as sex, socio-economic and socio-political position. She criticizes her claim that Yorùbá society lacked sex-based hierarchical dimensions because the Yorùbá language has age-based categories instead of sex-based ones.² Bakare-Yusuf asserts that language may not always equate to social behaviour and that the absence of social phenomena in language does not preclude their presence in culture (Bakare-Yusuf 2004: 1–12). The consensus that the social category ‘woman’ did exist therefore allows the exploration of women’s work and its connections to Yorùbá indigenous gender ideals and Christianity in the town of Abèòkúta.

Methodology

There has been a considerable amount of academic enquiry regarding gender and labour in nineteenth-century Yorùbáland. Most recent studies, including those of Marjorie Mackintosh and Judith Byfield, use precolonial society as a background to their core focus on the development and transformation of gender and work in the colonial and postcolonial periods (Byfield 2002; McIntosh 2009). Olatunji Ojo, Robin Law and Francine Shields, however, take precolonial society as their main subject matter (Law 1993; 1995; Ojo 2005; 2008). While Ojo is principally

²For instance, the Yorùbá language lacks sex-based pronouns and sex-based categories that denote familial relationships such as brother and sister. Instead, the language includes age-based categories of *egbon* and *aburo*, meaning elder and younger relative/sibling respectively.

concerned with the movement, economy and gendered aspects of domestic slavery, Law and Shields look at women and work in the precolonial era. Shields' impressive doctoral thesis, 'Palm oil and power: women in an era of economic and social transition in nineteenth-century Yorùbáland (south-western Nigeria)', is a macro-economic analysis of the gendered division of labour in Yorùbáland during a time of economic transition from the slave trade to 'legitimate' trade in areas such as Abẹ̀òkúta and Ìbàdàn in the nineteenth century (Shields 1997). While this article uses identical sources to Ojo, Law and Shields, it differs in focus as it attempts to explore labour in the quotidian lives of women alongside missionaries' perception of, and interaction with, female work and how this influenced their opinions of other aspects of Yorùbá social life, including marriage and polygyny. Following in the tradition of authors such as Saburi Biobaku, Judith Byfield and Agneta Pallinder-Law, it examines the practices of one Yorùbá town, Abẹ̀òkúta, without attempting to portray these town specificities as necessarily universal to Yorùbáland (Biobaku 1957; Pallinder-Law 1974). Although the Yorùbá spoke an identical language, differentiated by dialect, Yorùbá towns in the nineteenth century developed in distinctive forms under diverse circumstances, and, as a result, town characteristics were often unique. Nevertheless, with respect to marriage and labour, gaps in the archival sources necessitate that some examples and similarities are taken from Lagos, Ìbàdàn, Oñdó and Òtá, a town that bordered with Abẹ̀òkúta; when used, these are clearly identified. However, the analysis is centred on the Ègbá people of the prolific and dynamic town of Abẹ̀òkúta. Without reiterating the town's history, which has already been widely and extensively debated (see Biobaku 1957; Pallinder-Law 1974; Phillips 1969; Lloyd 1971), it is important to say that Abẹ̀òkúta came into existence only because of the nineteenth-century intra-ethnic wars.

The nineteenth century in Yorùbáland is popularly known as the age of confusion. The Òyò Empire, the most powerful in the area from the seventeenth century, disintegrated in the early nineteenth century due to a combination of internal and external crises. An advancing Fulani jihad from the north, the rise of Dahomey in the west, the instability of the central Òyò government, and successive inept Òyò kings known as *Aláàfín* all contributed to the maelstrom of local instability. This was compounded by the impact of slave raiding and the struggles for the control of trade routes as the region became incorporated into global economies. The kingdoms of the Yorùbá were thrown into a state of crisis that was to last for over seventy years. Violent and debilitating wars, slave raids, widespread insecurity and grave human suffering devastated communities. There was mass migration, desertion of homesteads and means of livelihood, and families were separated. Whole towns and villages were deserted, and large areas of farmland were reclaimed by forest. Fought from the 1820s, these intra-ethnic wars ended in the 1890s when the British intervened and forced the signing of peace treaties (Biobaku 1957; Awẹ 1973; Falola 1991). During one of the Yorùbá wars known as the Òwu war of 1817, the original Ègbá homestead in the Ègbá forest was destroyed and many of its citizens were enslaved. Those who escaped abandoned their homes and moved to a new area under Olúmọ rock in 1830, which they called Abẹ̀òkúta ('under a stone'). Here, they rebuilt their political, economic and social structures and embarked on wars of expansion while defending their town from foreign incursion (Ajisafe Moore 2010 [1916]; Biobaku 1957: 16–17). Although the Ègbá of Abẹ̀òkúta consisted of many sub-groups, primary evidence

demonstrates that the cultural practices of these groups were largely identical. Therefore, the town is explored as a single unit without significant reference to townships.

Abẹ̀òkúta is an ideal case study for an enquiry into nineteenth-century practices because of the vibrancy of Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS) evangelists in the area, the records of whom form the primary resource base. From 1845, when the CMS began its ministry in the region, missionaries were required to keep a journal of their daily activities; these were later sent to the CMS headquarters in London, in order to ‘know accurately the state of the mission’ (Peel 2003: 10). These records and the nineteenth-century Abẹ̀òkúta CMS newspaper *Ìwé Ìròhìn* (1859–67) now constitute a voluminous and indispensable source for understanding the nineteenth-century Yorùbá. Their daily entries, although primarily concerned with their religious undertakings, also include information on politics, economics and social organization. Missionary journals as sources do raise some concerns. First, there is evidence of frequent cultural bias and prejudice towards Yorùbá culture. Bowen once referred to Africans as ‘deficient and ... stupid’, and these prejudices coloured missionaries’ perception of the Yorùbá (Bowen 2011 [1857]: 286). In many instances, missionaries also dismissed Yorùbá culture as dark, barbaric and heathenish. In 1853, the evangelist Thomas King described the last funeral rites of an *Aláké*, ruler of the Ákè section of Abẹ̀òkúta. After recounting the funeral procession, sacrifices and dance, King concluded abruptly with ‘then all [performed] obscene customs too shocking to relate’.³ This hasty end to the narration of a ritual leaves many unanswered questions. Several other events considered ‘unimportant and irrelevant’, most notably discussions about female household dynamics, were also overlooked. Detailed descriptions of culture are therefore infrequent. Commenting on the representation of indigenous Yorùbá religion in the CMS journals, Peel remarks that what is missing from the journals is precisely what is essential to social and cultural history: “‘thick” descriptions of rituals, extensive vernacular texts, and exegeses of myths and symbols’ (Peel 2003: 12).

Missionary records are also cold and do not adequately depict tone, emotion, silences, hesitations and other important linguistic tools that are necessary for an adequate assessment of events. Furthermore, missionaries’ records give mere glimpses into moments in the lives of the Yorùbá people with whom they interacted. As these encounters would undoubtedly have been limited, records are not necessarily representative of the entire Yorùbá life experience. The fact that journals are uncritical of their authors’ activities also poses a problem (Adeboye 2006: 91). Mission records must thus be read for what they are: expressions of how evangelists perceived the Yorùbá, which may not always be consistent with, or reflective of, the life experiences of the entire populace. Other sources used, such as the published books of missionaries, Western travellers, explorers, ethnologists and early indigenous elites, also pose similar constraints.

Despite these limitations, evangelical records are important to social enquiry. When missionary records are read along the grain, one observes that some of

³University of Birmingham, Cadbury Research Library, Special Collections, Church Missionary Society Archive Microfilm Collection, Section IV: Africa Missions, Part 4: Nigeria–Yoruba Mission, 1844–80 CMS/CA2/0: Original Papers–Missionaries: Thomas King.

their remarks and observations were insightful and accurate because their motive to convert the people demanded that they invest considerable time and effort in learning about Yorùbá cultures, institutions and languages. In reference to Yorùbá marital arrangements, a European missionary wrote in January 1864 that ‘young married women should be keepers at home and guide the house. In this country, women are consistently in the market, or carrying loads, or doing some work.’⁴ Despite the observer’s Western prejudices concerning the ‘proper’ duties of wives, his observation that Yorùbá women worked outside the home is accurate and other nineteenth-century observers and Yorùbá oral traditions corroborate this claim. As I will discuss, working was a compulsory duty for every wife and integral to indigenous ideals of femininity. Another interesting dimension to CMS records, especially in relation to women’s labour, is the personal accounts of indigenous Yorùbá missionaries concerning their personal struggle with conforming to the European ideals that they espoused. The majority of CMS missionaries in the nineteenth century were either Sierra Leonean ex-slaves originally captured from Yorùbáland or homegrown Yorùbá converts. Their documentation of women’s work was often deeply personal, as they had to mediate between the cultural expectations of their faith, their wives’ insistence on engaging in economic activities and the realities of Yorùbá life. The use of CMS journals also dictates the timeline because this enquiry into female labour begins in 1845, the start of CMS activities in Abẹ̀òkùta and the subsequent documentation of Yorùbá life, and ends in 1893 when the region came under British suzerainty; they therefore are useful for exploring indigenous culture before pervasive European rule and influences. Although I do not assume that the nineteenth century was a static, unchanging time, the lack of extensive social commentary in the sources necessitates that the entire period be explored as a single entity.

Much of my enquiry into women’s labour explores the quotidian, lineage level, because *ebi* (lineage) was the primary mode of organization at the time. The lineage comprised a group of people who traced their origin along agnatic lines to a single ancestor, along with their wives, slaves, pawns, followers and hangers-on, who lived together in a polygamous spatial patrilocal dwelling known as the compound, or *idile* in the Yorùbá language. The lineage was an economic, political, religious, judicial and social unit. Land was corporately owned by the lineage and all members laboured for the compound’s economic success. Chieftaincy candidates and other public officials were nominated from within lineages, marriages were brokered among lineages, and members collectively worshipped household deities. Lineages also internally policed their members, and disputes were referred to higher town authorities only if they either could not be resolved in-house or involved non-lineage members. All individuals were born into a lineage and remained in one for their lifetime. Should a member be exiled from a community for committing a crime for which the penalty was excommunication, they would attach themselves to another household in the host town. Even death did not release an individual from lineage affiliations, as they were buried in the compound and worshipped as ancestors who were expected

⁴University of Ìbádán, Department of History, Kenneth Dike Library, *Ìwé Ìròhìn 1859–1867*, (cited hereafter as *Ìwé Ìròhìn*), January 1864.

to intervene in the lives of their descendants (Johnson 2010 [1921]: 95).⁵ It was within the lineage that females first learned to work.

The introduction of girls to labour in nineteenth-century Abẹ̀òkúta

At about the age of four, when young children began to show a measure of independence, such as bathing and feeding themselves, children in Abẹ̀òkúta, and indeed all of Yorùbáland, were taught to perform household chores (Crowther 1852: 235). The Yorùbá considered this measure of independence as a sign that a child had developed the cognitive capacities required to begin learning the skills needed to survive in society. One such important skill was household labour, which included domestic sanitation, running errands, cooking and tending to livestock (Drewal 1977: 561). These tasks were intended to promote individual household competencies and cooperation with others to achieve larger tasks. Children also cared for the old and invalids of the household, which taught compassion and care, and their duty to serve household visitors encouraged familiarity with strangers and built social and communicative skills (Renne 2003). There is some indication that different tasks were assigned to boys and girls. Young boys tended to horses and large livestock and ran errands while girls engaged in household activities such as cleaning and fetching water. In nineteenth-century Abẹ̀òkúta, however, these tasks often overlapped, and although some household duties were stereotyped as female work, boys were taught these chores so that they could perform them when girls were unable to do so. When the townsmen and civil chiefs met to discuss town politics in Abẹ̀òkúta, women and girls were confined to their homes, under pain of death, for the duration of these meetings. Depending on the undertakings, these confinements lasted anything from a couple of hours to seven days, according to one 1847 report.⁶ During this time, boys assumed all the female duties that required leaving the compound. During one such confinement in 1859, Robert Campbell, a Caribbean traveller of Ègbá descent, noticed that there were a few men and boys about 'looking as if in the perpetration of some guilty action, because ... they were compelled to perform some office regarded according to their customs, as proper only for women' (Campbell 1861: 87). Thomas Jefferson Bowen, a Southern Baptist missionary, also noted that during one such confinement several boys hawked goods, which was a stereotypical female task. He described them as 'awkward and sheepish, clearly inadequate to the smiles and chats of girls whose places they were endeavouring to fill' (Bowen 2011 [1857]: 141). From birth until the age of six or eight, children were primarily socialized by their mothers, who, through daily observation and instruction, taught children good work ethics, cultural practices, good morals and proper Yorùbá social behaviour. From around the age of six, however, male and female socialization began to differ (Schwab 1955: 366). At that age, boys began to

⁵Andrew Gollmer, CMS/CA2/043/044, 10 July 1846; James Okunseinde, CMS/CA2/074, 28 September 1879.

⁶David Hinderer, CMS/CA2/049, 17 May 1857; Henry Townsend, CMS/CA2/085, 4 January 1847.

spend an increasing amount of time with their fathers and other men learning male occupations such as farming and smelting, while girls began to learn their mothers' commercial activities, since female instruction from then on was geared towards preparing them for economic production and wifely duties.

Nineteenth-century observers often disagreed about the gendered division of labour in nineteenth-century Yorùbáland. Observers such as Bowen and William Clarke insisted that women never engaged in farming activities, with Clarke stating emphatically that 'females ... are never known to cultivate the farms ... so strong is the aversion of the native mind to this kind of female servitude that I have yet to see the first instance of a woman engaged, hoe in hand, in cultivating the soil' (Clarke 1972: 58). Other nineteenth-century visitors including Hugh Clapperton, however, wrote that women performed 'all the labour of the land' (Clapperton 1966: 58). While the evidence is too sparse to definitively confirm why there is such a disparity in the records, researchers of Yorùbáland including Robin Law and Francine Shields now accept that nineteenth-century observers wrote only about the places they visited. Since Bowen and Clarke remained in Western Yorùbáland, it is probable that women in these areas indeed did not farm. In places such as Oñdó in Eastern Yorùbáland, which missionaries did not penetrate until the late nineteenth century, evidence suggests that women did engage in farming. In 1875, the missionary Nathaniel Young in Ode-Oñdó stated that 'a good many of the men and children have gone away to their farms and a good many of the women too – as their women also cultivate lands as well as the men'.⁷ Young's emphasis on women cultivating lands 'as well' is telling, as it suggests that women's role in farming was peculiar to these areas. Despite this, in Western Yorùbáland, there were some reports of men trading and isolated instances of some females engaged in agricultural labour in extenuating circumstances, for example when their fathers were sick or if male members of the lineage were away at war, or when elderly women who could no longer engage in rigorous trade assisted on farms (Shields 1997: 57). However, these were the exception and not the rule, because in Western Yorùbáland, which is where Abèòkúta is located, men farmed while women traded and boys and girls were socialized along these lines.

From a very early age, girls learned economic labour by accompanying, assisting and imitating older women. They were initially given light tasks and slowly progressed to harder work. Girls first accompanied their mothers to the market to observe and assist, and later they became responsible for trading in their mother's absence. When they could be trusted with this task, they began hawking goods locally before venturing further afield; first they visited the rural markets surrounding the towns, and then they joined large caravans to trade in distant towns and markets (Awè 1992: 60). These activities ensured that girls had the requisite competences for future economic independence. Through trading, girls learned assertiveness, confidence, resolve, effective communication, bargaining, negotiation and financial savvy. Girls neither kept the profits acquired from their commercial dealings nor received a salary or remuneration. Childhood was considered a training stage used to acquire the vital skills for later life. Profits were turned over to their mothers or the female with whom they were apprenticed.

⁷Nathaniel Young, CMS/CA2/098, 11 July 1875.

Girls continued to work for their mothers until they married and began to work for themselves.

Marriage and women's matrimonial labour in precolonial Abẹ̀òkúta

In nineteenth-century Yorùbáland there were few spinsters.⁸ Everyone who could marry did so. LaRay Denzer calls marriage in Yorùbáland 'a condition of adulthood', suggesting that one could not begin the journey from childhood to adulthood without first getting married (Denzer 1994: 3). People were expected to enter into matrimony when they reached the culturally acceptable marriageable age, usually around eighteen to twenty for females and mid-twenties to early thirties for males.⁹ These relatively late ages for both sexes may be linked to Yorùbá attempts to retain the crucial lineage labour of their children for as long as possible. Once married, parents would likely lose their children's labour and the financial gains that resulted from this, because, as I will discuss, their offspring began working for themselves and their own households. Additionally, the age gap between what was considered an acceptable marrying age for girls and boys could be linked to women's shorter childbearing years, which necessitated that they married sooner than men.

There were two types of marriage in precolonial Yorùbáland: marriages between free men and free women and those between free men and slaves. For free women, marriage in precolonial Yorùbáland followed three distinct stages. The first stage was the initial formal betrothal ceremony known as *ijòhun* or *isìhun*, when the groom's family paid the first instalment of the bridewealth to engage a prospective bride, who was usually either an infant or a young girl. The groom could be a young boy or man, to be married for the first time, or an older man who wished to marry additional wives to grow his household. *Ijòhun* included a variety of agricultural produce, local alcohol and cowries (money), the amount of which had been previously negotiated and agreed to by both families before the ceremony. *Ijòhun* ensured the intended groom's sole sexual access to the girl, and legal rights over all children she bore in the future (Fadipe 1991: 60–1; Ajisafe Moore 2010 [1916]: 26; Johnson 2010 [1921]: 113). From that day, any sexual indiscretion on her part was considered *pańsàgà* (adultery). After *ijòhun*, the prospective husband then performed bride service in the form of free manual labour for his bride-to-be's family to show his commitment to the lineage and his dependability as an *àna* (in-law) (Fadipe 1991: 74). Such work included clearing land for farming, supplying firewood – sometimes as often as once a week – building or thatching roofs, and other general household repairs (Delano 1937: 128; Ajisafe Moore 2010 [1916]: 23). He also began to contribute to the financial undertakings of his intended in-laws, including costs incurred during yearly feasts and funeral expenses. W. Williams, a CMS missionary, also added that the intended groom was obliged to send an annual amount of new

⁸A few exceptions included people with severe disabilities or women with important religious roles.

⁹It is possible that males from wealthy families married earlier because their lineages had the resources to procure marriages earlier than poorer lineages.

corn and yam every year until his intended bride could be wed.¹⁰ When the bride came of age, the bridegroom paid *ìdàna*, the final bride price, just before the wedding. *Ìdàna* again included agricultural produce and money and marked the union of the two families. Once paid, the bride moved permanently to her conjugal home in a wedding ceremony known as *ìgbéyàwó*, literally translated as ‘to carry the bride’ (Johnson 2010 [1921]: 114).

The sparse records concerning marriages to slaves suggest that many men married slave wives in the nineteenth century, often to ease the bridewealth burden. To wed a slave, a man needed only to capture or buy a female slave from a slave market or a slave dealer, have sexual relations with her, and keep her in his compound.¹¹ Campbell commented that ‘a less troublesome way of procuring a wife, with many, is to resort to the slave-marts of Ilorin at once, money in hand, and make their choice’ (Campbell 1861: 28–9). Although slaves were expensive, men considered them cheaper than the long-term costs of bridewealth. Shields argues that while slave women may have been called wives, the title was not necessarily representative of their status and many women perceived themselves as concubines (Shields 1997: 275). Slave wives did not hold the same status as free wives, as they could be punished or killed without consequence, did not need to consent to marriage, could be sold for profit, and, as I will discuss, had to work for both themselves and their masters/husbands.¹² In essence, they were at once ‘concubine, commodity and worker’ (Burrill 2008: 52). The sources also indicate that slave wives were never married as first wives, since, in Yorùbáland, the ascension to adulthood required that a man pass through the proper betrothal and bridewealth process.¹³ Finally, rarer still are clues regarding informal relations between slaves or marriage among slaves. The only record found about slave marriage was written by Ajisafe Moore, who stated that ‘[a] master may give his slave another woman slave of his in marriage. In that case, nothing is paid. Of course, the children, their offspring are included in the property of the master’ (Ajisafe Moore 2010 [1916]: 27).

After marriage, women lived permanently with their husband’s kin group. Within matrimony, men and women had clear economic roles and responsibilities to one another. Since girls did not accumulate any income while working for their mothers, they often had no independent finances at the start of their marriage. The bargain of marriage required that a husband give his wife starting capital to trade and the woman used income from this trade to meet her responsibilities in the compound, which included providing for her own upkeep and that of her children (Ajisafe Moore 2010 [1916]: 28–9; Oyèwùmí 1997: 65). A husband could decide to give his wife more resources over time but this was solely at his discretion, as only the initial capital was mandatory. Most women traded – even those who had other primary occupations traded part time. Niara Sudarkasa’s claim that ‘virtually all women in [Yorùbá society] are engaged in some type of trade activity’ is confirmed by the nineteenth-century missionary William Clarke, who observed that, despite

¹⁰W. Williams, CMS/CA2, 23 November 1878.

¹¹Although the sources make no mention of the appropriate age to wed a slave wife, it is assumed that men also married slave women after the societally acceptable age of eighteen.

¹²The question of consent has been explored extensively elsewhere (see Alanamu 2015).

¹³It was common for free men to marry slave wives but male slaves could not marry free women.

women carrying out other occupations, they left their work from about 5 p.m. during the peak market period to 'try their fortune at trade' (Sudarkasa 1973: 2; Clarke 1972: 265).

Although Ajisafe Moore, and later Simi Afonja, wrote that a wife was required to help her husband in his vocation as well as carry out their own independent trading ventures, there is little historical evidence to support this claim as many nineteenth-century observers expressly stated that women were not obliged to work for their husbands (Ajisafe Moore 2010 [1916]: 28; Afonja 1981: 305; Bowen 2011 [1857]: 305). It is possible that Ajisafe Moore may have been referring to slave wives, since they were expected to work for their upkeep and perhaps to buy their freedom, and work for their masters/husbands (Shields 1997: 217–76). Free husbands and wives had complete economic independence and exclusive control over their financial affairs. There was no common purse. There is also little evidence to suggest that husbands and wives contributed jointly towards household expenses. Helen Callaway argues that, within the compound, *omọ-iyá* (children of the same mother) formed stronger bonds than the *obàkan* (siblings with the same father) because mothers were responsible for the feeding, clothing and upkeep of their children (Callaway 1997: 180). Spouses kept the profits from their economic activities and neither could be held responsible for the other's debt, either in their lifetime or posthumously. Wives had no rights or claims over their husband's property and vice versa, nor could a spouse inherit in the event of death. The only property to which a wife was entitled was a room for herself and her children upon marriage (Bowen 2011 [1857]: 305). In practice, the patrilineage, and not the husband, allocated this room.

The independence of Yorùbá wives was emphasized in numerous missionary reports. The Sierra Leonean missionary James White recounted a significant event that took place in the town of Ọ̀tá in 1870. This town bordered Abẹ̀òkúta, and White described it as being so much like Abẹ̀òkúta that 'it may be inferred with safety that they are from the same origin'.¹⁴ White wrote that Abraham Ajàkà, a convert, loaned his wife fourteen heads of cowries to buy a slave, who cost 134 heads of cowries. After about a year, a scarcity of slaves led to a rise in prices and someone offered him twice what his wife had paid for the slave. Intending to buy his wife's share of the slave and then sell for a profit, Abraham accepted. However, when he informed his wife of his plans to sell the slave, she refused, insisting that she required the slave's services. When Abraham attempted to pressure her to sell, the wife took the case to the mission house. John King, and later James White, heard the case and decided in favour of the wife, stating that, since Abraham had lent her the money, the slave was her property and he had no right to sell him or her. However, they ruled that the wife should pay Abraham the fourteen heads of cowries he had loaned her. Unsatisfied with the ruling, Abraham took the matter to the chiefs, who again upheld White's decision and told the wife to restore to Abraham fourteen heads of cowries. Still displeased, Abraham continued to pressure his wife to sell, beating her and once throwing her out of the compound. When the authorities became aware of this state of affairs, he was exiled from the town on 25 May 1871 for insubordination to the government. Although insubordination was

¹⁴James White, CMS/CA2/087, Letter to Reverend Venn, 1 January 1866.

ordinarily a capital offence, his sentence was commuted because White pleaded on his behalf.¹⁵ This account is even more remarkable when one considers that missionaries often disapproved of slave ownership and, as I will discuss, women's work. Nevertheless, when arbitrated as an economic dispute rather than a moral one, the wife's claim was upheld because of local understandings of marital finances. Should a spouse provide capital towards his wife's ventures, outside his mandatory initial contribution, he was only entitled to his investment and not the profits. The only exception to this was if both parties had previously agreed to alternative terms.

Missionaries and women's labour

Missionaries often opposed Yorùbá marriage structures, recommending instead that Christian marriage based on Victorian bourgeois patterns of the male breadwinner and patriarch who provided for his (house)wife and children was a better model for society. In the Aké section of Abèòkùta, Reverend (later Bishop) Ajayi Crowther stated optimistically in 1853 that many of the converts who were married in church now entered into male breadwinner/female housewife roles 'with all readiness and happiness', encouraging others to do the same.¹⁶ His assertion may have been true for some Christian couples in some parts of Lagos. Kristin Mann argues that Christian influences and the introduction of ordinance marriages prompted a rise in matrimonial arrangements modelled along European lines in which women depended first on their fathers, and then on their husbands (Mann 1991). However, evidence from Abèòkùta was markedly different.

In Abèòkùta, Crowther's comment was more of an aspiration than a reality, as very few converts lived up to these ideals. About twenty years later, Daniel Coker in his 1875 annual letter still stated disapprovingly that women were so intent on trading that some neglected church. He wrote that:

the principal business of most of the women in the church is selling the articles received from Lagos in the neighbouring towns ... Some of the candidates of baptism are tempted to neglect class and Sunday service when the fifth day falls on a Thursday and Sunday.¹⁷

Every fifth day was a large market day known as *ojò ojà* (day of the market). Larger than the daily town market, the market on these days attracted people from the surrounding towns and villages who brought various wares and merchandise to Abèòkùta to buy and sell. For many women converts, the financial draw of the market took precedence over church attendance. The wives of Yorùbá missionaries, who were supposed to act as examples to the congregation, continued to engage in large-scale economic undertakings that were separate and independent from their husbands. In 1864, Arthur Harrison, a European missionary, wrote a letter to Henry Venn, the secretary of the CMS, expressing his disapproval of Mrs White, the wife of James White, a Sierra Leonean evangelist. He complained

¹⁵James White, CMS/CA2/087, May 1871.

¹⁶Ajayi Crowther, Journal, 17 October 1853.

¹⁷Daniel Coker, CMS/CA2/028, Annual Letter, 1875.

that her trading activities were so large that she had employed three women and two men to assist in her trade of European goods including plates, cloth and tobacco. He added that, contrary to CMS proscription against the sale and consumption of alcohol, 'Mrs White had received [and traded] one hundred cases of gin'. Harrison was further exasperated by the news that Mrs White had employed a Mrs Talabì, a 'disgraced' convert suspended from the church, who had left her husband to cohabit and bear children by another man. Even worse, rather than moving with her husband when he was transferred to Òtá, Mrs White remained in Abèòkúta to continue her trade.¹⁸ This type of economic independence was typical of Yorùbá missionary wives at the time and was in sharp contrast to European wives, such as Anna Hinderer, the wife of the German CMS missionary David Hinderer, who simply supported her husband's ministry. Indeed, the wives of Yorùbá missionaries seemed to have viewed their activities as separate from the church, hence Mrs White's lack of qualms regarding her sale of alcohol and the moral status of her employees.

Some wives of Yorùbá missionaries did not concern themselves with church activities at all, reflecting historical patterns of separate labour spheres. They saw church work as their husbands' duty, which had little to do with their profession. James Johnson expressed his disapproval of Mrs Allen, the wife of another of the town's Ègbá pastors, who did little to identify with her husband's job and church work. He complained that she 'scarcely resided in her station ... sometimes sleeping there only at night or other times spending only a few hours on Sundays out of the whole week'. She instead lived in Ìpòrò, where they had a house. There, she carried out her trade and even had her own slaves, despite Johnson's opposition to Christians owning slaves.¹⁹ Judith Byfield proposes a reason why missions opposed women's economic ventures. She writes that although missionaries admired the socio-economic independence of women, they opposed it because it impeded their desire to create a monogamous family unit modelled after European patriarchy (Byfield 2002: 23). Missionaries such as T. J. Bowen thought that the Yorùbá family unit 'lacked unity' since women had independent affairs, separate from their husbands, and supported their own children. His call for a 'family unit' was entrenched in his idealized androcentric Western view of the family (Bowen 2011 [1857]: 343). Some missionaries even suggested that teaching men commerce was the only remedy for women's supposed monopoly on trade. Accordingly, the CMS introduced a new cotton gin to promote cotton trade and teach vocational trading to men, stating that they felt 'it was proper for men rather than women to do so'.²⁰

Some missionaries articulated their disapproval of Yorùbá marriages by insinuating that a lack of a common purse somehow led to suspicion and mistrust between spouses. A European missionary wrote in *Ìwé Ìròhin* that according to indigenous custom, husbands and wives had different purses and interests, and

¹⁸ Arthur Harrison, CMS/CA2, Letter to Reverend Venn, 5 February 1864. Despite missionary opposition to women's labour, they hardly ever spoke about men's labour, perhaps because they viewed the latter as normal and unworthy of note. However, this absence leaves many questions unanswered, including those concerning young men's labour and its connection to masculinities.

¹⁹ James Johnson, CMS/CA2/056, 1878.

²⁰ Nigerian National Archives, Ibadan, *African Times* (1862–65; 1876–82), 1 April 1870.

since converts decided to follow this ‘native’ principle, Christian marriages, like ‘heathen’ unions, lacked any domestic peace or cohesion. He argued that a husband did not entrust his property to his wife lest she appropriate it for her own use. He added that since husbands were not consulted on financial matters, women would most likely end up ‘hopelessly in debt’.²¹ This account distorted the facts about Yorùbá customs, introducing negative connotations, and is quite revealing about the missionary’s bias against Yorùbá models of marriage. Rather than view the Yorùbá system as an alternative arrangement that promoted women’s independence and self-sufficiency, many missionaries saw it as a destructive institution that bred hostility and distrust. Furthermore, the missionary’s insinuation that men were better traders whom women needed to consult in order to make appropriate business decisions was unfounded. By all indications, women were in a better position than men to make accurate and informed decisions in commerce, as they – and not men – had been socialized in this role.

Within the discourse of women’s labour, a few missionaries changed their stance slightly towards the mid-1860s, perhaps due to a realization that they could not prevent women from pursuing economic activities. Missionary discourse changed from opposing all women’s formal economic and commercial activities to insisting that women perform gender-appropriate ‘reasonable work’.²² Missionaries asked that Christian wives engage in petty-trading activities at home to earn extra money rather than large-scale, long-distance trade ventures that took them away from their husbands and children for extended periods.²³ Nevertheless, even this was unsuccessful, as Yorùbá Christian wives continued to trade along traditional lines well into the twentieth century. In 1900, L. A. Lijadu, a Yorùbá missionary based in Ondo, defended his wife’s trading activities to his supervisors by claiming that they were within the ‘reasonable limit’ specified by the CMS. In response to accusations levied against himself and his wife, he wrote that his wife was not ‘uncontrollable’ as others had suggested and her travels for trade were not as frequent as reported. He argued that, contrary to the accusations, she spent most of her time with him at the mission house rather than on trading activities.²⁴ Evidently, up until the end of the century, not much had changed with regard to the economics of the household.

Rather than a system of mutual benefit, many European missionaries saw the separate purse system as a hindrance to ‘happy’ and successful marriages. They argued that ‘husbands no doubt fancy it is cheaper for them if their wives earn their own living’, rather than supporting them.²⁵ An *Ìwé Ìròhìn* contributor – who, from his tone, was most likely European – commented that ‘a selfish husband makes his wife do all the hard work so that she has no time to attend to her proper duties of minding the house and bringing up the children’.²⁶ Therefore, men were also the targets of this vilifying narrative. European missionaries stated that the usual excuse a woman gave for trading was that her husband’s

²¹*Ìwé Ìròhìn*, May 1863.

²²For more on changes in church regulations, see Ajayi (1965).

²³*Ìwé Ìròhìn*, January 1864.

²⁴L. A. Lijadu, Family Papers: Letter to the Finance Committee, 2 April 1900.

²⁵*Ìwé Ìròhìn*, January 1864.

²⁶*Ìwé Ìròhìn*, July 1862.

earnings were insufficient. Showing a lack of understanding of local realities and the position of indigenous missionaries, they considered this reason a ruse for women's desire to satisfy their need for gain and luxuries. The only way to remedy this was by teaching the new generation of females 'the correct way to live', which was why mission schools' curricula for girls put subjects such as cooking and sewing at the forefront of female education, hoping that these would make women better housewives.²⁷

It is ironic that although indigenous evangelists often sided with their European counterparts and wrote disparagingly about Yorùbá marriage models, many had wives engaged in large-scale, long-distance trading, highlighting what little control, if any, local missionaries had over their wives' activities.²⁸ This African missionary narrative also often flew in the face of reality because many local evangelists depended on the labour of their wives for sustenance, as they repeatedly complained that their salaries were inadequate to provide for their families. Their perpetual requests for salary increases were seldom granted, leading them to rely on spousal labour for support. This collaboration between husbands and wives was rare and seldom practised beyond the marriages of missionaries. African missionaries thus lived lives of contradiction: caught between Christian cultural expectations of conjugality and the realities of sustaining a family on an inadequate single income. As a compromise, some missionaries took up a second occupation; notably, James White bred and sold livestock and livestock produce.²⁹ Some indigenous missionaries could not even afford to start a trade. In a letter to Reverend Venn, Samuel Crowther, son of Ajayi Crowther and head of the dispensary at Abéòkúta, wrote that 'my present salary being not sufficient to keep myself and wife, I have in consequence not been able to keep anything for extra expenses such as building a house or commencing a trade'. He continued that if the financial committee again denied his request for an increase in salary, he would be forced to join a merchant group. He added that in such an eventuality, 'my medical services will no longer be required and I shall consequently be obliged to quit my present house under such circumstances, I have fancied this a most unfavourable result'.³⁰

The pressure for converts to conform to European ideals of marriage also had other unforeseen effects, one of which was infidelity, which was reported to have become near endemic in congregations towards the end of the nineteenth century. It is difficult to assess these changes in Abéòkúta in depth. By the time they became pervasive in the 1880s, daily missionary journals had largely been replaced with annual church reports that gave little detail about social life. Nonetheless, we can appreciate the general characteristics of the changes that took place by examining Yorùbá communities in Lagos from the 1870s because the social, religious and economic structures in Lagos and Abéòkúta were similar. In 1873, Charles Phillips began a six-page lament about the immoral state of the Breadfruit Church in Lagos with comments about adultery. He wrote that:

²⁷*Jwè Ìròhìn*, February 1867.

²⁸James White, CMS/CA2/087, Letter to Reverend Venn, 28 October 1858.

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰Samuel Crowther, CMS/CA2/032, Letter to Reverend Venn, 25 September 1856.

The greatest drawback that I find to the cause of the gospel in this place is the prominence of the sin of adultery among the members of the church. We have our leaders meeting once a month and there is so scarcely a leaders meeting before which a case of this sin is not brought and I am sorry to remark that the number of members suspended on account of this sin is far greater than those suspended for other sins.³¹

Among other reasons given for this increase, Phillips insightfully suggested that the pressure placed on young Christian men to live according to European bourgeois ideals of masculinity compounded the prevalence of premarital liaisons. As an *Ìwé Ìròhìn* contributor observed, before a man married, ‘he was to have a house, furnish it, and earn a living on which he depended to keep him, his wife and his children respectable’. Without it, the writer claimed that the marriage would be that of ‘discontent and trouble’.³² The failure of Christian men to find employment and live up to these archetypes resulted in many young men delaying marriage for longer periods and instead engaging in premarital liaisons.

Missionaries, women’s work and polygyny

Missionaries routinely considered Yorùbá women’s matrimonial labour and polygyny as two sides of the same coin. They often accused Yorùbá marriages of being ‘contrary to true morality’ and ‘founded on idolatry and polygamy’.³³ They claimed that a woman separated from her husband during trading ventures would most likely be unfaithful as only ‘Christian principles ... could deny the feelings of nature’.³⁴ These assertions contradicted the true state of affairs because the problem of adultery was, as suggested by archival sources, more pervasive in churches than among non-Christians. Missionaries also often suggested that women’s labour led to child neglect. An article in the June 1864 edition of *Ìwé Ìròhìn* read:

Polygamy exists without limits. In consequence, the woman cannot devote undivided attention to her offspring for polygamy separates her from her husband and labour of some sort or other takes her time and attention, and in consequence of exhausting labour, the child is deprived of its usual food, the mother’s strength being needed to support the waste arising out of labour.³⁵

Missionaries thus consistently linked women’s labour to polygamy and all its principles, which they vehemently opposed. This perceived inextricable connection between polygyny and women’s labour may also explain why missions opposed labour for their female congregation and for the wives of missionaries. Although a considerable number of these women were in monogamous relationships, missionaries, especially European missionaries, would have perceived Christian women’s continued economic activities as an endorsement of indigenous tenets of polygyny, a practice that, according to them, was ‘founded on idolatry’. Several historians have discussed polygyny in nineteenth-century Yorùbáland and missionary opposition to it. Consequently, this will not be

³¹ Charles Phillips, CMS/CA2/077, 3 November 1873.

³² *Ìwé Ìròhìn*, November 1863.

³³ *Ìwé Ìròhìn*, February 1867.

³⁴ *Ìwé Ìròhìn*, June 1864.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

discussed extensively here.³⁶ It is necessary to say that polygyny was near universal in nineteenth-century Yorùbáland. Royalty, chiefs and rich men had large numbers of wives, and ordinary citizens were said to have had two or three (Bowen 2011 [1857]: 304–5; Campbell 1861: 29–60). To put it simplistically, a man's wealth and status were not measured in monetary terms but according to the size of his household, and women were married for their productive and reproductive value. The more wives a man married, the more children he could have. The more children he had, the more productive labour he acquired for economic ventures, increasing his means, which he used to purchase more slaves and marry more wives. This allowed a man to progress from junior masculinity when he married his first wife to adult and elite masculinity where he had a large household of wives, children and slaves, which in turn attracted followers to his household (Campbell 1861: 28; Barber 1991: 195). Besides, Yorùbá customs that prescribed that men and women had separate incomes freed male members from having to financially provide for their wives, increasing their ability to acquire more resources in terms of future wives and slaves.

Beyond its many advantages for men, polygyny was also practically beneficial to women. Having other wives in the compound not only freed women from boredom and the burden of domestic tasks, a certain household reciprocity also allowed women to engage in longer periods of trade (Brown 1970: 1075). When her children were still young, a woman could only engage in limited commercial activities because she had to care for her own children and those of the older wives. As her children grew older, they in turn were placed in the care of wives who were new mothers so that she could actively pursue economic activities, expand her trading interests, and accumulate wealth (Brown 1970: 1075; Afonja 1981: 309).³⁷ Women's independent finances meant that wives did not have to support their husbands and they could use their resources as they wished without fear of their husband's dealings or debt. Some women even became much richer than their husbands. Examples include Madam Tinúbu and Madam Jojòlólá, both of Abèòkúta, who were large-scale entrepreneurs and prominent chiefs in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Alice Schlegel and Judith Brown argue that women in pre-industrial societies, including Yorùbáland, did not perform tasks that were considered stressful, exposed them to danger, or took them away from home for long periods (Schlegel 1977: 35; Brown 1970: 1075). Schlegel contends that long-distance trade and dangerous tasks were incompatible with child bearing; as a result, most women were not socialized to – or expected to – perform such tasks (Schlegel 1977: 35). In the same vein, Niara Sudarkasa wrote that, in Yorùbáland, 'normally too, men predominated in long-distance trade, and women were pre-dominant in local markets' (Sudarkasa 1986: 100). This was not necessarily the case in nineteenth-century Yorùbá country as observers stressed women's long-distance trading activities. Captain Clapperton, a British explorer, commented that women were everywhere in Yorùbáland, carrying heavy loads from town to town (Clapperton and Lander 1829: 28). Similarly, Samuel Johnson, a Sierra

³⁶For example, see Hyam (1991) and Hastings (1994).

³⁷The presence of domestic slaves on farms and in homes would also have relieved women's household burden and made it easier to pursue trade.

Leonean missionary, described women as ‘hardy as men’ who engaged in the long-distance trade of cotton, palm oil, ammunition and slaves (Johnson 2010 [1921]: 245). Although there is little evidence that women’s work led to child neglect as missionaries suggested, such long-distance trading activities did often leave women and their children vulnerable to danger. Thomas King, a Sierra Leonean ex-slave with the CMS, recalled how he was captured by slave raiders when he was home alone with some younger siblings because his mother and elder sister had gone to a town about fifteen miles away for several weeks of trading.³⁸ Likewise, in 1860, 400 women traders were either killed or captured into slavery when they travelled in caravans to Èrin town for provisions.³⁹

Conclusion

Labour was central to indigenous ideals of femininity in nineteenth-century Abẹ̀òkúta. Young girls were socialized to work from a very young age and they continued to actively pursue labour after marriage. Matrimonial labour was key to women’s wifely duties because only through work could they sustain themselves and their children. The introduction of Christianity to nineteenth-century Abẹ̀òkúta complicated women’s pursuit of economic and financial independence, especially among Christians. Coloured by their desire to convert Yorùbá polygamous households into monogamous family units based on Victorian bourgeois ideals of the male breadwinner and female homemaker, missionaries, and especially European missionaries, actively sought to halt women’s economic activities. They often considered women’s labour and polygyny as mutually reinforcing and blamed the indigenous institution for supposed disharmony within marriages.

Nevertheless, their attacks on women’s economic pursuits were ultimately unsuccessful in the nineteenth century as many Yorùbá Christian women, including the wives of missionaries, continued to work along traditional lines. As a result, Yorùbá missionaries often had to choose between their adopted Christian culture and the economic realities of the time. The question of women’s labour, particularly Christian women’s labour, in nineteenth-century Abẹ̀òkúta was fraught with conflicts, but, ultimately, little compromise was made. Indeed, when European influences became more persuasive in the twentieth century, and more women were educated, women did not stop working. Educated women simply changed the type of work in which they participated, choosing teaching, nursing and clerical jobs over traditional trading patterns. Many women also used subjects such as cooking and sewing, which were intended to produce better housewives, to build careers as professional caterers and seamstresses.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Stacey Hynd and Staffan Müller-Wille who read the multiple versions of the thesis from which this article was derived. Their insightful comments and critiques were

³⁸University of Birmingham, Cadbury Research Library, Special Collections, Church Missionary Society Microfilm Collection, CMS/M/EL1: *Church Missionary Gleaner*, March 1851.

³⁹*Iwé Iròhìn*, October 1860.

cogent and invaluable. Many thanks also to Insa Nolte, Kate Fisher and Giacomo Macola for their valued input. I also appreciate the detailed feedback given by the reviewers of *Africa* whose suggestions and critique helped shape this article.

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Abstract

This article is about women's labour in nineteenth-century Abéòkúta, in present-day south-west Nigeria. It is based on primary research which explores women's economic independence and its intricate connection to the indigenous institution of polygyny. By examining the institution from the perspective of Anglican Church Missionary Society evangelists, it also demonstrates how indigenous culture conflicted with the newly introduced Christian religion and its corresponding Victorian bourgeois ideals of the male breadwinner and the female home-maker. It investigates the extent to which missionaries understood women's work in the Yorùbá context, their representations of the practice, their attempts to halt female labour and their often unsuccessful efforts to extricate their congregations and their own families from these local practices. It argues that European Christian principles not only coloured missionary perceptions of women's labour, but influenced their opinions of the entire Yorùbá matrimonial arrangement.

Résumé

Cet article traite du travail des femmes à Abèòkúta, dans la région sud-ouest de l'actuel Nigeria, au dix-neuvième siècle. Il se fonde sur la recherche primaire qui examine l'indépendance économique des femmes et son lien complexe avec l'institution indigène de polygynie. En examinant cette institution du point de vue des évangélistes anglicans de la Church Missionary Society, il démontre également comment la culture indigène contrastait avec la religion chrétienne nouvellement introduite et ses idéaux bourgeois victoriens de l'homme soutien de famille et de la femme au foyer. Il étudie dans quelle mesure les missionnaires comprenaient le travail des femmes dans le contexte yorùbá, leurs représentations de la pratique, leurs tentatives de faire cesser le travail des femmes et leurs efforts souvent infructueux de désengager leurs congrégations et leurs propres familles de ces pratiques locales. Il soutient que les principes chrétiens européens non seulement teintaient les perceptions des missionnaires sur le travail des femmes, mais influençaient leur opinion du mode matrimonial yorùbá.