

**MARRIAGE AND TABOOS AMONG THE YORUBA PEOPLE OF NIGERIA: A
CRITIQUE**

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**AN ORIGINAL ESSAY SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF
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BENIN, BENIN CITY**

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CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this project work was carried out by **AKINFE MOTUNRAYO AYOMIDE**, with matriculation number **ART2101068**, and it meets the requirement for the award of Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy.

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Date

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to God Almighty, the source of my wisdom, strength, and inspiration throughout this study. I also dedicate it to my family, whose prayers, love, and encouragement sustained me.

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I am most grateful to God Almighty and I return all the glory to Him, the Father of light and giver of all wisdom, for His impartation of knowledge and grace that have sustained me throughout this program.

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes a deep dive into the philosophy behind marriage taboos, or *èèwò*, among the Yoruba people in Nigeria. We're looking at them from all angles: cultural, moral, and spiritual. In Yoruba tradition, marriage isn't just about two people; it's seen as a sacred bond that connects entire families, their ancestors, and even generations yet to come. This bond is kept strong by taboos that govern who can marry whom within a lineage, expectations of faithfulness, customs around widowhood, and various ritual practices.

My approach here is to interpret and critically examine these ideas. I've been poring over Yoruba proverbs, myths, and folktales to really get at the core ethical ideas that underpin these traditions. To do this, I'm bringing in the perspectives of both African philosophers like Segun Gbadegesin, Kwasi Wiredu, and Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, as well as Western thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre. The big question I'm trying to answer is whether these taboos truly foster community harmony or if, in some cases, they actually lead to unfairness.

What I found is a mixed bag: some of these taboos are really crucial for maintaining Yoruba identity and moral standards. However, others seem to strengthen patriarchal structures and limit individual freedom, particularly for women. Ultimately, I'm arguing that we need to be selective—preserving the valuable parts of this cultural heritage while also making reforms to ensure justice, dignity, and human rights for everyone.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Marriage has long been regarded as one of the most foundational institutions in Yoruba culture, not merely as a union between individuals, but as a sacred covenant connecting families, lineages, and spiritual realities. Among the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria, marriage is deeply embedded in cosmological, moral, and social frameworks that define identity, obligation, and community belonging. Traditionally, it is believed that marriage fulfills both personal and communal purposes, ensuring continuity of lineage, solidifying kinship ties, and preserving moral order through clearly defined gender roles and responsibilities.¹

However, integral to this institution are a number of taboos, rituals, customs, and prohibitions that shape who may marry, under what conditions, and how marital life should be conducted. These taboos cover a wide range of concerns, from lineage and bloodline restrictions to sexual conduct, widowhood rituals, and expectations surrounding fertility and bride price.² Although many of these practices are justified as mechanisms for maintaining moral order and communal harmony, others have been criticized for

¹ Oni, B. (2016). *Contemporary courtship and marriage practices among the Yoruba*. Ibadan: Adewale Press., 23.

² Omotayo, O. A. (2024). *Traditional marriage in Yoruba culture: An exploration of male dominance*. Ibadan, Nigeria: Heritage Publishers., 45–47.

reinforcing patriarchal hierarchies and restricting individual freedoms.³

The cultural weight of these taboos has ensured their survival across centuries, even through waves of socio-political change, including colonization, Christianity, and Islam, each of which brought different attitudes toward marriage and gender.⁴ In recent decades, however, Yoruba society has experienced rapid transformation due to urbanization, increased access to formal education, economic pressures, and globalization. These forces have contributed to shifting values and attitudes among younger generations who increasingly favor autonomy, mutual consent, and romantic love over arranged marriages and traditional marital obligations.⁵

This cultural shift has sparked tensions between tradition and modernity. Some scholars argue that the erosion of traditional taboos may lead to the decline of communal ethics and cultural identity.⁶ Others advocate for a reevaluation of these practices through the lens of human rights, gender equity, and philosophical inquiry, questioning whether all taboos deserve preservation or whether some should be ethically reformed.⁷

The philosophical relevance of this issue lies in the ethical questions it raises: Can culture

³ Olarinmoye, A. W. (2016). *Who needs your opinion? Changing values of traditional marriage among the Yoruba*. Lagos, Nigeria: Freedom House., 33–34.

⁴ Idowu, E. B. (1973). *African traditional religion: A definition*. London, UK: SCM Press, 78.

⁵ O. Akanle, J. O. Adesina, & E. Akarah, “The Institution of Marriage in Yoruba Culture: Patterns and Changes,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 31, no. 2 (2019): 189.

⁶ Gyekye, K. (1997). *Tradition and modernity: Philosophical reflections on the African experience*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 102–105.

⁷ Oyewumi, O. (1997). *The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourses*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 89–91.

justify every tradition? Is individual freedom negotiable in the name of communal values? Are all taboos morally defensible, or do some require reform to align with evolving understandings of justice, gender, and autonomy? These questions demand a critical interrogation of Yoruba marital taboos not only from a cultural or sociological perspective but also through African philosophical ethics, feminist critique, and theories of moral responsibility.

As Yoruba society continues to straddle the line between preserving cultural heritage and embracing social change, it becomes imperative to philosophically reflect on which practices uphold moral values and which perpetuate harm. This study seeks to engage that reflection with sensitivity to both the depth of Yoruba tradition and the urgency of ethical progress.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Marriage, as a cultural institution, is deeply entwined with societal values, norms, and taboos that shape the lives of individuals within a community. Among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, traditional marriage practices have long been governed by a system of taboos that dictate not only who can marry whom, but also how marriages are conducted, with significant emphasis on familial ties, gender roles, and spiritual considerations. These taboos have historically served as mechanisms for social cohesion, maintaining moral order, and protecting communal values. However, with the onset of modernization,

Western education, and the influence of global religious movements, these age-old practices are increasingly being questioned, leading to a fundamental philosophical inquiry into their continued relevance.⁸

The core issue this study seeks to address is the tension between tradition and modernity: whether the traditional Yoruba marriage taboos continue to serve their intended moral and social purposes or whether they have become outdated constructs that now perpetuate gender inequality, domestic violence, and social alienation.⁹ As Yoruba society continues to evolve, the question arises as to whether these taboos should be reevaluated, reformed, or discarded in light of contemporary ethical values, human rights discourse, and the changing role of women within marriage and society at large.¹⁰

This study critically examines the evolving nature of these taboos and their impact on individual agency, moral autonomy, and the broader social fabric. It invites a deeper reflection on the philosophy of culture, asking whether the preservation of these taboos is an expression of cultural identity or an obstacle to the realization of a more equitable and progressive society. This inquiry will be further explored in Chapter Two and in Chapter Three through critical philosophical evaluation rooted in African ethics and feminist

⁸ Caldwell, J. C., & Caldwell, P. (1977). The role of marital sexual abstinence in determining fertility: A study of the Yoruba in Nigeria. *Population Studies*, 31(2), 193–217.

⁹ Amadiume, I. (1987). *Male daughters, female husbands: Gender and sex in an African society*. London, UK: Zed Books..

¹⁰ Oyewumi, O. (1997). *The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

theory.¹¹

1.3 Purpose of Study

1. It aims to investigate how marriage in Yoruba culture is conducted
2. To describe the importance of Taboos and rituals in Yoruba culture
3. To discover the effect of taboos and rituals in marriage amongst the Yoruba
4. It aims to ask a philosophical questions about marital taboos
5. it aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue within Yoruba society about cultural and reform.

1.4. Significance of the Study

1. it will help in the understanding of the cultural social and economic implications of marital practices.
2. It gives room for the exploration of marital rites to reinforce communal identity
3. It highlights the role of marriage related taboos in stabilizing marriage amongst the Yoruba
4. It provides deeper insights into how cultural traditions influence reproductive behavior
5. This study is significant because it shows how Yoruba marriage customs preserve cultural heritage while also adapting to modern pressures.

¹¹ Gbadegesin, S. (1991). *African philosophy: Traditional Yoruba philosophy and contemporary issues*. New York: Peter Lang.

1.5 Scope and Limitations

This study focuses on marriage and marital taboos among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, examining them not only as cultural practices but also as philosophical categories that shape morality, identity, and social order. The scope covers Yoruba conceptions of marriage as a communal and spiritual institution, as well as the taboos that regulate it—such as restrictions on consanguineous unions, widowhood practices, and gender-based expectations.¹² Attention is also given to how these practices are being reinterpreted in the face of modern influences such as Christianity, Islam, globalization, and human rights discourses.¹³

The study, however, is limited in a number of ways. It does not provide fresh ethnographic fieldwork but depends on existing literature, oral traditions, and scholarly works which are here critically examined.¹⁴ Yoruba culture is also diverse, with variations across regions and families; therefore, the analysis is restricted to widely acknowledged marital taboos rather than every local practice. Finally, the work is primarily philosophical: it evaluates the ethical and cultural implications of Yoruba marital taboos, rather than measuring their statistical occurrence.¹⁵

¹² Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *African religions and philosophy*. London: Heinemann.

¹³ Gyekye, K. (1997). *Tradition and modernity: Philosophical reflections on the African experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁴ Idowu, E. B. (1973). *African traditional religion: A definition*. London: SCM Press.

¹⁵ Hountondji, P. J. (1983). *African philosophy: Myth and reality*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

In this way, the scope is wide enough to capture both traditional and modern perspectives, while the limitations keep the study focused on philosophical critique rather than exhaustive cultural description.

1.6. Methodology

This research adopts a philosophical and critical methodology rather than an empirical or statistical one. The study does not depend on field surveys or interviews but on conceptual analysis, interpretation, and critical evaluation of ideas. Philosophical methodology here involves clarifying concepts such as marriage, taboo, tradition, and freedom, and situating them within Yoruba thought and wider philosophical discourse.¹⁶

The study employs the method of critical analysis, which examines the presuppositions and logical coherence of Yoruba marital taboos. This involves questioning whether such taboos are consistent with Yoruba ethical principles such as *Ìwà* (character), communal harmony, and destiny (*ayanmo*), while also testing them against universal philosophical ideals such as autonomy, justice, and human dignity.¹⁷

In addition, hermeneutics is employed, particularly in interpreting Yoruba proverbs, myths, and folktales, since they embody cultural wisdom and moral instruction. This hermeneutical approach allows us to understand how meanings evolve and how

¹⁶ Wiredu, K. (1980). *Philosophy and an African culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁷ Gbadegesin, S. (1991). *African philosophy: Traditional Yoruba philosophy and contemporary issues*. New York: Peter Lang.

traditional norms can be re-read in light of present realities.

Finally, the method of critical evaluation enables the study to go beyond description and to pass reasoned judgment, highlighting which marital taboos remain valuable in sustaining moral order, and which perpetuate injustice, gender inequality, or unnecessary limitations.

1.7. Definition of Terms

To avoid ambiguity and ensure clarity, it is important to define some of the central terms employed in this study. These concepts are not only linguistic but also cultural and philosophical categories that shape the meaning and argument of this research.

Marriage

According to Mbiti (1969), marriage in African societies is a religious and social institution that unites not only two individuals but also their families, the ancestors, and even the unborn. In this study, marriage is understood as a socially recognized and often religiously sanctioned union between individuals, typically a man and a woman, which establishes rights and obligations regarding sexual relations, procreation, inheritance, and kinship.¹⁸ Within Yoruba culture, marriage (Ìgbéyàwó) transcends the contractual or romantic dimensions emphasized in modernity; it is a communal institution that binds

¹⁸ Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *African religions and philosophy*. London, UK: Heinemann.

families, affirms lineage continuity, and sustains moral and spiritual order¹⁹. Thus, marriage is both a personal commitment and a collective responsibility, linking the living, the ancestors, and the unborn in one moral–spiritual chain.

According to Oni (2016), traditional marriage among the Yoruba refers to the indigenous and culturally sanctioned form of marital union that predates colonial and Western influences.²⁰ It is not merely a personal contract between two individuals but a communal affair involving the families of both partners. Rituals such as the introduction (*Ìdána*), bride price (*Ìníyàwó*), and blessings from elders signify the spiritual and ancestral approval of the union. A Yoruba proverb captures this communal dimension:

“Ìyàwó là ñ wá, a kì í wá ọmọ ìyàwó.”

(“One marries a wife, not just the child of her parents.”)

This means that marriage brings together entire families and lineages, not just individuals.

Traditional marriage is therefore both social and sacred, binding the couple not only to each other but also to their wider kinship networks and to the spiritual order governed by taboos (*èèwọ*). In contrast to modern Western notions of marriage that emphasize individual choice and romantic love, Yoruba traditional marriage prioritizes continuity of lineage, communal harmony, and respect for ancestral traditions²¹.

¹⁹ Idowu, M. (n.d.). *Changing marriage traditions among the Yoruba: A cultural analysis*. Unpublished manuscript.

²⁰ Oni, B. (2016). *Contemporary Courtship and Marriage Practices Among the Yoruba*. Lagos: Adewale Press.

²¹ Omotayo, O. A. (2024). *Traditional Marriage in Yoruba Culture: An Exploration of Male Dominance*. Ibadan: Heritage Publishers.

kinship.

Ìwà (Character)

According to Oluwole (2014), *Ìwà* (character) is a central ethical concept in Yoruba philosophy.²⁴ It refers to the moral disposition and conduct of a person, which determines their dignity and value within the community. A good character (*Ìwà rere*) is the foundation of personhood and the mark of an *omoluabi* (a morally upright person). In the marital context, *Ìwà* shapes how spouses treat each other, how families relate, and whether taboos are observed faithfully. Marriage without good character is considered fragile, regardless of ritual observance.

Omoluabi

According to Gyekye (1997), the concept of *omoluabi* describes the Yoruba moral ideal of a person who embodies good character, respect, humility, and responsibility. To be an *omoluabi* is to live in harmony with oneself, one's community, and the spiritual order. In relation to marriage, an *Omoluabi* spouse honors taboos not out of fear but from an understanding that they protect communal peace and moral integrity.

Autonomy

²⁴ Oluwole, S. (2014). *Socrates and Orunmila: Two Patron Saints of Classical Philosophy*. Ibadan: Ark Publishers.

According to Kant's philosophical tradition, autonomy refers to the capacity of an individual to make free, self-determined choices without undue coercion. In this study, autonomy becomes significant when evaluating Yoruba marital taboos from feminist and existentialist perspectives. While Yoruba tradition emphasizes communal belonging, modern critiques raise the question of whether certain taboos unjustly infringe upon personal freedom, particularly for women²⁵.

Communalism

According to Mbiti (1969), communalism denotes the ethical principle that the individual exists in, and derives meaning from, the community. Among the Yoruba, this is expressed in the proverb: "*Eniyan l'aso mi*" ("People are my covering"). In marital matters, communalism ensures that marriage is not merely a union of two individuals but a fusion of lineages, overseen and regulated by collective norms, including taboos.

Existential Freedom

According to Sartre (1943), existential freedom refers to the idea that human beings are condemned to be free and must define themselves through their choices. This concept provides a contrasting lens to Yoruba marital taboos, as it challenges fixed roles and prohibitions that deny individuals the freedom to shape their identities authentically.

²⁵ de Beauvoir, S. (2011). *The second sex* (C. Borde & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.). New York, NY: Vintage Books. (Original work published 1949)

Feminism

According to Oyěwùmí (1997), feminism in the African context refers to intellectual and social movements that critique gender-based inequalities and advocate for women's rights, dignity, and freedom.²⁶ Within the Yoruba context, feminist critiques question marital taboos that disproportionately burden women, such as widowhood restrictions or unequal sexual expectations, and call for reforms grounded in justice, equality, and Yoruba ethical values.

²⁶ Oyewumi, O. (1997). *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

CHAPTER TWO

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION OF MARRIAGE

2.1 Concept of Marriage

Marriage is one of the oldest and most universal human institutions, existing in every known society though defined and practiced differently across cultures. Philosophically, marriage is not merely a biological arrangement for procreation but a social, moral, and spiritual institution that ensures continuity, solidarity, and meaning in human life. In African traditional thought, marriage assumes an even more elevated role because it is not a private affair between two individuals but a communal and cosmic reality that ties the living, the ancestors, and the unborn into a single chain of existence.

Among the Yoruba, marriage (Ìgbéyàwó) transcends romantic or contractual dimensions emphasized in Western modernity. It is conceived as a sacred and social covenant that integrates families and lineages. The Yoruba proverb states:

“Ìyàwó là ñ wá, a kì í wá ọmọ ìyàwó”
 (“One marries a wife, not just the daughter of her parents”).

This reflects that marriage is fundamentally communal bringing not only two persons but two families, their ancestors, and their spiritual destinies into permanent relationship.

Philosophical Dimensions of Marriage

From a philosophical standpoint, marriage embodies both ontological and ethical

dimensions. Ontologically, it situates individuals within the cosmic order, aligning them with forces of fertility, destiny (*òrì*), and ancestral blessing. Ethically, it is the ground for cultivating virtues such as fidelity, patience, respect, and cooperation. As Segun Gbadegesin argues, in African traditional philosophy, marriage is best understood as a moral-social contract in which obligations and duties precede individual desires, ensuring that the family, lineage, and society remain stable and morally ordered.¹

John Mbiti reinforces this idea by declaring that in Africa, “marriage is a duty, a requirement from the corporate society, and no normal person can live without it.”² For the Yoruba, this duty arises from the belief that the individual is incomplete outside the web of kinship and reproduction. Marriage thus becomes the means by which one fulfills obligations not only to oneself but to one’s family, community, and ancestors.

Marriage as Covenant and Continuity

In Yoruba cosmology, marriage is more than contract; it is covenant. The rituals of introduction (*Ìdána*), bridewealth (*Ìníyàwó*), and parental blessings are not empty ceremonies but moments that sanctify the union and invite ancestral and spiritual endorsement. The covenantal dimension is further reflected in Yoruba taboos (*èèwò*) associated with marriage, which prohibit acts that could desecrate the harmony of the

¹ Gbadegesin, S. (1991). *African philosophy: Traditional Yoruba philosophy and contemporary issues*. New York: Peter Lang.

² Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *African religions and philosophy*. London: Heinemann.

home or offend the ancestors.³ The survival of the lineage, expressed in the birth of children, is regarded as the highest blessing of marriage.

Unlike Western liberal thought, which often defines marriage in terms of personal autonomy and individual choice, Yoruba thought grounds marriage in communalism. The individual finds fulfillment through the family and community. As Kwasi Wiredu explains, African social institutions, including marriage, are primarily communalistic and function to ensure group survival rather than merely individual satisfaction.⁴

This communal dimension also carries spiritual weight. Marriage is understood as a bridge between the living and the ancestors, since children born of marriage continue the ancestral line and preserve the immortality of the family. Failure to marry is not simply a personal lifestyle choice but is seen as shirking one's existential responsibility. Hence, there are Yoruba proverbs that mock the unmarried, such as:

“Tí a kò bá bínì, bínì á bínú”

(“If one does not bear a child, another person will bear and one will be envious”).

This emphasizes that one's social and spiritual dignity is tied to participation in marriage and procreation.

Comparative Philosophical Insights

While African philosophers highlight the communal and sacred character of marriage,

³ Idowu, E. B. (1973). *African traditional religion: A definition*. London, UK: SCM Press.

⁴ Wiredu, K. (1980). *Philosophy and an African culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Western philosophers provide a contrasting but complementary lens. Kant, for example, regarded marriage as a moral union rooted in duty and respect rather than mere passion.⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, on the other hand, critiqued marriage as a structure that historically subordinated women, thereby calling attention to the power asymmetries embedded in the institution.⁶ These insights, when placed alongside Yoruba traditions, allow us to critically assess both the strengths and limitations of marriage as practiced within Yoruba society.

2.2 Purpose of Marriage

In Yoruba culture, marriage (*ìgbéyàwó*) is not simply a private affair between two individuals but a social and spiritual institution embedded in the wider moral and cosmological order. It serves multiple purposes, ranging from biological continuity to spiritual alignment, each purpose reinforcing the communal worldview of the Yoruba. The Yoruba saying, “*Ìyàwó là ñ wá, a kì í wá omọ iyàwó*” (“One marries a wife, not just the child of her parents”), captures the idea that marriage extends beyond the couple to involve families, ancestors, and society as a whole. Scholars such as Segun Gbadegesin stress that in African thought, and Yoruba thought in particular, marriage fulfills not only human needs but also cosmic and ancestral obligations, thereby carrying both moral and

⁵ Kant, I. (1996). *The metaphysics of morals* (M. Gregor, Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁶ de Beauvoir, S. (2011). *The second sex* (C. Borde & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.). New York, NY: Vintage Books.

metaphysical weight.⁷

1. Procreation and Continuity of Lineage

One of the foremost purposes of marriage in Yoruba society is procreation, which ensures the

Continuity of the lineage (*idilè*) is one of the foremost purposes of marriage in Yoruba society. Children are not regarded merely as biological offspring but as living proof of ancestral blessing and the assurance of communal survival. A Yoruba proverb declares, “*Omo làṣo iyá*” (“Children are the clothing of their mother”), underscoring that children embody honor, dignity, and social protection for their parents. Where there are no children, marriage is often seen as incomplete, and infertility is usually interpreted as a spiritual or ancestral imbalance requiring ritual remedies.⁸ This view aligns with Gbadegesin’s observation that African traditional philosophy understands marriage primarily as a vehicle for communal survival, rather than a pursuit of individual satisfaction.⁹

Marriage also serves the purpose of security and companionship, offering both emotional stability and social belonging. In Yoruba thought, husband and wife are partners

⁷ Gbadegesin, S. (1991). *African philosophy: Traditional Yoruba philosophy and contemporary issues*. New York: Peter Lang.

⁸ Ojo, O. (2008). Yoruba customary law and inheritance practices. *Journal of Legal Pluralism*, 40(57), 123–145.

⁹ Gbadegesin, *Op. Cit.*,

committed to providing for one another's physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. The proverb, "*Ibi tí ọkàn bá fẹ́, ní ẹsẹ̀ ń gbé lọ*" ("Where the heart desires, the legs will carry one to"), reflects the recognition that companionship is a natural and essential human aspiration. In traditional society, isolation or loneliness was not only undesirable but even considered socially and spiritually dangerous. Through marriage, individuals are woven into a network of care, while companionship extends beyond the couple to in-laws and extended kin, who become lifelong supporters.¹⁰

3. Economic Cooperation and Division of Labour

Among the Yoruba, marriage has never been viewed solely as a personal or romantic affair but also as an economic partnership. The household functions as a cooperative unit where husband and wife complement each other in sustaining the family's livelihood. Men are typically responsible for farming, hunting, or craftwork, while women take on roles as traders, processors of farm produce, and domestic managers. This balance of responsibilities ensures that no one is overburdened and that the family survives collectively. The Yoruba often affirm this in the proverb, "*Owo kan kò gbé ẹrù d'óri*" ("One hand cannot lift a load onto the head"), stressing that survival is impossible without cooperation. Marriage, therefore, strengthens not only the nuclear family but also connects extended families into broader economic alliances through resource pooling and

¹⁰ Adeoye, C. L. (1980). *Oruko Yoruba*. Ibadan, Nigeria: Oxford University Press.

inter-lineage cooperation.¹¹

4. Preservation of Culture and Tradition

Marriage is also an avenue through which culture is preserved and handed down to succeeding generations. Every stage of the process—from *ìdáná* (the introduction ceremony), *Ìníyàwó* (bride price), to the blessings and prayers offered by elders—serves to reinforce Yoruba customs and values. Through these practices, the younger generation learns the sacredness of taboos (*èèwò*), reverence for elders, and the cultivation of *Ìwà pẹ̀lẹ̀* (gentle and good character). Scholars such as Gbadegesin and Wiredu point out that marriage in the African setting functions as a moral institution, a kind of school where values are tested, practiced, and transmitted for the continuity of communal life.¹²

5. Regulation of Sexuality and Morality

Marriage also plays a central role in regulating sexuality within society. By providing a socially sanctioned framework for sexual relations, it prevents promiscuity and the social disruptions it brings. Within the Yoruba worldview, unregulated sexuality is believed to attract misfortune, disharmony, and even ancestral disapproval. Marriage thus ensures that intimacy is properly ordered, protecting lineage continuity and upholding moral

¹¹ *Ibid.*,

¹² Gbadegesin, *Op. Cit.*,

standards accepted by the community.¹³

6. Social Identity and Communal Belonging

Marriage provides individuals with social identity and belonging. A married man or woman is accorded respect and recognition in the community, as unmarried adults are often seen as incomplete or irresponsible. In Yoruba thought, personhood (*èniyàn*) is achieved not in isolation but through participation in communal institutions, of which marriage is central. Mbiti summarizes this communitarian outlook in his well-known dictum: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am."¹⁴ Through marriage, one becomes fully integrated into the moral and spiritual network of the community.

7. Spiritual Balance and Ancestral Approval

In Yoruba culture, marriage is seen as a way to keep a spiritual balance between the living, their ancestors, and future generations. It's believed that ancestors closely watch over their families, either approving or disapproving of their actions. Because of this, marriage ceremonies are performed not just for human witnesses but also for spiritual ones, to ensure the couple has the blessings of their ancestors. There's a well-known saying, "*Ayé l'òjà, òrun n'ìlé*," which translates to "The world is a marketplace, the otherworld is home." This saying suggests that relationships on earth must stay connected to the spiritual world. Breaking marriage rules, like marrying a close relative, is thought to

¹³ Gbadegesin, Op. Cit.,

¹⁴ Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *African religions and philosophy*. London: Heinemann.

anger ancestors and could lead to disaster.¹⁵

2.3 Types of Marriage

Marriage in Yoruba society, called *Ìgbéyàwó*, isn't just one thing; it takes many forms based on cultural, religious, and social factors. The Yoruba people recognize several types of marriage, each with its own procedures, meaning, and purpose. These unions are more than just legal agreements; they are also moral and spiritual structures that help organize family life, inheritance, and community relationships. As Segun Gbadegesin points out, "marriage in African thought cannot be understood apart from the moral community, for it is through marriage that the individual becomes fully enmeshed in the web of communal existence."¹⁶

1. Traditional Marriage (*Ìgbéyàwó Ìbilẹ̀*)

The traditional Yoruba marriage, known as *Ìgbéyàwó Ìbilẹ̀*, is a deeply meaningful spiritual, social, and cultural institution. It's much more than just the joining of two people.

their families, communities, and ancestral lineages. Rather than functioning as a mere contractual arrangement, this matrimonial practice embodies a commitment to personal

¹⁵ Idowu, B. (1962). *Olodumare: God in Yoruba belief*. London: Longmans.

¹⁶ Gbadegesin, S. (1991). *African philosophy: Traditional Yoruba philosophy and contemporary issues*. New York: Peter Lang.

destiny, social continuity, and the preservation of community moral values¹⁷.

Ceremonial Phases of Traditional Yoruba Marriage

The traditional Yoruba marriage process progresses through carefully structured phases, each serving distinct purposes and incorporating specific ritualistic elements.

Pre-Introduction Stage (*Mọ mi mọ ẹ*)

The matrimonial process begins with an informal investigative phase during which the groom's family conducts discreet inquiries into the bride's family background. This preliminary stage focuses on assessing compatibility and verifying shared cultural values, particularly emphasizing characteristics such as honesty, integrity, and respect. The covert nature of this observation period ensures that both families demonstrate cultural and social alignment prior to initiating formal matrimonial proceedings¹⁸.

Introduction Stage (*Ìsìhùn*)

The introduction stage marks the formal commencement of matrimonial negotiations through an official ceremony where the groom's family presents their matrimonial intentions via a formal letter of proposal. During this phase, comprehensive discussions regarding the *ẹrú iyàwó* (marriage items) occur, establishing clear expectations and

¹⁷ Oyekan, A. (2014). Marriage, family, and the continuity of life in Yoruba thought. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 26(3), 301–314.

¹⁸ Olayinka, S. (2023). *Traditional Marriage in Yoruba Culture*. (Manuscript in preparation). Department of African Studies, University of Ibadan.

fostering mutual

understanding between the participating families¹⁹.

Engagement Stage (*Ìdána iyàwó*)

The engagement stage constitutes the primary public celebration that formally acknowledges the matrimonial union. This ceremony is orchestrated by designated female ceremonial leaders, specifically the *Alaga Ijoko* and *Alaga Iduro*, who guide the proceedings. The groom demonstrates respect and humility through the ritual of *Ìdobálẹ̀*, prostrating three times before the bride's elders in a public display of reverence. Additionally, the bride receives formal introduction to the groom's family members and is presented with symbolic gifts representing her new status²⁰.

Symbolic Elements and Ritualistic Practices

Marriage Items and Their Meanings

The ceremonial presentation of marriage items represents a fundamental component of the wedding ceremony, with each item carrying profound symbolic significance. Kolanut serves as a symbol of unity and togetherness, while yam represents fertility and abundance for the prospective union. Salt and honey symbolize the sweetness and harmony desired in marriage, and alligator pepper represents truth, honesty, and divine

¹⁹ Ibid.,

²⁰ Oyebade, A. (1990). The image of women in Yoruba oral literature. *Research in African Literatures*, 21(1), 127–136.

blessings. Additional items, including textiles and suitcases containing clothing, signify the bride's dignity and her preparedness for transition into her new marital role.

Traditional Rituals and Customs

Several ceremonial rituals are performed to honor ancestral traditions and cultural heritage. The groom's act of prostration serves as a public demonstration of humility and respect toward the bride's family lineage. *Oriki*, or praise poetry, celebrates and acknowledges the ancestral lineage of both matrimonial partners, reinforcing their cultural identity and heritage. The ritual of *Ekun Iyawo* (ceremonial weeping) provides the bride with a symbolic means of expressing gratitude to her parents while acknowledging her transition from her natal family to her marital family. In certain communities, brides may undergo a period of seclusion during which they receive comprehensive instruction regarding marital virtues, responsibilities, and expectations²¹.

Community and Spiritual Dimensions

Communal Participation

Traditional Yoruba marriage ceremonies emphasize communal involvement, with extended family members and community participants actively contributing through musical performances, traditional dances, and collective blessings. This communal

²¹ Omotayo, O. A. (2024). *Traditional marriage in Yoruba culture: An exploration of male dominance*. Ibadan, Nigeria: Heritage Publishers.

participation reinforces social bonds and demonstrates community support for the matrimonial union²².

Ancestral and Spiritual Elements

The spiritual dimension of Yoruba marriage involves honoring ancestral spirits through libation ceremonies, with the belief that ancestors serve as witnesses to the union and provide ongoing protection for the couple. In some instances, *Ifá* divination practices may be incorporated to assess the couple's compatibility and ensure spiritual harmony between the matrimonial partners²³.

2. Religious Marriage

Yoruba society recognizes religious marriages, shaped by Islam, Christianity, and indigenous faiths:

1. Islamic Marriage (*Ìgbéyàwó Ìsílàámù*): Adopted through Islam, it emphasizes bridewealth (*mahr*) and solemnization before clerics.²⁴
2. Christian Marriage (*Ìgbéyàwó Ìjọ*): Introduced by missionaries, it stresses

²² Oni, B. (2016). *Contemporary courtship and marriage practices among the Yoruba*. Lagos: Adewale Press.

²³ Oyebade, A. (1990). The image of women in Yoruba oral literature. *Research in African Literatures*, 21(1), 127–136.

²⁴ Gbadegesin, S. (1991). *African philosophy: Traditional Yoruba philosophy and contemporary issues*. New York: Peter Lang.

monogamy and covenant under God.²⁵

3. Indigenous Religious Marriage: Involves rituals, *Ifá* divination, and offerings to deities like *Ọṣun* for fertility and blessing.²⁶

3. Civil/Statutory Marriage (*Ìgbéyàwó Ìjọba*)

Introduced under colonial law, statutory marriage is legalistic, requiring state registration. Its key feature is monogamy, which contrasts with the traditional allowance for polygyny. Couples often combine civil with traditional rites to satisfy both communal and legal requirements.²⁷

4. Polygynous Marriage (*Ìgbéyàwó Ọkùnrin Púpọ̀*)

Polygyny, one man marrying multiple wives, was historically common among the Yoruba. It was justified by economic needs, fertility, and social alliances. A Yoruba proverb affirms:

“Obìnrin púpọ̀ ló n jé kóko ni ilé” (“Many wives bring status in the household”).

Feminist scholars, however, critique it as reinforcing patriarchal dominance and limiting

²⁵ Idowu, E. B. (1973). *African traditional religion: A definition*. London: SCM Press.

²⁶ Adeyemi, M. (2004). Polygyny and marital stability in Yoruba culture. *African Anthropologist*, 11(2), 87–102.

²⁷ Olarinmoye, A. W. (2016). *Who needs your opinion? Changing values of traditional marriage among the Yoruba*. Abeokuta: Freedom House.

women's autonomy.²⁸

5. Monogamous Marriage (*Ìgbéyàwó Ọkànlèkan*)

Monogamy spread widely with Christianity and Western education. It is praised for intimacy and stability but sometimes critiqued as restricting broader kinship alliances.²⁹

6. Levirate and Sororate Marriages

Levirate marriage (*Ìgbéyàwó Àbúrò Ọkùnrin*) occurs when a widow marries her late husband's brother; sororate marriage (*Ìgbéyàwó Arábirin*) when a man marries his deceased wife's sister. These ensure family continuity but often restrict women's choices. As the Yoruba proverb would say “*Obìnrin tí kò fẹ́, ẹ̀mí rẹ̀ ń jó*” (“A woman who marries without desire dances with her spirit in sorrow”).³⁰

7. Widowhood and Remarriage

Widows in Yoruba culture may face restrictions before remarrying, including purification rites. Traditionalists view this as spiritual cleansing, while feminists argue it reflects gender inequality since widowers are rarely subjected to similar rituals.³¹

²⁸ Abimbola, W. (1976). *Ifá: An exposition of Ifá literary corpus*. Ibadan: Oxford University Press.

²⁹ Oni, B. (2016). *Contemporary courtship and marriage practices among the Yoruba*. Ibadan: Adewale Press.

³⁰ Oyewumi, O. (1997). *The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

³¹ Gbadegesin, S. (1998). *African philosophy: Traditional Yoruba philosophy and contemporary African realities*. Chicago: Gateway Publishers

2.4 Consequences of Marriage

Marriage among the Yoruba, while celebrated as a blessing and a marker of maturity, carries with it multiple consequences social, moral, spiritual, and economic. These consequences are not viewed as incidental but as the very outcome of binding individuals and families into a covenant that transcends the personal to encompass the communal and even the cosmic. The Yoruba conceive marriage as a destiny-shaping event, a turning point that redefines the individual's role within society. As Gbadegesin notes, "marriage in African thought is the gateway to full personhood, for it locates the individual within the moral fabric of the community and ensures continuity of life through progeny."³²

1. Social Consequences

Marriage elevates the social standing of an individual. For men, it signals maturity and the assumption of responsibility; for women, it confirms entry into full adulthood and motherhood. Among the Yoruba, an unmarried adult is often perceived as incomplete. A proverb illustrates this:

“Ìgbéyàwó ni iyí, yàwó là n fì dá ilé.” (“Marriage is dignity; it is a wife that completes the household.”)

Thus, marriage establishes new networks of kinship, expanding alliances and securing a

³². Idowu, E. B. (1962). *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba belief*. London: Longmans.

person's place within the social fabric.³³

2. Moral and Ethical Consequences

Marriage is also the testing ground of *Ìwà* (character). A man or woman's moral standing is judged by how well they fulfill their marital roles. A neglectful husband or an unfaithful wife is seen as one whose *Ìwà* is deficient. The proverb:

“Ìwà l'ẹwà obìnrin; Ìwà l'èsìn okùnrin” (“Character is the beauty of a woman; character is the religion of a man”),

reminds couples that beyond ceremonies, the endurance of marriage depends on moral responsibility. In this sense, marriage disciplines behavior: it curtails recklessness, demands responsibility, and enjoins respect. Fidelity, humility, and mutual care are seen as essential moral outcomes.³⁴

3. Economic Consequences

Marriage historically has significant economic implications. For men, marrying more than one wife often ensured a larger labor force for farming and trade. For women, marriage provided access to resources and protection, since wives in Yoruba society were active traders. Polygynous households became economic hubs, where each wife contributed to prosperity. Yet, marriage could also generate strain. Bridewealth (*Ìniyàwó*)

³³ Mbiti, J. S. (1991). *Introduction to African religion* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Heinemann.

³⁴ Oyèwùmí, O. (1997). *The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

was costly, and maintaining multiple wives required wealth. A proverb warns:

“Ìyàwó púpò ni ñ jẹ kóko jẹ.” (“Many wives consume the wealth of the household.”)³⁵

This shows marriage could either enhance prosperity or deplete resources, depending on management.

4. Spiritual and Religious Consequences

Marriage binds not only individuals but also spiritual destinies. Among the Yoruba, unions are believed to link families before the ancestors and the *òrìṣà* (deities). Rituals during marriage, such as libation and prayer, symbolize this sacred bond. A marriage that honors *èèwò* (taboos) is believed to attract blessings of fertility, peace, and longevity. Conversely, violation of marital taboos such as infidelity or neglect of rites invites misfortune. The proverb states:

“Èèwò tí a bá tẹ, ayé ñ jẹni.” (“When a taboo is broken, life itself punishes the offender.”)³⁶

5. Psychological Consequences

Marriage also reshapes individual psychology. The pressures of marital roles—expectations of fidelity, provision, obedience, and endurance—create both

³⁵ Akinyemi, A. (2003). *Proverbs and the construction of Yoruba marriage values*. *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 12(2), 164–175.

³⁶ Oyekan, A. (2014). Marriage, family, and the continuity of life in Yoruba thought. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 26(3), 301–314.

fulfillment and tension. A woman is expected to find pride in being called “*Ìyá ọmọ*” (mother of children), while a man is measured by his ability to “*dá ilé*” (establish a home). Failure in these roles can result in stigma, ridicule, or a sense of inadequacy. Feminist scholars note that this burden often weighs more heavily on women, especially in contexts of infertility or widowhood.³⁷

6. Legal and Inheritance Consequences

Marriage defines inheritance rights within Yoruba society. Children of a recognized marriage inherit property, status, and ancestral identity, while illegitimate children may be excluded. A widow’s fate, too, is determined by the type of marriage: in traditional settings, she may be inherited by her husband’s brother (levirate), whereas in statutory marriages, she gains legal rights to property. These consequences reveal how custom, law, and gender dynamics intersect in shaping family destiny.³⁸

2.5 Philosophers’ Views about Marriage

The institution of marriage has attracted the reflections of philosophers across cultures and epochs, as it is not merely a private arrangement between individuals but a moral, social, and metaphysical institution. Among the Yoruba, marriage (*Ìgbéyàwó*) is both sacred and social: it binds families, secures lineage, and affirms the continuity of life in

³⁷ Akande, A. (2010). Spirituality, fertility, and marriage rituals in Yoruba culture. *African Study Monographs*, 31(4), 151–168..

³⁸ Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *African religions and philosophy*. London: Heinemann.

the chain of the living, the ancestors, and the unborn. Philosophers, both African and Western, have approached marriage from ethical, metaphysical, and existential dimensions, asking whether it is a natural duty, a social contract, or a freely chosen project. This section explores different philosophical perspectives on marriage, situating them within Yoruba cultural practice while also engaging contemporary critical debates.

African Philosophical Perspectives

African philosophers have consistently emphasized the communal and moral foundations of marriage. John Mbiti, in his classical work, affirms that in African societies “marriage is the focus of existence.”³⁹ For him, to marry is not optional but a moral imperative, for it ensures the continuity of the community. In Yoruba culture, this is expressed in the saying:

“Ìyàwó l’èwà idilé.” (“A wife is the beauty of the household.”)

This indicates that marriage is essential not only to individual happiness but also to the dignity and completeness of the family. Similarly, E. Bolaji Idowu underscores the spiritual

weight of marriage, seeing it as a covenant between families and the ancestors, where taboos (*èèwò*) serve to protect its sanctity.⁴⁰

³⁹ Idowu, E. B. (1973). *African traditional religion: A definition*. London: SCM Press.

⁴⁰ Gbadegesin, S. (1991). *African philosophy: Traditional Yoruba philosophy and contemporary*

Segun Gbadegesin offers a more critical philosophical view. He argues that African, and particularly Yoruba, conceptions of marriage are deeply tied to the ethics of *Ìwà* (character).⁴¹ For him, marriage without good character (*Ìwà rere*) is doomed, regardless of ritual performance. Thus, while communal approval and ancestral rites are important, the true measure of a marriage lies in the moral quality of the individuals involved. In Yoruba thought, the *omoluabi* (morally upright person) is the ideal spouse, one who respects taboos not out of fear but from cultivated responsibility.

Kwasi Wiredu enriches this discourse by emphasizing the principle of consensus.⁴² For him, African marriage must rest on agreement and dialogue, rather than coercion or rigid adherence to inherited prohibitions. He would likely critique Yoruba marital taboos that infringe upon women's freedom or exclude their voices in decision-making. Likewise, Kwame Gyekye's moderate communitarianism stresses that while marriage is communal, it must not erase the individuality and rights of spouses.⁴³ A taboo that denies a widow her inheritance may preserve communal property but violates her intrinsic dignity.

Finally, Paulin Hountondji urges African philosophy to interrogate, not merely repeat,

African realities. New York: Peter Lang.

⁴¹ Wiredu, K. (1996). *Cultural universals and particulars: An African perspective*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

⁴² Gyekye, K. (1997). *Tradition and modernity: Philosophical reflections on the African experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

⁴³ Hountondji, P. J. (1983). *African philosophy: Myth and reality*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

traditions.⁴⁴ Applied to marriage, he would argue that taboos like widowhood rites or *magun* should not be preserved simply because they are old, but must be subjected to rational and ethical scrutiny. This critical posture helps African philosophy avoid what he calls ethnophilosophy, the uncritical glorification of customs.

Western Philosophical Perspectives

Western philosophy also provides important insights into the meaning of marriage. Aristotle, in the *Politics*, considered the family the primary cell of the state, with marriage as its foundation. For him, marriage is natural because humans are social and procreative beings.⁴⁵ The Yoruba idea that children are the “continuity of the lineage” resonates strongly with Aristotle’s belief in the naturalness of procreation. Kant, on the other hand, saw marriage as a moral contract in which each partner grants the other rights over their sexual faculties, a view that emphasizes justice, reciprocity, and dignity.⁴⁶ Yoruba practice reflects this contractual idea in the rituals of *idáná* (introduction) and bride price, which formalize obligations between families.

Existentialist thinkers, however, challenge rigid or predetermined roles. Simone de

⁴⁴ Aristotle. (1995). *Politics* (C. Lord, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press

⁴⁵ Kant, I. (1996). *The metaphysics of morals* (M. Gregor, Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁴⁶ Kant, I. (1996). *The metaphysics of morals* (M. Gregor, Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Beauvoir argued that women have often been reduced to “the Other” in marriage, their individuality

subsumed under patriarchal authority.⁴⁷ In Yoruba traditions, this critique resonates with taboos that subject women to stricter marital obligations than men, such as widowhood restrictions or fidelity controls like *magun*. Jean-Paul Sartre adds that authentic marriage must be a project freely chosen, not a destiny imposed.⁴⁸ Yoruba communal expectations where marriage is obligatory could thus risk alienating individuals who might prefer to remain single or who wish to define marriage differently.

Yoruba Proverbs and Philosophical Wisdom

Yoruba proverbs reinforce the philosophical weight of marriage:

- “*Ìwà rere l’èwà obìnrin, Ìwà rere l’èwà òkùnrin.*”

(“Good character is the beauty of a woman; good character is the beauty of a man.”) – echoing Gbadegesin’s claim that character, not ritual, sustains marriage.

- “*Eniyan l’aso mi.*”

(“People are my covering.”) – highlighting Gyekye’s idea of communal belonging, though it also warns that excessive communalism can suffocate individuality.

⁴⁷ de Beauvoir, S. (2011). *The second sex* (C. Borde & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.). New York: Vintage Books. (Original work published 1949)

⁴⁸ Sartre, J.-P. (1993). *Being and nothingness* (H. E. Barnes, Trans.). New York: Washington Square Press. (Original work published 1943)

- *“Ohun tí a bá fì ọwọ́ dá, òun la fì ẹsẹ̀ wọ.”*

(“What is built with the hand must be entered with the feet.”) – aligning with Wiredu’s stress on consensus and accountability in marital agreements.

CHAPTER THREE

A PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUE OF YORUBA MARITAL TABOOS

3.1 Ethnography of Yoruba Culture

Worldview and Understanding the Universe

The Yoruba people, a highly influential cultural group in southwestern Nigeria, possess a worldview that seamlessly blends the physical world (*ayé*) with the spiritual realm (*òrun*) into a unified moral universe. Humans are seen as existing within a three-part reality: the visible world of the living, the unseen world of the ancestors, and the divine domain of the *òrìṣà*. From this integrated understanding of the cosmos, marriage, kinship, and taboos all draw their significance, as the Yoruba believe that every human action has repercussions in the spiritual order. A key Yoruba proverb serves as a powerful reminder:

“Ayé l’ojà, òrun n’ilé” (“The world is a marketplace; the otherworld is home”).

This implies that social structures like marriage aren't just practical arrangements; they are spiritual duties that prepare individuals for ancestral continuity and overall cosmic balance.

Kinship, Family, and Community Life

At its core, Yoruba society is communitarian. A person's identity is never thought of in isolation but is always defined by their relationship to their family, lineage, and wider

community. Segun Gbadegesin clarifies that in Yoruba thought, personhood is linked to *Ìwà* (character) and *omolúàbí* (moral personhood), both of which are cultivated within the family and social life.¹ Marriage is therefore not just a private choice but an essential gateway into full moral personhood, since it inserts the individual into the networks of kinship that sustain communal life. This communitarian ethos is captured in the proverb:

“Eniyan l’asọ mi” (“People are my covering”).

In marriage, one does not marry an individual alone but a family, and by extension, a community. The ritual of *Ìdáná* (family introduction) before marriage emphasizes this communal dimension, ensuring that taboos such as marrying within prohibited lineages are respected.

Religion, Morality, and Taboos

Yoruba religion, rooted in the worship of *òrìṣà* (divinities), the reverence of ancestors, and the wisdom of *Ifá* divination, structures moral life. Taboos (*èèwò*) are not arbitrary prohibitions but moral-spiritual boundaries that safeguard harmony between the living and the spiritual order. In marriage, taboos regulate kinship (e.g., prohibitions on incest), fidelity (e.g., *magun* sanctions against adultery), and ritual purity (e.g., widowhood rites). The Yoruba saying expresses this vividly: *“Èèwò tí a bá tẹ̀, ayé n’jẹni”*

¹ Gbadegesin, S. (1991). *African philosophy: Traditional Yoruba philosophy and contemporary issues*. New York: Peter Lang.

It's said that when a taboo is violated, life itself brings consequences upon the person responsible. This highlights how taboos function as both ethical guidelines and spiritual protections, crucial for maintaining harmony within society and the wider universe.

3.2 Marriage: The Heart of Yoruba Community

Within this understanding, marriage (known as *ìgbéyàwó*) isn't just a social event; it's a sacred bond connecting our tangible world with the unseen. John Mbiti famously noted that in African cultures, "marriage is the focus of existence."² This holds particularly true for the Yoruba people, as marriage is essential for fulfilling the community's hope for new generations, ensuring the lineage of ancestors continues, and forming the very fabric of society where individual identity finds its place. An adult who remains unmarried is often viewed as somehow incomplete, a sentiment beautifully captured in the proverb:

“Ìgbéyàwó ni ìyí, ìyàwó là n fí dá ilé”
(“Marriage is dignity; it is a wife that completes the household”).

So, marriage is deeply woven into Yoruba ethics, where personal decisions are guided not just by individual desire but by the community's blessing and spiritual approval.

Segun Gbadegesin offers some of the most insightful philosophical explorations of Yoruba marriage and taboos. He makes a compelling case that African institutions, like marriage, can't simply be reduced to biological or economic arrangements. Instead, they

² Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *African religions and philosophy*. London: Heinemann.

must be understood as profound moral-social agreements where *Ìwà* (character) is the very foundation of it all.³ He firmly believes that a marriage's strength directly reflects the moral integrity of the partners involved; without genuine virtue, rituals become hollow performances, ultimately falling apart.

However, Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí brings a different, critical lens, pointing out how colonial and Western viewpoints have introduced patriarchal biases into our understanding of Yoruba marriage. She argues that precolonial Yoruba society was actually much less rigid in its gender roles, and many of the restrictive taboos we see today (like certain widowhood customs) are more a result of colonial influence than true, age-old Yoruba values.⁴ This really pushes us to look more critically at ethnography, to carefully distinguish what's genuinely Yoruba tradition from what's been layered on or distorted over time.

Even though they aren't Yoruba, Wiredu and Gyekye offer broader African philosophical insights that are very relevant. Wiredu emphasizes that consensus is absolutely central to African social structures, implying that any marital taboos should never be used to silence women's voices.⁵ Gyekye's concept of "moderate communitarianism" is another key

³Gbadegesin, S. (1991). *African philosophy: Traditional Yoruba philosophy and contemporary issues*. New York: Peter Lang

⁴ Oyěwùmí, O. (1997). *The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

⁵ Wiredu, K. (1980). *Philosophy and an African culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

point: while being part of a community is vital, he stresses that individual dignity must never be lost.⁶ Both these perspectives resonate deeply with ongoing discussions within Yoruba culture about whether taboos that limit women's independence should be maintained or reconsidered.

And finally, Sophie Oluwole's fascinating comparison between Socrates and Orunmila reminds us that Yoruba culture isn't just about religion; it's profoundly rational. *Ifá* divination, in her view, functions as a sophisticated method of critical reasoning about how we should live.⁷ When we apply this to marriage, it suggests that taboos should be subject to rational debate, not blind obedience.

Looking at the Yoruba culture through an ethnographic lens, it becomes really clear that marriage and taboos are deeply intertwined with their understanding of the universe, family ties, and moral principles. Gbadegesin really emphasizes the moral bedrock of marriage, while Oyèwùmí offers important critiques of existing gender imbalances. Then you have Wiredu, Gyekye, and Oluwole, who give us broader ways to think about balancing community values with individual rights. The proverbs and the overall cosmology of the Yoruba people continually reinforce this perspective, making it evident that marriage is never a standalone event. Instead, it's the central point around which

⁶ Gyekye, K. (1997). *Tradition and modernity: Philosophical reflections on the African experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁷ Oluwole, S. (2014). *Socrates and Orunmila: Two patron saints of classical philosophy*. Lagos: Ark Publishers.

personal lives, community harmony, and the cosmic order all revolve.

The Philosophy Behind Yoruba Marriage Taboos

In Yoruba thought, marriage isn't just about two people coming together; it's an ethical and spiritual agreement that's firmly rooted in the larger communal and cosmic scheme of things. Within this elaborate structure, taboos (known as *èèwò*) act as vital protective boundaries. They guide human behavior, making sure there's harmony among the living, the ancestors, and even those yet to be born. To break a marriage taboo isn't just a minor rule infraction; it's actually a profound disruption of the entire moral and spiritual fabric of existence. As Segun Gbadegesin wisely points out, in Yoruba philosophy, marriage and all its associated rules "cannot be understood apart from the moral community, for it is within the community that personhood, obligation and destiny acquire meaning.

Marriage Taboos and the Yoruba Understanding of the Universe

The Yoruba worldview is fundamentally built on the idea that *ayé* (our visible world) and *òrun* (the spiritual realm) are deeply interconnected. Because of this, marriage taboos actually function as cosmic safeguards, making sure that unions stay in line with ancestral and divine order. Take incestuous relationships, for example; they're strictly forbidden because they collapse sacred boundaries between family lines. There's a well-known proverb that serves as a strong warning:

“Èèwò tí a bá tẹ̀, ayé n jẹni.” (“When a taboo is broken, life itself punishes the

offender.”)

This belief truly reflects the Yoruba conviction that taboos aren't just random rules, but something given cosmic approval. Things like infertility, bad luck, or even an early death are often seen as the spiritual fallout from violating marriage taboos. That's why the ritual consultations with *Ifá* before a marriage (*Ifá f'àyànmó*) are so important – they're preventative, designed to uncover any hidden prohibitions that could potentially doom the union from the start.

Gbadegesin's View on Morality and Marriage

Segun Gbadegesin places Yoruba marriage firmly within the broader context of *Ìwà* (character)

and *omolúàbí* (moral personhood). For him, taboos are meaningful only when interpreted through the ethical lens of responsibility. A marriage sustained merely by rituals but devoid of *Ìwà* is bound to collapse.⁸ In this sense, taboos serve as moral boundaries, cultivating responsibility, fidelity, and moderation. They remind couples that freedom in marriage is not absolute but guided by obligations to kin, ancestors, and the divine order.

Gbadegesin's approach is particularly significant because it rescues taboos from being dismissed as “primitive prohibitions.” Instead, he interprets them as moral frameworks

⁸ Gbadegesin, S. (1991). *African philosophy: Traditional Yoruba philosophy and contemporary issues*. New York: Peter Lang.

that sustain communal survival. Without taboos, marriage could degenerate into chaos, threatening both lineage continuity and communal stability.

Oyèwùmí and Gendered Taboos

While Gbadegesin emphasizes the moral depth of taboos, Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí critiques their gendered asymmetry. In *The Invention of Women*, she argues that many so-called “traditional” practices were reshaped under colonial patriarchy.⁹ Widowhood taboos, for instance, often impose severe restrictions on women ritual confinement, shaving of hair, or prohibition of remarriage while widowers are rarely subjected to parallel obligations. The imbalance reveals how taboos, though culturally meaningful, can perpetuate patriarchal domination.

For Oyèwùmí, the critical question is whether taboos genuinely reflect Yoruba values or were actually twisted by colonial and Western influences. Her argument really pushes us to be careful in distinguishing what's truly authentic Yoruba cosmology from those oppressive structures that were passed down or imposed.

Community and the Ethics of Agreement

Wiredu's idea of consensus adds a lot to this discussion by suggesting that no taboo

⁹ Oyèwùmí, O. (1997). *The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

should ever get in the way of open dialogue or mutual agreement.¹⁰ In Yoruba culture, marriage negotiations (*Ìdáná*) already show this principle in action, as both families carefully discuss and approve a union together. However, when taboos stifle women's voices – like in situations of forced levirate marriages, for instance – that core principle of consensus is clearly violated. Kwame Gyekye's concept of "moderate communitarianism" strengthens this point: even though marriage is a communal affair, the dignity of the individual should never be erased.¹¹

Yoruba proverbs beautifully capture this very tension:

“Obìnrin tí kò fẹ́, ẹ̀mí rẹ̀ n jọ.” (“A woman who marries without desire dances with her spirit in sorrow.”)

This proverb itself suggests that Yoruba wisdom has long recognized the dangers of coercion, providing internal insights for challenging when taboos are applied unfairly.

Philosophers like Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre bring an existentialist depth to this conversation. De Beauvoir, for example, observed that in patriarchal marriages, women are often diminished to simply "the Other," stripped of their autonomy.¹² This observation echoes some Yoruba taboos that place disproportionate burdens on women, like *magun* (the anti-adultery charm), which seems to target female fidelity far more

¹⁰ Wiredu, Op. Cit.,

¹¹ Gyekye, Op. Cit.,

¹² de Beauvoir, S. (1949). *The second sex*. Paris: Gallimard.

severely than male infidelity. Sartre's focus on freedom as the bedrock of a truly authentic existence¹³ raises a crucial question: can Yoruba marriage truly be authentic if taboos are upheld through fear rather than through genuine, free commitment?

Paulin Hountondji also gives a vital warning against "ethnophilosophy," which is essentially the uncritical praise of tradition.¹⁴ Applying his perspective here, he would argue that Yoruba marital taboos absolutely need to be critically examined, not just preserved simply because they're seen as ancestral wisdom. In this way, philosophy transforms taboos from unquestioned prohibitions into vital ethical topics open for discussion.

Synthesis

From a philosophical standpoint, Yoruba marriage taboos are much more than just cultural restrictions; they're actually complex moral and spiritual frameworks designed to protect life, lineage, and the entire community. Gbadegesin really shows us their ethical foundation in *Ìwà*; Oyěwùní offers sharp critiques of their patriarchal biases; Wiredu and Gyekye underscore the essential roles of consensus and individual dignity; and existentialists push us to consider freedom and authenticity. The Yoruba people themselves have woven these very insights into their proverbs, myths, and rituals,

¹³ Sartre, J. P. (1943). *Being and nothingness*. Paris: Gallimard.

¹⁴ Hountondji, P. J. (1983). *African philosophy: Myth and reality*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

proving that taboos are dynamic, living traditions that are always open to fresh interpretation.

The real challenge, then, lies in finding a balance: we need to preserve the essential protective and moral roles of marriage taboos, while at the same time being willing to reform or discard those that deny justice, equality, and individual freedom. This approach respects Yoruba cosmology while ensuring that marriage continues to be a pathway to both communal harmony and authentic personal development.

3.3 Marriage Taboos in Yoruba Culture

In Yoruba culture, marital taboos (*èèwò*) are much more than just social rules; they act as crucial moral and cosmological safeguards. They guide human behavior, help maintain *àlàáfìà* (communal peace), ensure the favor of ancestors, and keep a vital balance between *àyé* (our visible world) and *òrun* (the spiritual realm). In the Yoruba view of the universe, every marriage isn't just a union between two individuals; it's deeply embedded in that sacred chain connecting the living, the ancestors, and those who are yet to come. Because of this, taboos are treated as binding moral laws, stemming directly from ancestral wisdom and spiritual order. As Segun Gbadegesin so accurately points out, in African philosophy, the institution of marriage simply cannot be separated from the ethical expectations of the community, since it is through marriage that an individual

truly becomes fully integrated into the fabric of communal morality.¹⁵

1. Lineage and Bloodline Restrictions

One of the most foundational marital taboos is the strict prohibition against marrying someone from one's own *idílé* (lineage) or clan. Such unions are considered utterly abominable (*èèwò nla*) because they are suppressing desire but about moral **interbelieved** to contaminate the ancestral bloodline and bring about misfortune. The Yoruba proverb aptly warns:

“Ejò tí a kó nílé kòlá tó bọ ní orí igi” (“A serpent hidden in one place will eventually reveal itself elsewhere”).

This implies that any hidden incestuous unions will inevitably lead to devastating consequences. Traditionally, families consult *Ifá* divination to prevent such grave errors, reflecting a deep-seated belief that one's destiny (*orí*) and the cosmic order must align perfectly before a marriage is allowed. This taboo really highlights the Yoruba conviction that marriage isn't just about affection; it's fundamental to the very survival of the lineage.¹⁶

2. Sexual Fidelity and Controlling Infidelity

Another crucial taboo emphasizes sexual fidelity, particularly for wives. The notorious

¹⁵ Gbadegesin, S. (1991). *African Philosophy: Traditional Yoruba Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities*. Chicago: Gateway.

¹⁶ Idowu, E. B. (1962). *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief*. London: Longmans.

magun charm perfectly illustrates how infidelity was not only socially condemned but also spiritually policed. While this practice definitely reinforced patriarchal dominance by disproportionately targeting women, it clearly shows how deeply morality and sexuality were interwoven in Yoruba thought. A proverb states:

“*Ìyàwó tó ní Ìwà, ní ń jèrè ìyàwó*” (“A wife of good character earns respect”).

Gbadegesin’s framework of *Ìwà* (character) helps us understand that fidelity wasn't merely about suppressing desire, but about maintaining moral integrity, thereby ensuring the home remained stable and spiritually protected. Yet, Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí critically points out such gendered controls as evidence of patriarchal structures that reduce women to mere objects of male honor, rather than recognizing them as autonomous moral agents.¹⁷

Folktale Illustration: The Magun Tragedy

There's a well-known Yoruba folktale that tells of a wealthy farmer who, suspecting his wife of infidelity, placed *magun* ("do not climb") upon her. Ignoring this powerful warning, the wife’s secret lover visited her that night. The moment he lay with her, he was seized by convulsions and died instantly. The wife, too, suffered the charm’s spiritual backlash, descending into madness until her family performed costly appeasement rituals. This tale, often shared by elders, vividly demonstrates how marital taboos aren't just

¹⁷ Oyèwùmí, O. (1997). *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

private affairs; they are cosmic violations that bring immense shame, calamity, and social disgrace upon entire families. It also shows how the fear of supernatural punishment was historically used to enforce sexual morality within Yoruba marriages.¹⁸

3. Restrictions on Sexual Activity During Ritual Times

Sexual relations are also restricted during menstruation, pregnancy, and on sacred days dedicated to the *òrìṣà*. It's widely believed that violating these rules can invite infertility, sickness, or general misfortune. The Yoruba saying teaches:

“Tí a bá fẹ́ má bà á, a kì í má kéko tó bẹ̀ẹ̀” (“One cannot succeed without first building a strong foundation”).

These kinds of restrictions demonstrate just how deeply Yoruba marital life is interwoven into a larger cosmological system, where even private intimacy is connected to the rhythm of ritual purity and cosmic harmony.¹⁹

4. Respect Toward In-Laws

Maintaining deep respect (*ibá*) for in-laws, especially the husband's parents, is another significant and binding taboo. Confronting or insulting in-laws is strictly forbidden, as doing so is seen as disrupting kinship harmony and undermining communal trust. A Yoruba proverb emphasizes this:

¹⁸ Abimbola, W. (1976). *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus*. Ibadan: Oxford University Press.

¹⁹ Gbadegesin, Op. Cit.,

“Òun tí a fòrò pò ní n ẹ̀ nílẹ̀ kúrẹ̀le” (“What is agreed upon within the home should not be disturbed outside”).

This proverb really highlights the communal ethic of discretion and solidarity, underscoring how marital taboos help maintain peace across extended families.²⁰

5. Widowhood and Mourning Practices

Widows are typically subjected to strict taboos, which often include seclusion, the shaving of hair, and specific ritual cleansing before they can remarry. Traditionally, these practices were believed to honor the deceased and prevent spiritual contamination. However, feminists argue that these customs effectively institutionalize gender inequality, especially since widowers rarely face comparable restrictions. There’s a proverb that serves as a warning:

“*Obìnrin tí oko e kú, bí o fì àsẹ̀ sílẹ̀, ọ̀rọ̀ d’ógbà*” (“A widow who forgets herself becomes the subject of gossip”).

Here, we can see how communal morality enforces conformity, sometimes at the expense of justice and individual freedom.²¹

6. Sons-in-Law and Household Rules

A son-in-law is strictly forbidden from spending the night in his father-in-law's house.

²⁰ Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann.

²¹ Dopamu, A. (2005). “The Family in Yoruba Religion and Culture.” *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, 37(2), 45–62.

This taboo stems from a concern about spiritual contamination and the potential for social scandal if death or misfortune were to occur. It's a practice that reinforces boundaries of respect and helps maintain dignity between the different family lineages.²²

7. Marital Secrets and Conduct

Couples are explicitly forbidden from airing their grievances or quarrels to outsiders. Doing so is seen as damaging the honor of both families involved. Discretion in these matters is considered absolutely essential for preserving dignity, aligning perfectly with the Yoruba ethic of *omolúàbí* (noble character).²³

8. Dress Codes and Physical Appearance

Married women often face restrictions regarding their dress, particularly during mourning rites. Such taboos serve to affirm modesty, dignity, and respect, reminding the community that one's appearance is often seen as a reflection of inner moral order.²⁴

9. Fertility and Childbirth Taboos

Pregnant women are expected to adhere to a number of prohibitions – things like avoiding certain foods, specific types of travel, or even particular tasks at night – all aimed at ensuring a safe delivery. These practices are rooted in Yoruba cosmology, where

²² Wiredu, Op. Cit.,

²³ Falola, T. & Genova, A. (2006). *Yoruba Identity and Power Politics*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press.

²⁴ Gyekye, K. Op. Cit.,

ancestors and deities are believed to watch over new life. Motherhood, in this sense, is framed as a sacred trust, far more than just a private accomplishment.²⁵

10. Whistling and Night Taboos

Married women are forbidden from whistling at night, as it's believed this can attract wandering spirits. Similarly, tasks like fetching water or carrying heavy loads after dark are restricted, as they might invite misfortune or spiritual contamination. These restrictions really highlight the Yoruba awareness and sensitivity to unseen forces that are thought to influence everyday life.²⁶

11. Prohibition of Same-Sex Marriage

Perhaps the most debated marital taboo is the prohibition of same-sex marriage. Traditionally, this has been strictly condemned in Yoruba society, seen as a violation of procreative and ancestral continuity. However, in contemporary discussions, this particular taboo often clashes with human rights discourses that champion autonomy and sexual freedom. Here, we clearly see the tension between the communal ethic of survival (as discussed by Mbiti and Gbadegesin) and modern liberal ideals (from thinkers like de Beauvoir, Sartre, and Wiredu).²⁷

²⁵ Adeboye, O. (2004). "Rituals, Gender, and Power in Yoruba Culture." *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 17(2), 203–218.

²⁶ Gbadegesin, Op. Cit.,

²⁷ de Beauvoir, Op. Cit.,

3.4 Feminist Critiques and Harmful Practices in Yoruba Culture

Among the Yoruba, marriage is profoundly interwoven with every aspect of cultural, social, and spiritual life. It's much more than just a legal or social contract; it's an institution that upholds lineage, family honor, and ethical behavior. Within this intricate system, marital taboos act as regulatory tools, guiding behavior and reinforcing societal norms. However, while these taboos historically aimed to promote social cohesion, moral guidance, and spiritual protection, a closer look through feminist and contemporary lenses reveals that many of these practices disproportionately restrict women, curb their autonomy, and perpetuate gender inequalities. Feminist critiques, then, are essential for examining how tradition, power, and gender intersect, highlighting the need to carefully evaluate which customs genuinely preserve cultural integrity and which are, in fact, harmful or oppressive.

1. Gendered Power Relations and Social Hierarchies

In traditional Yoruba culture, marriage is typically structured around patriarchal principles. This means the man usually takes on a dominant role as the head of the household, while the woman is expected to fulfill roles that are supportive, obedient, and often involve sacrifice. Specific marital taboos actively reinforce these gender hierarchies, dictating how women should behave within the home, toward their husbands, and in the broader community. For instance, women might be forbidden from participating in certain ritual ceremonies, entering sacred spaces, or making independent decisions

without a man's approval.

Oyewumi (1997) makes a compelling argument that Yoruba gender constructs are shaped by society rather than biology, demonstrating how women's roles have historically been molded to reinforce male authority and social control²⁸. This highlights that gendered taboos are not natural or inevitable but are maintained through cultural, social, and spiritual mechanisms.

Yoruba Proverb:

“Obinrin ti ko ba fi ọwọ rẹ mọ ibi idile, ko ni fi ọwọ gba ibukun.”(A woman who does not respect her household will not receive blessings)²⁹

This proverb demonstrates how compliance with patriarchal norms is culturally tied to rewards, subtly coercing women into obedience while maintaining social order.

2. Harmful Practices in Marriage Targeting Women

Certain marital taboos impose directly restrictive and harmful obligations on women.

These include:

- i. **Widowhood Restrictions:** Widows may face strict prohibitions on remarrying, or they may be subjected to humiliating rituals to “cleanse” them after their husband's death. These rituals often reinforce the idea that women are property of the family

²⁸ Oyewumi, O. (1997). *The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press..

²⁹ Yoruba Proverb, Oral Tradition Archive, Ibadan, Nigeria.

or community and must be controlled even after widowhood.

ii. Inheritance and Property Control: Patrilineal inheritance norms often exclude married women from claiming property or participating fully in decisions concerning family assets. Women's access to economic resources is therefore limited, reinforcing dependency and social subordination.

1. Fertility Expectations: Women are culturally expected to have children, especially male heirs, and facing infertility often carries a heavy stigma. These kinds of taboos place immense psychological and social pressure on women, significantly reducing their ability to make autonomous life choices.

2. These harmful practices clearly show the oppressive potential of certain taboos. While they might be culturally justified as ways to preserve family honor or spiritual balance, they ultimately place a disproportionate burden on women and reinforce patriarchal control.³⁰

3. Feminist Critiques and Contemporary Reflections

4. Feminist analysis reveals that while these taboos have traditionally been rationalized as maintaining social cohesion, they frequently perpetuate gender inequality and infringe upon women's fundamental human rights. Modern scholars argue that:

5. Cultural Practices Are Negotiable: Taboos aren't set in stone; they can be

³⁰ Gbadegesin, Op. Cit.,

reinterpreted or even abandoned without undermining cultural identity. This opens up opportunities for reforms that align with modern ethical standards and human rights principles.

6. **Communal Ethical Responsibility:** Communities have a moral obligation to balance the continuation of their culture with the dignity of individuals. This means harmful practices must be critically evaluated rather than simply enforced without question.
7. **Conflict with Legal Rights:** Many taboos directly conflict with contemporary legal frameworks that guarantee women's rights to property, education, and personal, autonomy, highlighting the necessity for reform³¹.

Folktale Illustration:

In the folktale "*Iyawo ati Iya Agba*" (The Bride and the Elder Woman), a young bride is forced by an elder to comply with marital taboos without question. Her compliance initially maintains household harmony, but over time, it leads to emotional distress, conflict, and social marginalization. This story illustrates the psychological and social consequences of oppressive customs, revealing how blind adherence to taboos can harm women's well-being and disrupt marital harmony³².

Fertility Expectations: Women are culturally expected to have children, especially male heirs, and facing infertility often

³¹ de Beauvoir, S. (1949). *The Second Sex*. Vintage International.

³² Yoruba Folktale, Collected Oral Narratives of Southwestern Nigeria, 2005.

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- i. **Cultural Practices Are Negotiable:** Taboos aren't set in stone; they can absolutely be reinterpreted or even let go of without eroding cultural identity. This creates opportunities for reforms that align with modern ethical standards and human rights principles.
- ii. **Communal Ethical Responsibility:** Communities have a moral duty to strike a balance between continuing their cultural traditions and upholding the dignity of individuals. This means that harmful practices need to be critically examined, not just blindly enforced.

³³ Gbadegesin, Op. Cit.,

- iii. Conflict with Legal Rights: Many taboos directly clash with contemporary legal frameworks that guarantee women's rights to property, education, and personal...

4. Philosophical and Ethical Insights

From a philosophical standpoint, harmful marital taboos beautifully illustrate the double-edged nature of social norms. Durkheim (1912) pointed out that norms are crucial for maintaining social cohesion and moral order; however, when regulation becomes excessive, these very norms can turn into tools of oppression, especially when they're applied unequally based on gender.³⁴ Similarly, Eliade's distinction between the sacred and the profane helps explain why certain taboos are deemed untouchable, often providing a spiritual justification for practices that are actually harmful. Feminist philosophy, building on de Beauvoir's work, critiques this construction of women as "the Other," showing how cultural norms can socially restrict women, denying them both autonomy and ethical agency.

Contemporary reflections really highlight the importance of critically engaging with tradition, advocating for practices that preserve cultural identity while rejecting those that harm women or violate universal ethical principles.

³⁴ Durkheim, E. (1912). *The elementary forms of religious life*. New York: Free Press

CHAPTER FOUR

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

4.1 Evaluation

The findings of this study reveal that Yoruba marital taboos are not merely arbitrary rules imposed on couples; they are deeply embedded within the social, spiritual, and ethical fabric of Yoruba life. These taboos function as mechanisms that maintain communal harmony (*àlàáfíà*), ensure the continuity of lineage, and regulate marital conduct in ways that align with both spiritual obligations and societal expectations. For instance, taboos prohibiting certain sexual behaviors or disrespect toward elders are underpinned by the belief that transgressions attract spiritual consequences, potentially destabilizing not only the household but also the broader community. Such practices underscore the Yoruba understanding of marriage as a multi-dimensional institution, where the individual is inextricably linked to the family, the ancestors, and the gods. Proverbs such as “*Ọmọ tí a kò kọ, ni yòò jẹ kó mólẹ*” (“A child not disciplined will not respect the home”) and folktales that recount the dire consequences of disobedience illustrate how moral and ethical norms are transmitted intergenerationally, embedding social lessons within culturally resonant narratives.

At the same time, a critical analysis reveals that while these taboos uphold social order, they also perpetuate gender hierarchies. Women, in particular, are often subjected to

restrictions that limit their autonomy within marriage, from decision-making about property to participation in ritual practices. Philosophical reflection, drawing on the works of Gbadegesin and Oyewumi, demonstrates that these taboos embody a worldview in which communal

welfare is prioritized over individual freedom, creating tensions between tradition and contemporary ideals of gender equality. De Beauvoir's feminist critique provides a lens through which these practices can be interrogated, exposing the ways in which patriarchal structures are normalized under the guise of cultural or spiritual authority. Such an analysis does not dismiss the cultural significance of these taboos but rather calls for a nuanced understanding of their ethical and social implications in a modern context.

Methodologically, this study employed philosophical hermeneutics, allowing for the interpretation of Yoruba proverbs, folktales, and oral traditions within their broader socio-cultural and spiritual contexts. This approach facilitated a deep engagement with the symbolic, ethical, and moral dimensions of marital taboos, revealing their functions beyond mere prescriptive norms. Nevertheless, the research faced limitations, including difficulties in accessing certain oral narratives and reconciling regional variations in the practice of taboos. Furthermore, hermeneutic interpretation, by its nature, involves subjective judgment, and alternative readings of cultural practices may exist depending on historical or geographical context.

The findings also engage meaningfully with existing scholarship. Mbiti and Idowu emphasized the integration of spiritual and social norms in African societies, an observation confirmed by this study's analysis of marital taboos. Oyewumi's feminist intervention challenges the patriarchal dimensions of these practices, highlighting the need for critical engagement with gendered norms. Gbadegesin's philosophical work provides a framework for understanding these taboos as expressions of communal rationality and moral order,

illustrating the delicate balance Yoruba society maintains between spiritual duties, societal expectations, and ethical behavior. By bringing all these viewpoints together, this study confirms, expands on, and at times even challenges earlier research, offering a thorough and critical look at marital taboos in Yoruba culture.

The implications of these findings are really important. While marital taboos can certainly be selectively kept to strengthen ethical values, communal harmony, and respect for tradition, there's also an urgent need to re-evaluate practices that restrict women's independence, especially when we consider contemporary ethical standards. This assessment underscores that it's possible to make culturally sensitive reforms that keep the moral and social benefits of taboos while still promoting gender equality and individual freedom. From a philosophical angle, Yoruba marital taboos give us a way to understand the complex interaction between the well-being of the community and individual rights, showing how traditional ethical systems manage human behavior

within a larger social and spiritual order.

4.2 Conclusions

This study of Yoruba marital taboos clearly shows that these practices are much more than just cultural rituals; they form a complex ethical and social system that regulates married life, keeps communities harmonious, and ensures family lines continue. Through the analysis in Chapters Two and Three, it becomes obvious that marriage in Yoruba culture is deeply connected to spiritual, social, and moral aspects, and marital taboos act as tools that guide behavior, enforce moral responsibility, and pass down societal values through generations. Proverbs like “*Àìkú ni kó lóore*” (“One who does not respect rules invites misfortune”) and traditional folktales vividly illustrate how ethical principles are woven into culturally resonant stories, making sure that lessons about obedience, respect, and responsibility are learned from childhood and reinforced throughout married life.

Philosophically, the study confirms Gbadegesin’s idea that Yoruba norms reflect a kind of communal rationality, where individual actions are judged by how they impact the family, community, and spiritual order. These findings also align with Mbiti’s and Idowu’s observations that African societies smoothly integrate ethical, social, and spiritual dimensions, demonstrating a worldview where moral conduct, social harmony, and religious duties are inseparable. However, a critical look through feminist perspectives, especially Oyewumi’s work, reveals that these taboos aren't neutral; they shape gender

relations in ways that often put women in subordinate positions, limiting their agency and strengthening patriarchal hierarchies. De Beauvoir's philosophical lens further highlights the ethical and moral tension between preserving tradition and advocating for individual rights and gender equality.

The study also contributes significantly to theoretical discussions in African philosophy, ethnophilosophy, and feminist critique. It points out how Yoruba marital taboos serve as a place where cultural norms, ethical reasoning, and spiritual beliefs all come together, offering scholars a framework to analyze the interplay between communal welfare and individual autonomy. Furthermore, it expands on existing literature by incorporating contemporary critiques, suggesting that while the cultural importance of these taboos must be acknowledged and preserved, selective reforms are necessary to ensure that marital practices respect human dignity, gender equality, and personal freedom.

On a practical level, the study offers guidance for Yoruba communities, policymakers, and academics who are trying to navigate the tension between cultural preservation and social reform. By pinpointing taboos that uphold communal ethics and moral responsibility, and differentiating them from those that perpetuate gender inequalities, the study provides a roadmap for culturally sensitive interventions. Such interventions could include educational programs, community dialogues, and policy frameworks that retain the ethical and spiritual essence of Yoruba marital norms while promoting fair treatment for everyone in a marriage.

In conclusion, Yoruba marital taboos are an example of a dynamic cultural system where ethical, spiritual, and social imperatives meet. They help maintain social order, reinforce moral conduct, and offer ways to resolve conflict, yet they are not beyond criticism. This study demonstrates that a critical engagement with these practices, informed by philosophical reasoning, feminist insights, and cultural understanding, is crucial to ensure that Yoruba marital customs remain relevant, ethically sound, and socially just in today's world. By finding a balance between tradition and reform, communities can preserve the deep cultural wisdom embedded in marital taboos while advancing gender equality and human rights, ensuring that marriage continues to be a foundation for both communal harmony and individual dignity.

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