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CULTURAL NORMS AND GENDER PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES: A SOCIO-ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF YORUBA COMMUNITIES IN SOUTHWEST NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study probes into the influence of cultural norms in determining gender participation in decision-making among Yoruba communities of Southwest Nigeria showing that while Patriarchal authority remains entrenched, there are already tendencies towards inclusivity. Under a socio-anthropological framework, the study employed qualitative methodology using in-depth interview, key informant interview and participant observation to gather data within six Yoruba-speaking states. A purposive sample of 60 participants ranging from chiefs, to elders, women leaders and youth representatives and religious leaders was involved. The transcription, translation and thematic analysis were done manually as well as through NVivo software, triangulated with secondary sources like oral histories and data from archives. The findings show decision-making to be overwhelmingly patriarchal, excluding women from formal structures of authority and into symbolic roles like the Iyalode. These exclusions are also given religious, cultural backing, and validated through prescriptions which rationalise male predominance in homes and panchayats. And yet, women are active in markets, religious sects, and groups of like-minded citizens, while educated younger women more and more push against the constraints. Emerging trends spurred by education, migration and globalization indicate that Yoruba cultural practices are moving toward more gender-inclusive participation, Oguntoye said. The study suggests policy direction by enforcing gender inclusion in governance, revitalizing female leadership institutions, utilization of more education and leadership training for women, development enhanced platforms through NGOs and associations as wells ample religious interpretation that could reduce exclusion. Utilizing ethnographic evidence and gender theory as heuristic guide, the paper provides new socio-anthropological understanding of how the tripartite culture, gender and governance intermingle to inform African cultural practices.

Keywords: cultural norms; gender participation; decision-making; Yoruba communities; socio-anthropology; Southwest Nigeria

1. Introduction

Decision-making procedures underlie social structure, government, and cultural perpetuation in pre-state traditional society. In African communities, decision-making is not an exclusively political activity but a rooted cultural practice that has been conditioned by custom, values, and group identity. In Southwest Nigerian Yoruba communities, customs dominate in organizing power, authority, and inclusion in both the private and the public spheres. Historically, the political systems of the Yoruba are hierarchical, being directed by institutions like the monarchies (Obaship), chief councils, lineage leaders, and grade-age associations, all being regulated by complex tradition. In these arrangements, inclusion in decision-making decision-making is frequently gendered, reproducing the convergence of patriarchy, religion, kinship, and economic status.

Everywhere, gender and governance debates have stressed the importance of balanced participation of men and women in decision-making as an essential route to inclusive development as well as democratic consolidation (UN Women, 2023). In Africa, however, patriarchal arrangements and traditional customs still restrict the voices of women in political and communal governance, even in areas where formal legal instruments enforce equal treatment. The contradiction appears striking in the Yoruba society, where the preeminence of females was widespread in trade, market society, and some traditional institutions—symbolized by the Iyalode (leader of the WOMEN)—while they were barred at the upper decision-making echelons led by male elders and chiefs. The contradiction between acknowledgement of the socio-economic role of females and their mobilization exclusion at upper decision-making levels invites essential issues concerning the continuity of cultures, gender egalitarianism, as well as social change.

In Nigeria, the Yoruba are one of the largest ethno-linguistic groups, known for their sophisticated political institutions, resilient culture, and adaptability. Even in the face of urbanization, globalization, and democratization, cultural norms are extremely influential in determining who is involved in decision-making and under what circumstances. Research has established that although Yoruba females in the past had yielded authority in marketplaces, religious institutions, and household economies, participation in formal and communal decision-making is still limited by the gender role prescriptions of cultures, religious forces, and the symbolic leadership of male elders (Olojede, 2021; Aina, 2022). Meanwhile, new forces in the contemporary world like education, international migrant links, Christianity, Islam, and feminist campaigns redraw the old gender order, allowing for fresh sites of negotiate over and challenge to authority.

In spite of the salience of these matters, academic concern with the Yoruba decision-making pattern has been spotty. Most literature centers in political anthropology and studies of royalty, while paying poor attention to the interplay of cultural prescriptions and gendered participation. Where the role of females has come under discussion, they are typically depicted as peripheral or symbolic, and not as active decision-making participants. In addition, there is too little empirical research that synthesizes socio-anthropological field evidence with the current gender equality and governance debates. The result is an overdrawn lack of understanding of how the Yoruba cultural prescriptions perpetuate or remake gender relations, how females negotiate arenas of influence in the face of exclusionary structure, and what the consequences of these patterns are for inclusive governance.

This study thus explores how gender participation in decision-making procedures is constructed by cultural norms among the Yoruba people in Southwest Nigeria. Whereas it attempts to look into the level of male and female participation in household, communal, and institutional decisions, it attempts to identify the various cultural, religious, and socio-economic variables that underlie or restrict participation. It also attempts to investigate how the forces of modernization and globalization are modifying traditional practices. Through the use of a socio-anthropological perspective that bridges ethnographic procedures with gender thought, the study attempts to close the gap between cultural anthropology and current gender scholarship. Ultimately, it attempts to offer contextually based findings that can guide both scholarly discourses as well as interventionary efforts aiming at encouraging gender-inclusive decision-making in Nigeria and beyond. Despite the economic visibility and cultural prominence of Yoruba women in trade, markets, and religious spaces, their participation in decision-making within households, communal institutions, and political structures remains constrained by enduring cultural norms. Traditional councils, lineage meetings, and chieftaincy institutions are largely male-dominated, with women often relegated to consultative or symbolic roles. While historical figures such as the Iyalode once institutionalized women's voices in Yoruba governance, contemporary realities reveal that patriarchy, religious influences, and cultural prescriptions of gender roles continue to limit the scope of women's authority. Although modern influences such as education, urbanization, and feminist advocacy have created openings for change, there is limited empirical evidence on how these forces interact with deep-seated cultural practices to shape gendered participation in decision-making. Existing studies are often descriptive or historical, with insufficient attention to the everyday negotiations of power within Yoruba households and communities. This leaves a critical knowledge gap in understanding the interplay between cultural norms and gender inclusion in decision-making, particularly within the context of ongoing social transformation in Southwest Nigeria.

In response to such a lacuna, the current study attempts to investigate the cultural regulations of decision-making among the Yoruba people, evaluate the level and character of male and female participation, and map the socio-cultural, economic, and religious obstacles that define such participation. In particular, the study poses these questions: What are the cultural regulations that organize decision-making among the Yoruba people? What is the role of gender in determining participation at the household, communal, and institutional levels? What are the challenges that restrict the participation of women in decision-making? And how are modernization, education, and globalization redefining traditional gender relations? Through responses to these questions, the study attempts to produce new socio-anthropological understanding about the intersections of culture, gender, and governance, while enriching current

discourses around inclusivity and equity in African communities.

2. Literature Review

Cultural norms are common knowledge in the sense that they are shared values, beliefs, and customs that govern social existence and direct group action. In African cultures, they give the framework in which power, authority, and decision-participation are characterized. Gender participation in such cases means the level at which men and females participate in making household, communally, and institution-based decisions. In the case of the Yoruba people, the culture operates as not just the unwritten law, as in the case of the Europeans, but also as deeply entrenched systems that enforce expectations regarding masculinity, femininity, and authority. Decision-making procedures, therefore, are framed by a logic in the culture in which the male elders and lineage heads take central-stage actors, whereas the voices of the females are often circumvented or limited to areas like the trade affiliations, household decisions, or auxiliary consultative assemblies.

Various theoretical frameworks account for these patterns. Patriarchy theory singles out the male predominance in political and social institutions, whereby male control over institutions of authority is justified by the prescriptions of the culture. Social role theory posits that gendered participation is due to culturally assigned gendered roles: men as leaders and judges, and females as nurturers, exchangers, and auxiliaries. The model of intersectionality complicates by demonstrating how gender crosses over with class, age, religious, and kinship moles in generating diverse inclusions or exclusions. For example, the historical acquisition by Yoruba leaders like the Iyalode of extensive influence was owed to economic prowess, while rural, non-educated females were mostly excluded. In combination, the various lenses emphasize that gendered participation in decision-making cannot simply boil down to the issue of inequality, yet is the end-product of institutionally entrenched culture that allocates institution of authority in intersecting social faultlines.

Empirical studies provide important insights into how these cultural norms play out in practice. Historical scholarship on Yoruba societies emphasizes that women once exercised institutionalized authority through the Iyalode and other female chieftaincies, and that market women wielded considerable economic and political power, particularly in urban centers like Ibadan and Lagos. Yet, colonial and postcolonial governance structures gradually eroded women's formal political influence, reinforcing patriarchal dominance in local councils and traditional institutions. Contemporary research has shown that despite advances in education and urbanization, women's participation in formal decision-making at community and political levels remains limited. For example, Olojede (2021) observed that women are underrepresented in local councils and traditional governance systems in Southwest Nigeria, while Aina (2022) argued that women's economic contributions are rarely translated into equal decision-making power. Studies from other African contexts also reveal similar dynamics: in Ghana, patriarchal lineage systems continue to limit women's authority despite their dominance in market trade; in Kenya, cultural and religious prescriptions often override constitutional provisions on gender inclusion. These findings highlight the persistence of cultural norms as barriers to women's participation, even in contexts where modernization and democratization have created enabling legal frameworks.

Meanwhile, contemporary scholarship points out that social norms are not absolute but dynamic under the forces of globalization, migration, and feminist activism. In urban Yoruba society, young highly educated women gain more voices in household decision-making and at the workplace. Women's organizations, NGOs, and religious institutions also established new arenas for females' voices in governance. The diffusion of Christianization and Islamic propagation has both contradictory and complementary effects—at times reinforcing the patriarchal order, yet at other times providing the alternative channels for females' leadership. These points indicate that the gender relations among the Yoruba in decision-making are in the making of renegotiation, where the traditional norms and the new practices of inclusion coexist. The literature confirms that gender participation in decision-making in Yoruba society remains heavily influenced by entrenched culture. Although excluded, in general, from the formal structures of authority, their participation in economic and religious activity affords females crucial sites of agency. What has yet to be explored is how tensions, generically, between tradition and contemporary society are negotiated in daily communal living, how the norms of culture are renegotiated as the socio-economic context changes. This thesis meets that gap by providing a socio-anthropological examination of gender participation among the Yoruba based upon ethnographic testimony as well as current discourse around gender equity.

3. Methodology

The study embraced a qualitative socio-anthropological design based in ethnographic study to investigate how gender participation in decision-making is shaped by cultural norms among the Yoruba people in Southwest Nigeria. The study was undertaken in the six Yoruba-speaking states Lagos, Oyo, Ogun, Osun, Ondo, and Ekiti selected purposively to cover differences in urbanization, tradition, and socio-economic settings. The study population was the elders, traditional leaders, women leaders, youths, and religious leaders whose voices shed light on the convergence of culture, gender, and authority. Purposive sampling was used to sample participants with the right experience and decision-making structure knowledge. In all, an average of around 60 participants, comprising male chiefs, Iyalodes, leaders of the market woman, household heads, youths leaders, and spiritual leaders, participated. Data was collected using in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and participant observation, allowing the researcher to record lived experiences, oral tradition, and common practices in culture in household and communal settings. Interviews were carried out in English and Yoruba depending on the choice of the participant, were recorded with the participant's consent, thereafter transcribed and translated. Data was analyzed using thematic content analysis. The transcripts were coded manually as well as with the software NVivo in order to identify the recurring tendencies such as patriarchy, symbolic role, barriers to participation, negotiate and negotiate of the power, as well as dynamic gender, the

evolving gender. Triangulation was done by making cross-reference of the insight based in interviews with the observation as well as the secondary materials like archival record, text of the tradition, as well as the current literature in anthropology. The trustworthiness was ensured by the credibility being improved by member-checking and the debriefing by peer in order to provide the thick description of the culture settings.

5. Results and Discussion

Table 1: Themes on Cultural Norms and Gender Participation in Yoruba Communities

Theme	Key Findings	Illustrative Evidence (Field/Observation)
Patriarchal dominance	Decision-making largely controlled by male elders, chiefs, and household heads; women excluded from councils.	"Only men sit in the palace meetings; women can advise but cannot decide." (Male elder, Osun)
Women's symbolic roles	Women's participation confined to auxiliary roles (e.g., Iyalode, market leaders); influence respected in economic matters but limited in politics.	"The Iyalode speaks for women, but her power is only what the chiefs allow." (Female leader, Oyo)
Religious and cultural barriers	Christianity and Islam often reinforce patriarchal norms; women restricted by cultural/religious prescriptions of submission.	"Our tradition and the Bible both say men should lead; women must follow." (Community pastor, Ekiti)
Negotiation and agency	Educated/urban women asserting influence in households, associations, and politics; NGOs and activism creating new spaces.	"Younger women with education cannot be silenced like before; they take part in decisions now." (Youth leader, Lagos)
Emerging shifts	Signs of gradual change due to education, globalization, migration, and feminist advocacy; coexistence of tradition and modernity.	"Culture is changing; women now contest elections in our town, which was impossible before." (Market leader, Ondo)

The table confirms that patriarchal dominance still undergirds decision-making at the base in Yoruba society, with male chiefs and elders holding first-level authority both in households and councils. This result demonstrates the enduring vitality of patriarchal norms by patriarchy theory (Aina, 2022), where male supremacy is justified by way of cultural imperatives. It verifies Olojede's (2021) record that females are systematically denied participation in the decision-making land of the Yoruba traditional governance. Meanwhile, symbolic functions of females continue as crucial yet narrow grounds of influence. The institution of Iyalode as well as leaders of the market women are representatives of females, yet their voices are often constrained by male-headed councils. This exemplifies intersecting, whereby females having economic agency play more influential role than their marginalized colleagues. However, these remains ancillary instead of central to decision-making, emphasizing the culture-based compartmentalization of gender engagement. Religious as well as traditional barriers buttress these exclusions. Both religions, Christian as well as Islamic, were discovered to legitimize male leadership while justifying females' submission. Similarly, as in other cases in Africa (Kassam, 2021), religion acts as both an exclusionary mechanism as well as an empowerment agent: while entrenching patriarchy in communal councils, at the same time, it also provides leadership sites for females in the church, mosque, and religious organizations. Optimistically, the findings also tend to indicate negotiations as well as agency, especially among young, university-educated females residing in urban areas who tend to challenge exclusion practices. NGOs, civil society organizations, and females' organizations played crucial role in initiating sites of advocacy, mentoring, as well as lobby for inclusion. This exemplifies social role in transformation, whereby traditional prescriptions tend to be more challenged and renegotiated. Lastly, the evidence all points towards emerging gender participation shifts that tend to emanate from current trends in modernization, education, globalization, as well as migration. These tendencies tend to initiate novel models of cultures that coexist alongside traditional practices, bringing forth an uneven yet dynamic process of change. Participation by females in electoral politics as well as in decision-making in the society, albeit narrow, points towards erosion of absolute patriarchal control as absolute. The result corroborates universal feminist scholarship that points at culture as both the locus of the constraint as well as the locus of the change.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This research has indicated that patriarchal norms continue to be strong in influencing gender inclusion in decision-making among Yoruba communities of Southwest Nigeria. Male-dominated structures persist in households, communal councils, and traditional institutions, confining females mostly to symbolic roles like the Iyalode or market leadership roles. Religious institutions and cultural prescriptions often perpetuate these exclusions by validating male command, even where females make substantial economic and social contributions. Meanwhile, findings showed that females in the Yoruba group practice agency through places like markets, religious organizations, and informal organizations, while

females with education and urban areas are increasingly flouting traditional barriers. These findings illustrate that the customized culture among the Yoruba people is not absolute intent, as contemporary experiences, formal education, population movement, and international integration provide agency opportunities for expanded feminine incorporation. In order to enhance the decision-making inclusiveness, there are a number of actions that are advised. Firstly, there is a necessity to reaffirm policies that impose gender inclusiveness in traditional councils and local governance institutions, such that females' voices can penetrate beyond symbolic office monopolies. Secondly, females' leadership institutions like the Iyalode institution must be rejuvenated and provided with substantial competency to add value to the communal decision, similar to the contemporary position occupied by the Iyalogbe in the Ago-Iwoye tradition. Thirdly, the acquisition of education and leadership training by females and adolescent-kind females shall enhance the confidence and competency needed for active participation. Fourthly, females' organizations, NGOs, and civic society organizations must persist in providing arenas for negotiation, advocacy, and mentoring. Fifthly, religious institutions must adopt more inclusive doctrine rendering in order to inhibit the religious ideology, as a means of excluding females. By these efforts, the various Yoruba communities can attain balanced and inclusive decision-making governance where both males and females play active parts in the communal future development.

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