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Women and Religion in Nigeria

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Introduction
Religion in Africa in general, and in Nigeria in particular, has assumed dimensions hardly separable from politics to the extent that some nations in Africa have established national bodies to coordinate the affairs of the religious bodies in their nations. Nigeria is not least active here as it, long ago, established the National Advisory Council on Religious Affairs, whose membership of twenty-four persons was shared on equal basis by the Islamic and Christian religions.\(^4\) This arrangement is flawed in two important ways: the question of women and that of the African Traditional Religion. Women activists in Nigeria are contesting men’s dominance of this body that grossly excludes them. They are neither floor members nor found in leadership positions. Shockingly, they are also beginning to lose out in African Traditional Religion as well.

In African Traditional Religion, women have always played active roles in religion, not just as floor members, but mostly as leaders in a variety of African Traditional Religions. African Traditional Religion not only permits women to be heads of religious bodies, but it also permits them to have their own religion. To some extent, therefore, especially in Yoruba land, there are male and female religions, both of which complement each other.

However, this is not so in the Islamic and Christian religions that came to supplant African Traditional Religion. Even in Christendom where women enjoy some freedom of association, they are yet to be permitted to serve as pastors in many denominations, not to mention being ordained as reverends or bishops. In most churches, especially the Protestant Church, the highest a woman can rise in the hierarchy of the Church is deaconess. In the Islamic religion, on the other hand, women are permanently conditioned to play a second-fiddle role and live a segregated life from their male counterparts. It is a situation that made an important Islamic cleric in Nigeria, Alhaji Abubakar Gummi, boldly say that he did not hope to see a woman leader emerge in his lifetime.\(^5\)

The research for this paper was guided by one question: How have Nigerian women responded to this religious subjugation by their male counterparts, not just now but also from pre-colonial days?

Concepts of Religion
Religion is defined by Bolaji Idowu as resulting from “man’s spontaneous awareness of, and spontaneous reaction to, his immediate awareness of a living power, a "holy order" infinitely greater than himself; a power mysterious because unseen, yet a present and urgent reality, seeking to bring man into communion with himself.”\(^6\) O.B.C. Nwolise, quoting Biton, says that religion is “a system of belief about the individual’s place in the world providing an order to that world and a reason for existence within it.”\(^7\) However, there is also a negative or radical definition of religion by Karl Marx, and this seems to be the one adopted by civilian politicians, military politicians, and other elites. Marx defines religion as "the sigh of the oppressed creatures, the sentiment of a heartless world, as it is the spirit of the spiritless conditions; it is the opium of the people."\(^8\) There is a purpose religion is supposed to serve, and three eminent persons highlight this purpose: the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo, General Yakubu Gowon, and O. B. C. Nwolise. The views of Awolowo and


those of Nwolise are similar. According to Awolowo, “All great religions and ideologies of the world preach one and only one supreme and imperishable lesson, namely: that love is the touchstone of all human activities; any human activity that does not stand the test of love is evil.”

Nwolise extends the lesson that religion teaches from love emphasized by Awolowo to “peace, tolerance, and consideration for others, justice, brotherhood of man, understanding, unity in one God and other virtues.”

Expressing a similar notion, General Yakubu Gowon said that the best of one’s religion should be put to the service of humanity. Service to humanity is thus the main essence of religion. But should this service be the monopoly of males alone? Should there be gender in service?

Methodology
My methodology can be divided into three categories: data sources, data collection/gathering methods, and data analysis methods. On data sources, library and archival documents such as the National Political Reform Conference of 2005, the 1979, 1989, and 1999 Constitutions, and the 1995 Constitutional Conference debated and documented the secular and spiritual spheres of the nation’s life. Consulted as well as secondary data, were monographs, journals, newspapers, and magazines. Considering the focus, scope, and empirical nature of this study, it was very clear that the needs of this study could hardly be met by a single research design; hence, a variety of methods were applied. First, appropriate archival documents were searched for and collected at the libraries of Obafemi Awolowo University and the University of Ibadan, as well as the National Archives, also at Ibadan.

In general, for the data analysis, descriptive analysis, and case study methods were employed. While the descriptive approach focused on the types and nature of religions recognized by the country since pre-colonial times, the case study approach focused on the federalization of religion and the place of women in the processes of the three main constitutionally recognized religions in Nigeria: Islam; Christianity; and African Traditional Religions.

Pre-Colonial Days
In modern-day Nigeria, religion and politics are interlocked in such an intricate manner to the extent that neither can be completely separated from the operation of the other. As a matter of fact, in most African countries there are attempts to create religious parties, although this is most often suppressed by the state. Senegal, Nigeria, and Algeria are good examples here.

Regardless, the synergy of religion and politics make African politics thick. As it is now, so was it in the beginning when monarchs in the traditional states attempted to co-opt religion into state affairs. Ekong states that, at one point in time, there came the need for “most kings and village heads to either combine ritual and administrative responsibilities or run the risk of being teleguided by the ritual and cult leaders.”

Although the monarchs did not completely succeed in submerging religion with traditional politics, they succeeded in subordinating it to the traditional state. Let it be stressed

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here that Traditional Religion in the pre-Islamic, pre-Christian, and pre-colonial era is synonymous to ritualism.\textsuperscript{13}

Either way, Nigerian women were not found wanting either as religious / ritual leaders or as monarchs directing the affairs of the state and the religion. In places where women were (and are still) traditional rulers, they controlled the affairs of the traditional states as well as their religions. Women traditional rulers in Nigeria are of three categories, as are the types of leadership in traditional religions. The first category is the substantive women traditional rulers who are found in the Niger, Adamawa, Eboyin, and Ondo states.\textsuperscript{14}

*Please Note: The researcher provided all images in the following section.*

### Examples of Women as Direct Traditional Rulers at the Local Level in Nigeria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/N</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Town or Village</th>
<th>L.G.A.</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Type of Rulership</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time Spent in Office</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Hajia Hadza Muhammed</td>
<td>Kumbada</td>
<td>Munya L.G.</td>
<td>Niger</td>
<td>Substantive Traditional Ruler</td>
<td>2001-2008</td>
<td>7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Nya’a Ggangwu’u</td>
<td>Arnado Debo</td>
<td>Ganye L.G.</td>
<td>Adamawa</td>
<td>Substantive Traditional Ruler</td>
<td>2004-2007</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bwaratu Nzumosu</td>
<td>Nokowo</td>
<td>Numan L.G.</td>
<td>Adamawa</td>
<td>Substantive Traditional Ruler</td>
<td>2005-2008</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Alu Ibiam</td>
<td>Uwanna</td>
<td>Afigbo North</td>
<td>Ebonyi</td>
<td>Substantive Traditional Ruler</td>
<td>1996-2008</td>
<td>13 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Oba Comfort Adesida</td>
<td>Ondo</td>
<td>Ondo West</td>
<td>Ondo</td>
<td>Substantive Traditional Ruler</td>
<td>1967-2007</td>
<td>40 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Picture 1: The researcher, F. A. Olasupo, standing to the left of the female king, Hajia Hadisa Muhammed. To the right is the research assistant. The others are the high chiefs or kingmakers of the female king.

Picture 2: Below is the researcher paying homage to the female king.
Picture 3. The researcher paying homage to the female king of Unwana, Eze Ogo II, in the Afigbo North Local Government of Eboyin state.

Picture 4: The researcher making a point before the female king of Unwana.
Women traditional rulers in Niger, Adamawa, and Ondo states in the pre-Islamic, pre-Christian, and pre-colonial days were not just traditional rulers of their communities, but also the spiritual heads. In Niger state, for instance, the women traditional rulers of Kumbada in the Munyan Local Government were just traditional rulers, as their community of that time had no religion. According to the present-day woman traditional ruler of the kingdom, Magajia Mohammed, who says in the pre-colonial days and now, “The people here don’t belong to or practice any religion.”

In Adamawa state, on the other hand, the woman traditional ruler of Arnado Debo in the Ganye local government, Gangwu, is “the traditional and spiritual head of the community. She presides over spiritual and traditional ceremonies and festivals including worships.” In Ondo, Lobun (the female king) was both political and religious leader. In Ile-Oluji as well, Lobun had her own religion separate from that of the male king, and she headed this religion. According to Akinfemiwa, "Lobun (Obabinrin) (female king) she is in charge of female affairs and the markets. She is also the priestess of 'Aje,' the god of wealth and trade. She is installed by Jomu Lobun (female kingmaker). The 'Olulu,' her crown, is a piece of white cloth tied round her head with red feathers stuck in it.”

Statistics on Women Traditional Rulers in the Pre-Colonial Era

Table 2

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/N</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Town or Village</th>
<th>L.G.A.</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Type of Rulership</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time Spent in Office</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Oduduwa</td>
<td>Ife</td>
<td>Ife</td>
<td>Osun</td>
<td>Progenitor</td>
<td>Pre-colonial</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Terracotta</td>
<td>Ife</td>
<td>Ife</td>
<td>Osun</td>
<td>Queen or Ooni of Ife</td>
<td>Between 12&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; and 13&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; centuries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Luwo Gbadiga</td>
<td>Ife</td>
<td>Ife Cent L.G.</td>
<td>Osun</td>
<td>Ooni of Ife</td>
<td>Pre-colonial days</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Debooye</td>
<td>Ife</td>
<td>Ife Cent L.G.</td>
<td>Osun</td>
<td>Ooni of Ife</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Moremi</td>
<td>Ife</td>
<td>Ife Cent L.G.</td>
<td>Osun</td>
<td>6&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Ooni of Ife</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Iyayun</td>
<td>Oyo</td>
<td>Oyo L.G.</td>
<td>Oyo</td>
<td>Alaafin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Orrompoto</td>
<td>Oyo</td>
<td>Oyo L.G.</td>
<td>Oyo</td>
<td>Alaafin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Jomijomi</td>
<td>Oyo</td>
<td>Oyo L.G.</td>
<td>Oyo</td>
<td>Alaafin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Jepojepo</td>
<td>Oyo</td>
<td>Oyo L.G.</td>
<td>Oyo</td>
<td>Alaafin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Ajiwon Arbobose</td>
<td>Oyo</td>
<td>Oyo L.G.</td>
<td>Oyo</td>
<td>Alaafin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Queen Amina</td>
<td>Zazzau</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>16&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; century Emir of Zaria</td>
<td></td>
<td>16&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Yakwano</td>
<td>Daura</td>
<td>Daura Emirate</td>
<td>Katsina</td>
<td>Queen</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Yakania</td>
<td>Daura</td>
<td>Daura Emirate</td>
<td>Katsina</td>
<td>Queen</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Walsam</td>
<td>Daura</td>
<td>Daura Emirate</td>
<td>Katsina</td>
<td>Queen</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Cadar</td>
<td>Daura</td>
<td>Daura Emirate</td>
<td>Katsina</td>
<td>Queen</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Agagri</td>
<td>Daura</td>
<td>Daura Emirate</td>
<td>Katsina</td>
<td>Queen</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Omu</td>
<td>Onitsha</td>
<td>Onitsha L.G.</td>
<td>Anambra</td>
<td>Female Monarch</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Queen Kanbasa</td>
<td>Bonny</td>
<td>Bonny L.G.</td>
<td>Rivers</td>
<td>Queen</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second category of women traditional rulers is comprised of those who operate in a dual-sex political system. This system has a kind of dual political system. In other words, it has two types of traditional rulers based on sex; i.e., both male and female traditional rulers. This is common among the Ondo, Ekiti Anioma, and Iuleha people of Yoruba land, the Ibo-speaking area of Delta-State, and the Iuleha community of Iuleha land, respectively. As female kings, they are also the priestesses and ritual leaders for their communities. They are expected to protect the male kings through ritual purifications.18

# Communities with Dual Kingship or Dual Rulership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/N</th>
<th>Female King</th>
<th>Male King</th>
<th>Town or Village</th>
<th>L.G.</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Type of Rulership</th>
<th>Date: Female</th>
<th>Years in Office: Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Oba Comfort Adesida</td>
<td>Oba Afolabi Idown Babade</td>
<td>Ondo</td>
<td>Ondo</td>
<td>Ondo</td>
<td>Dual</td>
<td>1967-2007</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Oba Kokumo Bolatito Unice</td>
<td>Oba S.S. Adedugbe</td>
<td>Ijero</td>
<td>Ijero</td>
<td>Ekiti</td>
<td>Dual Kingship</td>
<td>1990-2007</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Oba Adetomiwa</td>
<td>Oba of Idanre, Oba Frederick Aroloye</td>
<td>Ile-Oluji</td>
<td>Ile-Oluji/Oke-Igbo</td>
<td>Ondo</td>
<td>Dual Kingship</td>
<td>1995-2007</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Oba Victoria Cole</td>
<td>Owa of Idanre, Oba Frederick Aroloye</td>
<td>Idanre</td>
<td>Idanre</td>
<td>Ondo</td>
<td>Dual Kingship</td>
<td>1988-2004</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Oba Ibiboke Ayoola</td>
<td>Oba D.O Akinloye</td>
<td>Odigbo</td>
<td>Odigbo L.G</td>
<td>Ondo State</td>
<td>Dual Kingship</td>
<td>1997-2008</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Oba Taye Alademoni Adebayo</td>
<td>Oba Lawrence Temikotan</td>
<td>Ore</td>
<td>Odigbo</td>
<td>Ondo</td>
<td>Dual Kingship</td>
<td>1996-2008</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Oba Emily Meriyenwen Awogbigun</td>
<td>Oba Patrick Adejoye Osuwe</td>
<td>Ajue</td>
<td>Odigbo</td>
<td>Ondo State</td>
<td>Dual Kingship</td>
<td>1988-2008</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Omu Okpanam</td>
<td>Okpanam</td>
<td>Delta</td>
<td>Dual Kingship</td>
<td>2003-2007</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Omu</td>
<td>Ogwashi Uku</td>
<td>Delta</td>
<td>Dual Kingship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Omu</td>
<td>Ibusa</td>
<td>Delta</td>
<td>Dual Kingship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Baale Comfort Ajogbe Adeleye</td>
<td>Shoun of Ogbomosho</td>
<td>Ogbomosho</td>
<td>Ogbomosho</td>
<td>Oyo</td>
<td>Just Developing Toward Dual Kingship</td>
<td>1940-2006</td>
<td>67</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Oba Elizabeth Odeyemi</td>
<td>Joseph Adeyemi Ademuleka</td>
<td>Ilawe</td>
<td>Ekiti</td>
<td>Ekiti South West</td>
<td>Dual Kingship</td>
<td>1970-2010</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Female chief</td>
<td>Oba Adekunle Aromolaran</td>
<td>Ilesha</td>
<td>Ilesha</td>
<td>Osun</td>
<td>Just Developing Toward Dual Kingship</td>
<td>Since pre-colonial days</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The third category of women traditional rulers is comprised of those who act as regent at the demise of male traditional rulers. During this period of regency, they act as the rulers as well as the religious leaders of their communities. Again, this is common among the people of Ekiti and Ondo States of the Yoruba-speaking people. The regents in these places exercise all political and religious functions during the period in which they are regents, and most of them serve as regents for five, ten, or even seventeen years depending on the time the substantive male traditional rulers are appointed19.

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### Some Women Regent Traditional Rulers in Nigeria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/N</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Town or Village</th>
<th>L.G.A.</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Type of Rulership</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time Spent In Office</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Princess Adeyinka Adesida</td>
<td>Akure</td>
<td>Akure L.G.</td>
<td>Ondo</td>
<td>Regent</td>
<td>2000-2004</td>
<td>5 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Princess Adejoke Adekanye</td>
<td>Akungba Akoko</td>
<td>Akoko South West L.G.</td>
<td>Ondo</td>
<td>Regent</td>
<td>2002-Date</td>
<td>4 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Princess Joke Adesunloye</td>
<td>Ifira Akoko</td>
<td>Akoko South East L.G.</td>
<td>Ondo</td>
<td>Regent</td>
<td>2001-Date</td>
<td>5 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Princess Janet Adigun</td>
<td>Iye Akoko</td>
<td>Akoko North L.G.</td>
<td>Ondo</td>
<td>Regent</td>
<td>2003-Date</td>
<td>3 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Princess Ade Gbolarin</td>
<td>Ire-Ekiti</td>
<td>Oye L.G.</td>
<td>Ekiti</td>
<td>Regent</td>
<td>1999-2004</td>
<td>5 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Princess Fehintola Omolewo</td>
<td>Ayegabju - Ekiti</td>
<td>Oye L.G.</td>
<td>Ekiti</td>
<td>Regent</td>
<td>1997-2004</td>
<td>7 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Princess Bosede Elizabeth Fadiya</td>
<td>Oloje-Ekiti</td>
<td>Oye L.G.</td>
<td>Ekiti</td>
<td>Regent</td>
<td>2002-2004</td>
<td>11.5 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Princess Alu Ibiam</td>
<td>Uwanna</td>
<td>Afigbo North</td>
<td>Ebonyi</td>
<td>Regent</td>
<td>1996-2006</td>
<td>11 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Princess Adeboboye Aladeyelu</td>
<td>Igbara Odo Town</td>
<td>Ekiti South West</td>
<td>Ekiti</td>
<td>Regent</td>
<td>1996-2006</td>
<td>11 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Princess C.A. Falade</td>
<td>Ido Ani</td>
<td>Ose L.G.</td>
<td>Ondo</td>
<td>Regent</td>
<td>1978-1993</td>
<td>15 Years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Where women are not traditional rulers, it does not preclude them from being religious / ritual leaders who act as checks against the power of the male rulers. In the pre-colonial days, a number of women religious / spiritual leaders acted as checks against the possible abuse of authority by Alaafin of Oyo. First was Olosi, who was a religious cum political leader and had power to arrest the King and “put [him] in irons if he offends.” This powerful religious / political woman was said to be the “feudal head of Aseyin, Oluiwo, and the Baale of Ogbomosho.” (These three
traditional rulers were kings in their own rights, in their various towns: Iseyin; Iwo and Ogbomosho.) Once a woman ascended into this politico-religious office, according to Johnson, she was, of course, to be celibate for life.20

Second is Iya Naso. This woman was associated with the worship of Sango, god of thunder. Third is the priestess, Eni-oja (owner of the market), before whom even the king leaned on the day he went to worship at the market (Johnson, 1921:66). Other powerful priestesses: Iya 'le Ori, the priestess of the god Ori or god of fate; and Iya Mole, who had in her keeping the king’s Ifa god. She was also the head of all the Babalawos (Ifa priests in the city). Other priestesses in the city include Olorun-ku-mefun, the iyamonari, and Iya'leori.21 When the authority of one of the Alaafins of Oyo was threatened by his prime minister, a band of women religious leaders stormed the palace and assured his royal majesty of providing him with the necessary spiritual security. These women religious leaders told him,

A wa lehin re.
Gbogbo irunmole aafin yi wa lehin re
Awon lyami wa lehin re....
Oaborong-a-pa-ni-ma-wa-gun
Olokiki oru at’ori jeron
At’idi j’edo enia...
Awon l’olobe ide
Awon l’ogantia ti mu ’mi talotalo
Awon ni ifa, awon l’Odu-aiye –iya ooo!

We are behind you
All the spirits in the palace are behind you
Our godmothers (witches) are behind you...
Oaborong—one that kills without traces
One prominent at midnight, that eats
Animals from the head
They are ones with golden knife
They are ogalanta that drinks water talotalo
They are the Ifa; they are the Odu of this
World—Mother a a a!
(Translation by the researcher)22

Women religious / ritual leaders are not limited to Yoruba-speaking people, as Idemili in Igboland is the goddess of the river in charge of the security of lives and property. She is revered in the nineteen towns that make up Idemili Local Government. Ala (earth goddess, goddess of creativity, guardian of morality) is also in Igbo land.23

Thus, generally before the advent of modern religions, Islam and Christianity in particular, women had always contested religious space with their male counterparts, although from a very weak position. In Yoruba, Igbo, and many other communities in Nigeria, women have, since pre-colonial days, created feminist political and religious institutions as counterweights and as wives to male gods. Some of these are: Moremi, the wife of Oranmiyan, who was the sixth monarch to rule Ile-Ife; Olokun, the wife of Oduduwa, goddess of the sea, the giver of the children, healer of abdominal diseases; Oya, goddess of the river, wife of Sango; and Yemoo, the wife of Obatala and the Osun.24 These feminist structures are responses not to sex differences but to gender imbalances in governance and resource allocation, and they are directed toward challenging male dominance of traditional rule and other affairs. It should be noted that religion is another form of control, and its

21 Johnson, The History of the Yorubas, 56.
dominance in most Nigerian communities led women to set up rival structures as counterweight to male structures.

The Post-Colonial Period

The advent of foreign religions, because of their adverse tenets on women, further hastened the relegation of women in religious leadership; but resistance to this is gradually arising. Female monarchs are also adapting to the changing world, choosing to be either Muslim or Christian, depending on the religious trends in their communities. The Magajia of the Kumbada kingdom, Hajia Hadiza Mohammed in Niger State for instance, chose to be a Muslim over the earlier animist religion of her community and has since been evangelizing there. Her Majesty says,

I have started calling them to the palace, advising them to choose one religion. I am encouraging them to be whatever they want, Moslem, Christian, whatever. I don't like seeing people not practicing any religion. I have been praying for them day and night and would be happy for them to be Moslems or Christians one day.25

Because she is both the political and spiritual head of her community, the chief Imam of the village—Imam Musa Muhammad—regularly pays homage to Her Royal Majesty. When the Chief Imam of the village was asked about compatibility of this with Islam, the male Imam said, "This is an exceptional situation none of us can change. A woman chief is a necessity given our peculiar circumstance."26

Similarly, the female king in Ondo town, Oba Comfort Adekunmi Adesida, chose to convert to Christianity, while the church she attended while alive made her Iya Ijo. When she died, her daughter Akinfolarin Adesida was made regent and took over the title at an elaborate ceremony (which the researcher attended).

Ordinary women in most Nigerian communities are becoming conscious of the fact that they also need to occupy leadership positions in religious affairs, as they have done enough at the lower rung of the ladder. According to Uchem, women "clean the church; the desk, the compound; everything! They organize harvest and raise money. They contribute money and food and support the priest. Ovu Nde Nne n eji lekota Ndi Fada [It is the Christian Mothers who look after the priest]."27 When some women were then asked what part women play in decision-making in their parish, their response was,

"They are in the parish council."
[How many of them? I asked.]
"They are three."
[What is the total number in the parish council?]
"Fourteen!"
[And how do you see that?]
"Well, women are in the minority."

Emboldened by the women's political and religious development in South Africa and Uganda, Muslim and Christian women in Nigeria are growing conscious of leadership positions in politico-religious institutions. In South Africa, toward the end of the apartheid system of government, the wives of religious leaders demonstrated uncommon courage, organizing politico-religious rallies in which not less than 200 women, including the wife of Desmond Tutu, Leah; the

26 "No Male Rulers Please…There’s a Curse on Them ," The Nation , October 9, 2007.
27 Rose N. Uchem, Overcoming Women’s Subordination, 101.
wife of the Reverend Allan Boesak, Dorothy; and Dorothy Zihlagu, the sixty-seven-year-old chairperson of the Federation of South Africa Women were arrested and detained.28 And in Uganda, Alice Lakwena surprised the world when she successfully challenged the Ugandan government of Yoweri Museveni. With her guerrilla army made up of illiterate village men, women, and children, 6,000 in all, and using simple weapons made of stones, sticks, and “holy oil,” her “Holy Spirit Battalion” successfully put the government to shame.29 In the confrontation with the government forces that lasted almost 30 minutes, she “lost 46 female rebels, the government also lost three of her soldiers.”30

This agitation by women for leadership positions in religion is in fact a global phenomenon. In both the United Kingdom and the United States of America, there is clamor to have women bishops. Rowan Williams and John Sentamu, the archbishops of Canterbury and York, respectively, have given their support to this proposal. The Bishop of Guildford, Christopher Hill, also agrees that women can be ordained in the episcopate as the church already ordains them in priesthood. “At least, the widow of the late Archbishop Benson Idahosa of the Church of God Mission in Edo State, Nigeria is referred to as Bishop Margaret Idahosa.” However, opponents of the proposal, the Transfer Episcopal Arrangements (TEA) say that the timing is wrong. Others believe that it is a way forward for the church, provided the church can make it work. To these individuals, the proposal is “expected to remove any barrier on women from becoming the Archbishop of Canterbury as Hill believes that it is illogical to put a dividing line between the presbyteriate and episcopate.”31

Emboldened by these developments, Muslim women forbidden from leadership roles in the male-dominated Muslim community have started making calls for women’s leadership in religion. Yoruba’s Muslim communities have created leadership roles for women. A notable religious woman in any Yoruba community is often made Iya Adini or Suna (woman leader in Islam) in recognition of her role in the Islamic community. This is not enough, but there is little these women can do here without violating Quranic injunction, a document none can modify. From the Christian perspective, not only do women establish their own churches as a way of showing their displeasure at the male domination of leadership positions in Christian religion, but they are also the leaders in them. Instances include Prophetess (Dr.) D. S. Olaniye, the founder of the Agbala Daniel Church in Ibadan and the branch at Ife.32 They also have their own religious organizations, one of which is Christian Women International (CWIN), headed by Mrs. Odiete.33

In Kano, a predominantly Islamic city, the Islamic religion separates the women and girls from males, regardless of whether they are their husbands, brothers, or other relatives in their homes, not to mention their colleagues in social institutions. Women are beginning to react, and politics is the means through which they are doing so. The data available on the 2003 elections suggest that there is a remarkable increase in the number of women seeking elective political positions at the local government level, particularly in Kano State. In the run up to the June 2003 local government elections, over one hundred women sought elective posts, either as councilors or local government chairpersons. Preliminary data on the elections show that three women were elected in each of the six states of the North East and one as Chairperson in Taraba State. The CDD

30 Ibid.
(2004) interpreted this as a sign of a new political will and a new understanding that women have a non-negotiable right to participate in politics.34

It is interesting to note that all religions in Nigeria—Islam, Christianity, and African Traditional Religion—choose to discriminate against women. Strict Islamic tradition forbids women the freedom of dressing and association, particularly with their male counterparts. Most disgusting is the fact that they can only be led by their male counterparts and cannot lead in male-female associations. However, if an association is strictly female, they are permitted to provide leadership. Crusades against women are one thing, but attack against women in religious institutions is another. In Offa, Muslim fundamentalists, according to Soyinka, “have been destroying again and again the Moremi shrine erected to one of the heroines of Yoruba history.”35

The Christian religion also forbids women’s leadership in the churches.36 They base their ignorance, as Amanda Ogunro observes, on a few scriptures. “First they cite 1 Corinthians 14:34, which say ‘Let your women keep silence in the church: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience as also saith the law.’” Verse 35 also says, “And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.” Again, 1 Timothy 2:11-13 says, “Let the woman learn in silence with all subjugation. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence, for Adam was first formed then Eve.” As is the case of Offa in the west, Soyinka observed, “The Christian Fundamentalists in the east have also been destroying Mbari shrines saying that they are pagans.”

African Traditional Religion is not left out of these discriminations that take different forms. Bachama kingdom in Adamawa State has a culture akin to some of these discriminatory scriptures. Traditionally, the Queen in the Bachama kingdom is rarely seen in public. Among the Bachama people, there is a pagan festival at which it is an abomination for women to speak. This powerful Queen not only attended the festival, but she spoke there as well. Opposing the tradition that the Queen should not be seen in public, she was found several times sitting in the public with her husband-king. Among the Yorubas, there is the Oro cult festival. The Oro festival is an annual event in Yoruba land where females are not expected to leave their houses for certain number of hours in the most useful part of the day, from 6:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., for a period of seven days. On the seventh day, they are expected to remain indoors at all times.

Thus, as Ehusani observed, women have been suppressed through many factors, of which the most important are the burdens of culture, tradition, and religion that have interlocked with policies of governments of various types—colonial, military, and civilian—to keep people in general and women in particular down.40 However, modernization, globalization and democratization have combined to set the ball of women’s emancipation rolling. As for democratization and modernization, on Election Day, women in the Muslim-dominated parts of the North who were in the past inhibited by Islamic restrictions are now actively participating in electoral processes. Although uncounted during census and remaining in their respective homes, they now come out into the open to form their own separate line to vote or be counted. Modification in the case of the Oro festival comes as the festival is scheduled to fall outside the election period. Also, in some


37 Ajibade Kunle, “Terror.”


communities, cities especially, the timing of the Oro festival has been modified to take place at night, between 9:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m.

Various women scholars express women’s disgust with discrimination. For Adepeju Adereti, “The colonial administrative system allowed European officials to govern through male authorities, while ignoring their female counterparts. According to Parport (1987), the colonial officers ignored female candidates when looking for possible appointments to chiefships, scholarships or other benefits.”  

Ransome-Kuti expresses women’s frustration as follows,

The system of Sole Native Authority (SNA) had been a great source of oppression and suppression to the Egba people. Even most of the members of the council were not free to express their minds. The Alake always passed as “Mr. Know-All.” The Egba women would very much like the power of SNA removed because we are not happy under it. It is foreign to the custom of Egba.

For Alagoa, in respect to women in the South, “The position of women within the Warrant Chief System was a peculiar one. They were, to a large extent, an invisible factor within it...Although women were thus virtually excluded from the administration yet they came under their surveillance.”

However, globalization of issues has become the most lethal weapon in combating excesses of religion and tradition that deny Muslim and Christian women’s rights in Nigeria. When two Muslim women were convicted of adultery in the northern part of Nigeria and had to be stoned to death according to Sharia law, the entire globe, particularly the world human rights organizations, assisted by local human rights organizations such as the Civil Liberty Organization (CLO) and Campaign for Democracy (CD), rose in the defense of Safiyat and Amina (the women in question). The Federal Government was even threatened with economic and social sanctions should she allow the death sentence passed on the two women to be carried out. When fatwa was passed on a female reporter of the This Day newspaper by former Deputy Governor of Samfara state, Alhaji Skinkafi, Wole Soyinka commented,

If any harm comes to that girl, wherever she is we will see that wherever Shinkafi goes, he’s a wanted man. At the very least, wanted for questioning, that the record of his statement for declaration of fatwa against this girl will be in the record of INTERPOL, all human rights organizations all over the world. I want him to know that there is no longer a hiding place for anyone who commits crime against humanity.

This is globalization at work. A similar scene of this nature was also observed in a traditional state of the Bachama kingdom in Adamawa state not long ago. There, a woman evangelist, Jinkai Ethan, prophesized to the hearing of the Queen of the kingdom that the tenure of her husband-King, Freddie Soditi Bongo, would be terminated prematurely for the series of misrules by her husband

44 Ajibade Kunle, “Terror,” 27.
and herself. The Queen not only abused her and called her false prophet, but the Evangelist later lost her life in a gruesome murder that sparked disturbances in Bachamaland in 2003. Accusations leveled against the Queen in particular and her husband in general by some women’s groups, prompting the evangelist’s intervention, ranged from security and cultural breach to spiritual disrespect. The state government, under the governorship of Boni Haruna, later intervened by deposing the Queen and her husband-King.

Conclusion
The above analysis shows that women are not less religious than their male counterparts. But providing leadership in religion, not just in modern religions but in pre-modern ones as well, is the Rubicon they have yet to cross properly. Even from pre-colonial days, they have subtly resisted the male domination of leadership in religious affairs, either by sharing the role with their husband leaders or creating their own religion where they could be leaders. This trend is still feasible today, as they create and head their own churches. While this is so and explicit in the Christian world, it is the other way around in the Muslim world, because of the strict Islamic injunctions that unequivocally place women under male leadership.