

ABIYAMO: THEORIZING AFRICAN MOTHERHOOD

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Motherhood occupies a special place in African cultures and societies. Regardless of whether a particular African society displays a patrilineal or matrilineal kinship system, mothers are the essential building block of social relationships, identities, and indeed society. Because mothers symbolize familial ties, unconditional love and loyalty, motherhood is invoked even in extrafamilial situations that calls upon these values. For example, in the Ogboni a traditional political organization which formed part of the hierarchy of governance in some Yoruba polities, members refer to each other as *omoya*—mother's child-- emphasizing that fraternal and sororal bonds derive from mother and the institution of motherhood (Oyewumi 2003a). My goal in this paper is to articulate Yoruba conceptions of motherhood as one African model.

The social context of motherhood and the meanings attached to birthing events are a good starting point for appreciating Yoruba constructions of the institution. At the moment of birth, two entities are born—a baby and a mother. In Yoruba language, the term for mother is *abiyamo*, which can be translated as natal mother or nursing mother. In everyday usage, the term *abiyamo* is usually accompanied by another one *ikunle* which means kneeling, the preferred birthing position in the culture. Thus *ikunle abiyamo* refers to the kneeling of a mother in labor. The day a particular mother gives birth is referred to as *ojo ikunle* (day of birth).

The kneeling posture is invested with a lot of meaning, as is demonstrated by the prevalence of this pose in Yoruba art. In the cosmology, *Ikunle* recalls *akunleyan*—the pregestation act of kneeling before the Creator to choose one's—*ori*—Destiny on earth. It is significant that the most fateful choice any individual makes at this crucial pre-earthly moment is the selection of one's mother. Apart from the fact that the mother is the one who introduces a person into earthly life, there is the added fear of choosing a mother who has a short lifespan, because a motherless child is unlikely to survive. *Omoalainiya* (literally motherless child) is the term used to describe an orphan in Yoruba, regardless of whether the father of the child is living. The saying *omo k'oni ohun o ye, iya ni ko gba*—a child survives and thrives only at the mother's will—suggests the critical role the mother plays in the child's welfare. She is not only the birth giver—motherhood being present at creation—she is also the life giver, making motherhood a lifelong vocation.

Motherhood is a lifelong commitment and one remains a child to one's mother regardless of one's age. The importance of having a mother who has a long lifespan cannot be overemphasized. It is understood that one needs one's mother at every turn in life and most especially through rites of passage after birth such

as marriage, and the birth of one's own children. Until the very recent past, an expectant mother normally had her first child with her mother in attendance. As soon as a young bride was in her sixth month of pregnancy, her mother would insist that her daughter leave her marital home and come back to her natal home so that she could be properly looked after and ushered successfully through what is regarded as a dangerous and life threatening process. Even today, the first Yoruba prayer uttered as greeting after a baby is born is *eku ewu omo*—thanking God for allowing the mother and child to survive the dangers of childbirth. Olabimtan *et al*, describe the day in which the expectant mother goes into labor:

Ti inu ikunle abiyamo ba n te obinrin, awon obi re yoo teni si yara fun un. Won yoo ko akisa aso ti won ti lo si itosi, won yoo wa mu ose abiwere ti won ti gun pamo fun un, yoo lo fiwe ni ebinkule. Lehin eyi, yoo wo iyara, yo wa lori ikunle sori eni. Iya re yoo maa ku wole, ku jade, sugbon ekukaka ni alabaagbe ni ode yoo fi mo. Sibesibe, ko si ona ti ara odede ko fi ni fura nitori pe oju iya yii ko ni jo t'eeyan. Nse ni yoo maa mu igba ti yoo maa mu awo; sugbon ara odede ko ni so pe awon rii. Eekoogan ni iya yii yoo maa lo wo omo re nii iyara, ti yoo maa be ori, be orisa pe ki Olorun yo oun (Olabimtan 1986: 139).

When an expectant mother is in labor, her parents would spread mat for her in a room. They will gather scraps of cloth or other disused clothing nearby and she will be provided with a piece of *abiwere* soap [formulated to facilitate the birthing process] that had been prepared beforehand. She will proceed to take a bath. Afterwards, she will return to the room, kneeling on a mat in what is the [Yoruba] cultural birthing posture. [Meanwhile], her restive mother will be pacing up and down, going in and out of the house. But hardly would other residents of the compound know what is going on. Still, given the mother's strange demeanor, it is almost impossible for the neighbors not to suspect that something is amiss. She remains restless but her neighbors will pretend not to notice. Once in a while, she will check on her daughter in the room, invoking her *ori*, entreating orisa, that the Lord of the Heavens will pull them through (translation by Olufemi Taiwo).

This passage captures the drama associated with giving birth, and the responsibility of a mother in relation even to an adult child, in this case a mother-in-making herself. The passage also conveys the anxiety-producing nature of the moment with the expectant grandmother being one of two protagonists in the grand cycle of motherhood. In invoking *ori*, the expectant grandmother would appeal to both her own *ori*, and her daughter's *ori*; but at one level their destinies are perceived to be inseparable—they are one and the same. It is important to note that appeal to *ori* is regarded as the key prayer in time of crisis superceding entreaties to the deities. Indeed *ori*—a person's inner spiritual head—is itself a deity in Orisa (Yoruba religion).

Invocations of *ori*, prayers to *orisa* and entreaties to the Lord of the Heavens do not separate the birthing mother from the birthing grandmother. A dimension of the identification between mother and child is underscored by the following expression: *ori'ya mi o, e gba mi o* (my mother's ori, please save me) a commonplace cry of alarm, fear, or pain. It is no wonder then that if indeed the worst were to occur, that is the death of a mother in childbirth, her own mother would be regarded as the primary bereaved, even ahead of the expectant mother's husband. There is no greater tragedy in Yoruba society than the death of a mother in childbirth. When this unfortunate event does occur, the graphic images that are used to describe the calamity are telling enough: *ile wo*—the community is threatened with destruction; or *ile baje*—the death is regarded as pollution, the despoiling of the land that presages the unhinging of the world (see Oladele et al 1986: 229-230). Such a death calls for elaborate and costly cleansing rituals.

It is not surprising, then, that the birthing process is invested with so much significance that birth mothers are perceived to have mystical powers, especially over their offspring. Hence each birthing moment produces its own baby, its own mother, and the special bonds between them. Growing up in Yorubaland, one learns to respect the potency of the mother's words because children are told that the only person whose curse has no antidote is one's mother's curse. Children know that mothers have a special *ase* to which they routinely draw attention by invoking *ikunle abiyamo*--birth processes and the mystical and social values associated with them. These ideas are well expressed in this passage taken from the novel *One Man, One Wife* by T. M. Aluko, set in Idasa, a Yoruba town. Here we see a mother try to "persuade" her daughter, Toro, to yield to the wishes of her parents by marrying the groom they have chosen for her: "Toro, I enjoin you to marry Joshua. By the womb in which I carried you for ten moons, by the great travail I underwent at your birth, by these breasts, now withered, on which I suckled you when you were helpless, by this back on which I carried you for three years. . . . In the name of motherhood I command you to marry Joshua" (T. M. Aluko 1959: 108).

Centering African experiences of motherhood reveals that motherhood is not merely an earthly institution: it is pregestational, presocial, prenatal, postnatal, and lifelong. Precisely because there are no male equivalents of motherly responsibilities, motherhood transcends gender. Fatherhood is not its equivalent. As I have written elsewhere, mothers are not merely women. One cannot overemphasize the notion of pregestational motherhood; its immediate impact is to deepen temporally, and widen spatially the scope of the institution. The Yoruba world consists of the unborn, the living, and the dead, and motherhood is present in all these realms. An *aboyun* (pregnant woman) is understood to exist vicariously in two realms: the world of the unborn and that of the living. All spiritual and medicinal efforts made during the periods of gestation and parturition is designed to keep her firmly planted in the living world at the end of this life-transforming and indeed community-transforming process. Consequently, because the whole community is naturally invested in it there is no greater public institution than motherhood.

In earlier writings (Oyewumi 1993a, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2003), I have made a case that dominant Western feminist accounts of motherhood reduce it to a gen-

der category. As such, mother is represented as a woman first and foremost, a category that is perceived to be subordinated, disadvantaged, and oppressed because women are subordinate to males who are the privileged group. The gendering of the institution of motherhood leads to its patriarchalization. In turn, because of the privileging of males, reproductive processes like parturition, gestation, and childbirth, which have no male equivalents, are erased from many feminist accounts of motherhood. Within this patriarchalizing model, motherhood cannot be understood in and of itself, outside of the lens of women's oppression. With this approach, powerlessness and lack of agency attach by definition to motherhood. From an African perspective, what is most troubling in many feminist theories of motherhood is that the mother's god-like power over the infant is not recognized as such. Instead the mother is seen as trapped by her role as primary caregiver; her god-like power over her child, and the authority this gives her within society are not acknowledged.

Today, many feminist writers use the term *mothering* (referring to things mothers do) rather than "motherhood" (a more honorific term with connotations of power) to express what the institution is about. Nancy Chodorow's classic feminist work *The Reproduction of Mothering* poses a key question: "Why do women mother?" For Chodorow and for other feminists of her school, the verb "mother" is defined as those things that mothers do in regard to children, which they see as primarily nurturing. From this perspective, because men can also nurture, they can also therefore mother. Although this conception allows nurturing responsibilities of mothering to be shared by men and women, it discounts other aspects of motherhood that only females experience such as gestation, parturition and childbirth.

I have also demonstrated that Western feminist accounts gender motherhood indeed patriarchalize it, because of the centrality of the nuclear family. In the West, the nuclear family is essentially a gendered institution composed of a dominant male and a subordinate wife and their children. The secular motherhood advanced in feminist theories is best described as nuclear motherhood—a very specific cultural construction.

This Issue

This special issue on motherhood is based on a collection of papers delivered at a conference held in the Goree Island, Senegal from February 15-19, 2003 (see Signe Arnfred in this issue for details). The conference theme "Images of Motherhood: African and Nordic Perspectives," underscores the need for multiple voices and crosscutting lines of communication that transcend the traditional colonial borders, recognizing the fact of an emerging global scholarly community. Despite the modestly stated theme of the conference, the papers went beyond presenting images to provide original and analytic work on motherhood. According to Signe Arnfred (in this issue), the convener, the Inspiration for the conference and some of the papers presented came from earlier work by African scholars, thus demonstrating the importance of an ongoing exchange of ideas in the global arena.

In her paper "Motherhood in the Naming: Mothers and Wives in the Finnish/Karelian Cultural Region," Ulla Vuorela, in the spirit of common enquiry

takes up some of the questions about motherhood raised by the work of Oyeronke Oyewumi and Ifi Amadiume and applies them to the Finnish/Karelian society, drawing parallels between older Finnish conceptions of motherhood and African constructions. More importantly, by thoughtfully engaging questions that derive from African experiences, her paper and indeed the terms of discourse in the conference as a whole open up new paths for scholarly interrogation, offering a reverse dialectic in which not only do theoretical questions flow from the “first world” to Africa, but African experiences become the grounds for scholarly inquiry everywhere.

A number of the papers herein articulate African conceptions of motherhood that transcend the gendered, nuclear motherhood of Euro/American feminist accounts. In Mireille Rabenoro’s discussion of motherhood in Malagasy, we find parallels with Yoruba ideas and indeed those of other African societies. She writes that in the legends of indigenous Malagasy society “emerges an image of women existing among the elements (the air, the water), long before the appearance of men, of whom they are the source, the spring—the Mother” (1). As the Akan proverb puts it, even the king was born of a woman highlighting the fact that motherhood antedates the king and therefore cannot be subordinated to any social institution. If anything, it is the originary source—the fountainhead of the social.

It is the idea of motherhood as source that is at the base of the depiction and veneration of Mam Diarra Bouso, the mother of Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba, the founder of Mouridism in Senegal. Eva Evers Rosander, in her paper “Mam Diarra Bouso: The Mourid Mother of Porokhane, Senegal” tells us that Mourid pilgrims, especially women, regard her as one and the same with her son because “he, the son, was born by her, the mother” (2). The point is that without her life-giving to and sustenance of her child he would not exist. As one Mourid woman graphically put it, “It is Porokhane (the mother’s shrine) that has generated Touba (the son’s shrine); that is why Porokhane is life, is everything.... all I can say is that Serigne Touba is the house but Mam Diarra is the door of the house, and if the door is closed to you, you cannot come into the house” (12).

Can Mary, the mother of Jesus, be accorded recognition as the source of Jesus Christ, and ultimately be acknowledged as central in the Christian tradition? Karin Sporre, in her paper “Images of Motherhood: Conflicts and Creative new thinking within and from out of the Christian Tradition” touches upon this issue as she considers, “What images of motherhood are presently being articulated within the Christian tradition?” By calling up three texts from Sri Lanka, South Africa, and Sweden she reminds us that the Christian tradition is today a global one. These texts deal with depictions of Mary, and the ways in which these connect with women’s agency and sexuality in the secular world. One of the books Sporre examines is *Mary and Human Liberation* by Father Balasuriya of Sri Lanka. His reinterpretation of Christian doctrine on Mariology is of particular interest. According to Sporre, Balasuriya’s Mary is “a mother, present with her son, sharing his concerns and commitments. In so doing, he draws on the experiences of what women as mothers ordinarily do and ascribes these to Mary in dialogue with the biblical texts” (7). But what do mothers ordinarily do in relation to their children? What did Mary ordinarily do with Jesus, her son? We get

one answer in the famous lyrics in Nico Mbarga of “Sweet Mother”: —“if I no sleep, my mother no go sleep, if I no chop, my mother no de chop. She no de taya aa, sweet mother, I no go forget the suffer way you suffer for me eh eh.”

With the recognition that Jesus at one level was an ordinary child who was given life and sustained by his mother through the everyday practices of mothering, the traditional marginalization of Mary and indeed women in the Church is called into question. The second text analyzed by Karin Sporre elaborates further the idea of Christ’s humanity through his connections to his mother, Mary. The manuscript is an unpublished Ph. D. thesis by South African systematic theologian Lyn Holness titled “Christology from Within: A critical Retrieval of the Humanity of Christ, with Particular Reference to the Role of Mary.”

In her discussion of Balasuriya and Holness’ work, Sporre affirms the importance of local traditions in the interpretation of religion, even one as global as Christianity. South Africa was very well represented at the conference. A number of papers dealt with the state of motherhood in various parts of the country, and we include two of them in this issue. In “Perceptions and Experiences of Motherhood: A Study of Black and White Mothers of Durban, South Africa,” Thenjiwe Magwaza focuses on how race, class, and culture shape the experiences of mothers in the township of Durban. It is clear that race and class determine in fundamental ways the conditions of motherhood for South Africans. Black poverty as one terrible legacy of apartheid ensures that white families continue to benefit from the “motherwork” of black women at the expense of black communities and children. As Magwaza discovered, many white mothers enjoy the luxury of not working outside the home hence “most white mothers are more involved in their children’s school activities. Most activities take place during working hours when most black mothers are at work” (9).

The breakdown of the African family another dire effect of the apartheid is the focal point of Shereen Mills’ paper “Mother’s in the Corridors of the South African Legal System: Assessing the Johannesburg Family Court Pilot Project”. In her comprehensive study, Mills documents themes of poverty, absent fathers, domestic violence, and a racialized, class and gender-insensitive court system that is unresponsive to the needs of majority black single mothers who walk the corridors. Feminist theorizing in South Africa, and the racialized experience of motherhood at points recalls in some ways the situation in the United States at certain moments in history. At the risk of comparing mangoes and apples, the post apartheid moment in South Africa for black people resembles in some ways the post-emancipation moment for black Americans, particularly with regard to the dire state of the family. One can only hope that sharing experiences and theories will lead to greater alliances in the drive to transform the troubling state of mothers and motherhood, globally.

Indeed, the South African situation challenges very forcefully any easy dichotomies between Africa and the West, white West and black Africa, North and South, local and global. Spatially speaking, the movement of populations has made it ever more urgent the necessity for alliances and a spirit of common inquiry. In this regard, the plight of African mothers in Western “democracies” adds another much needed dimension to the global discussion of motherhood. In

her paper “Troubling Mothers: Immigrant Women from Africa in France,” Catherine Raissiguier foregrounds the “African Mother in the French-immigration-problem narrative evoked by Jacques Chirac.” The African Mother in this French fiction is one of four wives whose birthing prowess makes it possible for the immigrant father to collect substantial welfare benefits. Despite the importance of women in this discourse, they remain invisible in their own right, although they are insidiously described as a malevolent force whose dependency is wreaking havoc on the French economy by their dependency. But then the real story is different as Raissiguier points out.

In their focus on mothers across cultures and across religions, from the mother of Jesus, to the African immigrant mother in twenty-first-century France, these papers are informative; they broaden our scope, complicate our discussion, and deepen our understanding of motherhood locally and globally. I hope you find the collection of papers in this volume as stimulating as I do.

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