

NUDITY AND POWER IN NORTH-EASTERN YORUBA: A STUDY OF PRE-COLONIAL AND MODERN TRADITIONAL PRACTICES

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Abstract

In recent years, research into sexuality studies has become popular. It is an inter-disciplinary field that dovetails into many sub-fields like nudity, art, culture, psychology and others. Nudity has generated many debates on the female body in Yoruba. It is culturally symbolic, connoting different meanings and power. Drawing evidence from pre-colonial and modern Akoko in the north-eastern part of Yoruba, this paper engages symbolisms of nudity in the history of north-eastern Yoruba people. Nudity is discussed as ritual dress for festival and protest. While nudity festival is discussed among virgin girls in the pre-colonial period, nudity protest is examined in modern times as a tool for controlling public policy. This paper argues that public nudity has defining power over humans in the society. While female nudity is a common practice in Yoruba, Akoko version stresses the inexhaustible power attached to it, particularly the indispensable value occasioned by the nineteenth century Yoruba insecurity. This research is also important because it straightens out unique specificities of power accrued to public nudity, especially how women transformed their body to sites of power and change. This paper combines historical research method and inter-textual approach to establish the discourse in broader Yoruba sexuality studies and power.

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The theory of post-structural feminism is used to emphasise the power and meanings attached to woman's body. The research concludes that, in Akoko, the female body is inscribed with distinctive power base, which enriches Yoruba gender history and sexuality studies.

Keywords: Body, Nudity, Power, Akoko, Woman, Protest, Festival

Introduction

The Yoruba are one of the African ethnic groups with outstanding cultural distinctions. Among the people, the female body is inscribed with various meanings. Apart from sexualisation, it is believed to possess authorising power, used by women to command obedience. Therefore, the power accruable to the nude female body is central to this study. This nudity is regarded as a form of dress by some scholars like Bukola Oyeniya. According to him, nudity takes two forms:

- (i) as a political tool, usually wielded by the females, to ensure that the political class accede to a particular request, not necessarily requests made by the female folks, but those made by the generality of the society, especially when there is a stalemate between popular demands and political class' preferences; (ii) as a sign of sacredness of the human body. Here oath-taking and other (sacred or) religious activities, which placed unflinching importance on honesty, chastity, truthfulness, and absolute loyalty on the females are involved.¹

These two uses are central to the cultural use of public nudity in Yoruba, including Akoko. Clothing makes dressing possible, absence of which nudity is declared. Clothing is basically a form of covering. This covering could have various meanings or identifications, ranging from social, cultural, religious, economic and political leanings. In other words, clothing goes beyond

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covering. Thus, dressing is a form of communication and identification, with coding and encoding as potentials of symbolic signification and meaning-making. From the foregoing, clothing goes beyond mere covering to symbolism. Dress as a form of symbolism can be variously applied. For instance, a Yoruba proverb states: “bi ile ba san ni, awo laawo, bi o si san ni, awo laari”, “if someone has a wealthy background, it is the skin we check, if otherwise, it is the skin we also check”. Here, the skin, not cloth, is emphasised as the parameter for decoding someone from wealthy background, because, the skin is a covering, which depicts affluence or poverty. This shows that the skin is also a means of communicating one’s status to the public.

Total nudity of the skin too, is also designed to communicate a message. In fact, it is the only form of dress recognised by the deities, probably because, it is pure and untainted. In essence, the ‘nude dress’ is one of the attires appropriate in communicating the gods. Based on this background, this research engages nudity as a traditional dress in propitiating *imole* (god) in Akoko.

It should be stated that female nudity and its essence are not novel in Yoruba scholarship. Scholars on Yoruba history, like Rowland Abiodun, Oyeronke Oyewumi, Moyo Okediji, Sylvia Tamale and Judith Byfield have engaged power in the female body and its uses. ² Abiodun, for example, argues that being female naturally contributes to the power matrix. Power concentration in a woman’s body is in the enclosed part – clitoris, breast and others: “Thus the vagina, which is sometimes referred to as *ona-orun* 'path from heaven'; ‘*omu*’ 'breasts' through which one is fed during the most tender period of life... have acquired a powerful aesthetic and ritual significance in Yoruba religion and art”.³ Evidently, these are parts central to copulation, but, they were useful beyond this function. Invoking this power required wearing ‘nude dress’.

One may wonder what is embedded in the femaleness prescribed by Abiodun. Tamale and Oyewumi offer explanation for this. Tamale notes that the naked body of a woman

communicates the language of rebellion and subversion through spectacle. Women in Africa have used their bodies as weapons of final resort to demonstrate against marginalisation.⁴ Its effectiveness lies in the urgency it brings to bear on their request:

The act of public stripping is even more potent if the women are married and/or mothers. Exposing the nakedness of elderly women and mothers is especially symbolic in most African cultures and is considered the ultimate curse: The reason is said to be that through pregnancy, childbirth and nurturing, women are the givers of life. By stripping naked in front of men old enough to be her children or grandchildren, a mother is symbolically taking back the life that she gave, and so in a way, pronouncing death upon them.⁵

The above is an account of the power in a woman's body from a different country, Uganda, which punches the African world-sense of the power in discourse. Motherhood empowers female nudity beyond mere spectacle to foundation of life and living. The woman as a giver of life can withdraw it through nudity of her body. The place of motherhood in a typical Yoruba society is better evinced in the dome of Oyeronke Oyewumi on "Motherhood". Oyeronke Oyewumi advances the debate that matripotency (motherhood power) made Olodumare (Supreme God) to invest inexhaustible power in woman over humanity.⁶ In demonstrating how the word "*Iya*" in Yoruba language is misconstrued with the Western word "mother", she hermeneutically argues that motherhood has a socio-spiritual current that transcends birthing human. Through matripotency, *ori* and *akunleyan* (which are elaborately discussed later in this work), she connects to the overriding importance of mother as indispensable co-creator with power of life and death over her offspring. Thus, Tamale synchronises with Oyewumi in the indispensability of mother to arts of being African. When a woman seeks urgent and uncompromising request, she removes clothing to connect to this sphere of seniority and power. This is

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used to command immediate obedience from the society. Tamale and Oyewumi's works are relevant to this discourse in the section that discusses nudity protest of mothers in Akoko. It helps in understanding and explaining how women use their nudity to protest unwanted policies and actions, thus de-exoticising the Akoko practice.

In the section on virgin nudity procession, the work of Oyeronke Olajubu is relevant. Fertility and reproductive stage of woman determines her ritual value in Yoruba religion. Young virgin girls are regarded as brides whose signification lies in the value and reference, deity attach to their reproductive status. This status is regarded as channel of communicating the deity's power during rituals.⁷ Funmilayo Idowu Agbaje also emphasises the ritual worth of female virgins in Ekiti rituals (Ekiti is immediate Akoko neighbour):

On special occasions, a virgin might lead the procession, with a load filled with curses, incantations, herbs, and other semi-logical items concealed in pot, gourd, or wooden tray, balanced on her head. As the procession would head towards the king's palace, the women usually chanted a few songs and incantations in the pattern of lead chanter and chorus.⁸

Okediji stresses the place of female nudity in Yoruba art, as crucial to the worship of deities.⁹ An art piece depicting female on her knees is discussed as a link to some gods in Yoruba religion. Byfield's research on Abeokuta woman is a pragmatic example of the powers emphasised by scholars above. Women used nudity power to unseat Alake Ademola, king of Abeokuta, in a protest.¹⁰ In all these works, nudity and power in Akoko (a large sub-group in north-eastern Yorubaland) is not discussed, especially the peculiar configuration of power through nudity. Therefore, this work examines public nudity in protest and festivals of Akoko.

The theory of post-structural feminism is used in this essay. According to Bronwyn Davies and Susanne Gannon, the theory unpacks the binary categories of male and female, in order to make apparent, the constitutive trend of some practices: “Through analysis of texts and talk, it shows how relations of power are constructed and maintained by granting normality, rationality and naturalness to the dominant term in any binary...”.¹¹ In essence, the theory demonstrates how power controls social relations and how such interaction is owned by people, especially, the actors. It maintains that gender and sexuality are intertwined and controlled by linguistic and social arrangements. This theory is relevant to this work because, it also showcases how power controls social interactions. Female nudity is central to this power matrix. In addition, it is relevant to this discourse because of its endorsement of human body as a template, useful in understanding power hierarchy in the society. This hierarchy gives meaning and direction to power in nudity of major sexual/growth stages: virginity, motherhood and post-menopause. These stages have designated power and purposes, such that the female body could be regarded as a continuum of relevance. Thus, locating this work in the theory gives scholarly base to the arguments. As noted earlier, female nudity is not novel in Yoruba scholarship, thus, a brief introduction to nudity in Yoruba is engaged, before the discussion of nudity as dress in Akoko. The study is organized in five sections. The ongoing introduction is followed a review of the idea of nudity in Yoruba history. The third section examines nudity and virgin festivals in precolonial Akoko while the penultimate section burrows into the discourse of modern usages of nudity among Akoko women. The study was concluded in the fifth section.

A Brief Introduction to Nudity in Yoruba

In Africa, cultural nudity is not tantamount to sexualisation, because it is not an invitation for copulation. This is owing to the cultural appeal it signifies, thus, it is an act to draw attention to important request. In Yoruba, nudity is not an ordinary spectacle.

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The place of female nudity and its unwavering audience in Yoruba history makes it remain a source of power for women. It is imbued with meanings and implications. This nude power is naturally embedded in femaleness. Rowland Abiodun attests to this:

Though very rarely mentioned by field informants, there are indications that the fact of being female contributes to the power of women and perhaps also their entry into and participation in the Eegun cult. For example, the clitoris is traditionally believed to possess some kind of 'power', similar to the power possessed by the Eegun, for according to an informant, both are concealed, unseen, and use the power of 'our mothers'. This is the reason, perhaps, behind the belief that any man, no matter how medicinally skilful or powerful, can be disarmed by a woman.¹²

Here, power is configured in a woman's body is in the covered part – clitoris, breast and others. Invoking this power requires removing cloth covering and wearing ritual dress – nudity. A question lingers: why are these parts imbued with power? Oyeronke Oyewumi offers an explanation in motherhood. It (motherhood) attaches power to a woman's body over children of the earth: “it was Olodumare (the Supreme Being) who gave “awon iya” (plural of *Iya*) power and authority over all their children – humanity”,¹³ (*Iya* here means mother). Thus, procreation is one of the sources of this power. Oyewumi further uses matripotency, *ori* and *akunleyan* to emphasise the power accrued in femaleness cum mother. Matripotency refers to “the powers, spiritual and material, deriving from *Iya*'s procreative role... The matripotent ethos expresses the seniority system in that *Iya* is the venerated senior in relation to their children. Since all humans have an *Iya*, we are all born of an *Iya*, no one is greater, older or more senior to *Iya*.”¹⁴ *Iya* here, could be

taken to mean all women, as mother is female first before becoming *Iya*. Thus, apart from the inherent powers accrued from motherhood, seniority adds to this power matrix, thereby creating a potent blend. Furthermore, Oyewumi thinks that *ori*, which may be literally translated as head, is beyond physical anatomy in Yoruba cosmology. It is translated as human's destiny. The *ori* of *Iya* and offspring are inextricably interwoven. Thus, in the socio-spiritual sphere, the earthly mission of *Iya* and her children are not separable, which gives her influence over the children's destiny. Since all humans are her children, she has control and power over them.

Also embedded in the procreation process is *akunleyan*. This is described as “the *kneeling* process by which pre-earthly souls acquire their destiny...”.¹⁵ In Yoruba belief, one of the choices made by a human before birth is choosing a mother, which gives a hint that the woman was present at this moment. Abiodun corroborates this in *iroke* (the *Ifa* divination tapper) art image: “a kneeling nude woman figure holding her breasts, symbolises humanity choosing its destiny, *ori* from Ajala (Ajala) in heaven. To the Yoruba, this choice of destiny is probably the most important in the creation of man, and it is significant that woman has been chosen to handle the assignment. The woman uses *ikunle-abiyamo*, 'the kneeling with pain at child-birth', often regarded as the greatest act of reverence that can be shown to any being, to appease and 'soften' the gods and solicit their support”.¹⁶ Presence of the mother during *akunleyan* is strategic to power configuration. In sum, Oyewumi and Abiodun accentuate mother as co-creator, whose life and ancestry are impactful on humanity.

The essence of womanhood is also rooted in everyday living, which is probably derived from the socio-spiritual power. For instance, it is upheld that a wife must not use conjugal nudity to swear for her husband, because of the potency of such an act, especially the nudity. Mother's nudity is also regarded with such power over her children. For instance, if a mother uses her nudity to curse her offspring, it is usually regarded as irreversible

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tragedy. The power in mother's nakedness is corroborated in literature:

In the preparation of very powerful Yoruba medicines, the one for curing mental sickness in particular, the patient's mother's breasts are washed into a concoction which is drunk by the patient. Also, if a man experiences a series of inexplicable disasters in his occupation or private life, he is usually advised to perform a ritual suckling of his mother's breasts to avert a repetition of these undesirable events. This is a means of purifying the source and essence of one's being. It is also believed that through this ritual suckling, a person is once more protected by a mother's powerful influence.¹⁷

Okediji also emphasises the sacredness of nudity in Yoruba art: "nude art is an important part of Yoruba traditional religion and philosophy... serving as the visual paraphernalia used for the worship of various deities."¹⁸ These deities worship are further accentuated by Abiodun, in his discussion of other sections of the *iroke*, as kneeling woman carrying cock and another kneeling woman carrying calabash.¹⁹ These art pieces exemplify indispensability of the woman in *Ifa* divination and sacrifice. Thus, the woman is central to Yoruba traditional practices. However, non-ritualised public nudity is generally forbidden in Yoruba. Apart from lunacy, it is not mundanely paraded: "One of the secret fears of Yoruba adult is to be caught stark naked in public. Only a lunatic is seen naked in public. Once a person is seen naked in the marketplace, he is not only considered a lunatic, his madness is also believed to be incurable because he has been seen nude in the market. Any adult caught naked in public has damaged his image permanently."²⁰ Public abhorrence of nudity is laid bare here. It causes irreversible damage to human worth. Thus, society delineates stringent repercussions to public nudity. However, the same society

approves public nudity for ritual functions in Yoruba. The appropriateness of human conduct is determined by the society.

Meanwhile, public nudity during festivals could be explained in the unwavering regard people accord to their god; it is one of the media of communication. Here, explication of nudity as dress is laid bare. It is the identity, adherents must be dressed in, to receive recognition and answer to their request. “Equally effective in honouring their gods is the nudity of the kneeling woman, which is believed to make her wishes come true.”²¹ Thus, underlining this obedience is the potency inherent in the nudity. Abiodun further opines that there is inherent power in femaleness and female body, especially the vagina, which is needed in currying deity’s favour. “Thus the vagina, which is sometimes referred to as *ona-orun* 'path from heaven'; ‘*omu*’ 'breasts' through which one is fed during the most tender period of life... have acquired a powerful aesthetic and ritual significance in Yoruba religion and art”.²² The art of being female contributes to inherent power in woman. Nude state of femaleness is the nucleus of power.

In all, the foregoing exposé principally shows the inexhaustible power inherent in womanhood. Therefore, it is no longer far-fetched how nudity became a channel of connecting to this power. Post-structuralism is succinct here. Sexual, cultural and psychological powers are imbued in the female body. The context of use determines the potent variant. Body objectification is totally absent in cultural nudity. The background of such nude display - cultural power, knocks out any form of sexualisation. In this research on Akoko, the power and use of nudity is discussed in public protest and ritual festivals. Akoko is chosen, because it satisfies a quest to produce encompassing knowledge, through the trajectory of Yoruba micro history.

Nudity and Virgin Festival in Pre-colonial Akoko

As noted earlier, Olajubu is a gender scholar in religion. She notes the place of female virgins in Yoruba: “young virgin girls are depicted as brides and votary maids to the deities. As virgins, these girls symbolise purity and piety vessels fit for the habitation

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of deities and qualified to carry within them energies emanating from the deities".²³ Nudity of the virgin girl further stresses the worth of her body. Agbaje adds that virgins lead procession of women protests in Ekiti, due to the purity associated with her body.²⁴ However, in the case of Akoko, it needs be stated that, public procession of nude virgins was not popular for protest, rather, it was common for ritual festivals. Thus, ritual festivals shall be the focus of this section, especially as it relates to the worship of deities. The pre-colonial period is selected for this section, because, virgins do not embrace this ritual practice in contemporary age, as it was in the pre-colonial.

Nude festival is rooted in ancestral worship. Ancestral worship was central to ritual festivals in Akoko. Ancestors were immortalised as deities and worship centres were created. Samuel Johnson alludes to this custom that Yorubas are inclined to revere their ancestors with the features of *orisa*.²⁵ Akoko also transformed ancestral worship to *orisa*. Ancestor was the spring of many *orisas*. In some cases, the leaders of migrants were deified in the form of ancestral worship. In sum, virgin nudity was used in connecting the community back to their ancestors.

In Ikare Akoko, worship of *Aringiya*, a communal deity, brought by Agbaode, (one of the primordial ancestors of Ikare), was heavily rooted in nude virgin activities. A female virgin was a mythical request of *Aringiya* as signs of piety and purity. During the festival, only virgins could move near the brook and the flowing water, to propitiate the goddess.²⁶ During the worship, virgins would go totally naked. They danced to the sound beats of drums and gong until the water becomes still. The virgins would kneel down, with heads bowed down. At this moment, it was believed that *Aringiya* would come out to bless the people. An *egungun* known as *Igede-Oka* would appear holding cutlass. When a girl fell from the procession, he would jump across the brook and behead her, as this was a sign of sexual contamination.²⁷ This act was to prevent the wrath of *Aringiya* on Ikare, because it could amount to serious communal crisis. The role of *egungun* in preventing social crisis is discussed by

Oludare Olajubu. *Egungun* was used to correct social evils: “*egungun* is also used to execute criminals and to expel dangerous people from the community”.²⁸ Here, sex contamination was a serious crime in need of cleansing. The atoning mode was executing violator. Meanwhile, beheading of virgin here shows the importance of the festival to the existence of the community. In a typical Yoruba society, life is sacred and paramount. Taking life in this manner was only explainable on the basis that such threatens society’s commonwealth, which emphasises the fact that the festival was deeply rooted in community’s survival. However, the practice of beheading contaminated virgin was later modified: the virgin would face public shaming for indulging in extra-marital sex.

Following the procession, married women who the sought fruit of the womb would step forward and receive prayers from the masquerade. He would then pray for a bountiful harvest and everyone would dance to *Owa Ale*’s palace. The virgins would dance round the Iyometa region of Ikare in total nudity. The current *Owa Ale* of Ikare, Oba Adegbite Adedoyin notes that the festival was a paramount celebration in the town as it connected the people back to the source.²⁹ Here, the place of nude virgins as votary maids that connected the goddess to the people cannot be over-emphasised. In order to receive goodwill of the goddess for a fruitful year or for war-free year, virgins must be presented first; otherwise, the people believed that blessings would elude them. While the people depended on these virgins, the festival also upended the status of the virgins, they relished it as an achievement that they have refrained from pre-marital sex and brought good fortunes to Ikare. Heavy involvement of female in this festival reflects gendering. This challenges the submission of some Akoko scholars like C.O Akomolafe that females were not involved in religious activities: “...women had no place in the worship of *egungun* or other traditional gods...”³⁰

At Oge Akoko, *Itan* festival was also ritual festival that involved nude virgins. *Itan* was festival to celebrate female virginity as purity to venerate gods. The festival took place in a

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river called *Agha*, located in *Igho* grove. In cases of deflowered lady joining the procession, she would be attacked by a big snake or other dangerous animals. Again, like *Ikare*, contaminated virgins were also punished. Meanwhile, this taboo did not include married women that led the procession, since these women would have participated while they were unmarried. Hence, this qualified them to be *Itan* devotees and to lead processions even when they were married. Besides, most of such leading married women were *Itan* devotees. *Itan* signified the site of Oge ancestors' burial, especially the husband (Baba Oge) and wife (Yeye Oge) that founded Oge.³¹ The festival was regarded as a presentation of Oge female children to their ancestors, in order to curry ancestor favour in times of crisis like war. During the festival, participants would gather in the evening and move en mass to the forest grove in the night in total nudity. They were not to be seen during this procession, because such spectacle was forbidden. This was to preserve the sanctity of their ritual duty. They would sing to acknowledge ancestors and heroes as they moved. During the ritual rite, fasting must be observed. Apart from the fact that they offered prayers at the grove, other details of their activities were top state secrets that must not be divulged by any of the participants.³² After the completion of rituals, they would return for the community oldest man's rite. He would prepare a special form of bean cake, *akara ipa* for them. This was prepared with special leaves and in a rounded shape.³³ They would eat this and then depart for further reception parties at their various homes.

In Agba Oka quarter of Oka, there was nude dancing festival called *Igandan*. This also involved virgins who would recite the cognomen of their parents and lineage, after grove rites. They must not also be menstruating; otherwise, soldier ant locally called *Ijalo* would prevent them from reaching the grove. The dance took place after grove rites.³⁴ The dance was to enable the females reflect on their growing up experiences. Therefore, spectators would know a female child that was not properly catered for by her parents because of the way and manner she

would go about the recitation. If she was properly catered for, she would also reflect same in song. This Agba-Oka tradition was to ensure proper care for female children, as negative reflection would soil image of the lineage. At Ikanmu, a similar dance was also observed, to prepare the nude virgins for marriage.³⁵ *Igandan* reminisced society's reference for the female, especially good parental care as identity of worthy lineage.

Ogbagi also had virgin rituals in its festivals. *Aweya* was one of the central river goddesses worshipped. Items of worship were akara, pounded yam, kola-nut, cat fish, bitter-cola, alligator pepper and salt. These items were placed in circle round the shrine and the cognomen of the goddess would be recited, to invite her spirit to the shrine. Ritual prayers would then be offered. While this was done, virgins must be totally naked to participate in the rite. From the second day to fifth day, the virgins would adorn their body with *osun* powder. On the fifth day, they danced to the market and picked up any item sold without offering any form of payment.³⁶ This could be regarded as form of societal recognition for their devotion to *Aweya*. *Ege* festival was also a virgin festival in Akungba. However, this was not done in procession, rather, it was done individually as part of marital rites to celebrate girl as untouched before marriage. Uncooked liver of male goat would be hung on the lady's neck, who would dance in total nakedness three times before proceeding to her husband's house.³⁷ Upon arrival at her husband's house, the liver must be first cooked for him before any other meal. *Ege* rite is demonstrated in Akungba cognomen: "omo afi ihoho la'ja (oja)", "child who enters the market in nakedness".³⁸ This cognomen revises major submissions in Yoruba concept of nudity explained above. As discussed earlier, Okediji notes: "Once a person is seen naked in the marketplace, he is not only considered a lunatic, his madness is also believed to be incurable because he has been seen nude in the market. Any adult caught naked in public has damaged his image permanently."³⁹ This position is indeed popular in Yoruba social sphere. However, Akoko peculiarity disrupts this submission, by

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revising its appropriateness. Any virgin who did not engage in market nudity festival was considered worthless and barbaric. However, it needs be stated here that this nudity was a ritualised spectacle, not ordinary nudity emphasised by Okediji. In essence, Akungba practice depicts an exception to the popular Yoruba tradition: while market nudity could be tantamount to permanent damage to a person's image or incurable lunacy, organised or ritualised market nudity could also promote and protect one's reputation. This demonstrates a submission: micro history is crucial to knowledge production in Yoruba scholarship.

In the course of this section, some practices are common to the Yoruba sub-group like rejection of menstruating virgin by the gods. This is ritually symbolic. Henry and Margaret Drewal note the ritual abhorrence of menstruation in Yoruba gods worship. Firstly, Drewal regards it as *ase* (authority that make things come to pass) which could neutralise or contaminate any ritual powers. Secondly, it was seen as dirt and pollution, hence contamination by gods. Thirdly, contact of menstruation with god's ritual power could dry up the menstrual flow, thereby preventing such woman from menstruating in the future.⁴⁰ These caveats show that menstruation abhorrence by gods was not specific to Akoko, but general to Yoruba. It represented a form of power or pollution that was unpleasant to the gods. However, menstruation as *ase* connotes a form of natural power imbued in women. It is symbolic of a feminine power recognised by gods, which further connotes ritual power in womanhood. Preventing clash of power partly explains rejection of menstruating women by some deities in Akoko. In other words, the act of being woman signifies a form of ritual power acknowledged by gods. However, the heavy involvement of virgin in festival depicts indispensability of woman to festival. In another clime, this shows the relevance of religion as a moral compass, by making woman remain virgin till marriage. The central choice of virgins by deities shows females were not inconsequential in pre-colonial power hierarchy. In fact, religious festivals were not complete

without them. These also exemplify the place of nudity and virginity in Akoko as an agency of relations in Akoko.

The popularity of this festival could be explained on the heels of a historical trend: widespread insecurity of nineteenth century. Yorubaland generally was ravaged by inter-state wars in this century. Akoko became a popular victim of insecurity. Anns O’Hear puts it succinctly: “The Akoko area suffered from the competition between the three raiding states, being, in the words of Hogben and Kirk-Greene, “one of those unhappy districts alternatively raided by Nupe, Ibadan, and Ilorin.”⁴¹ Samuel Johnson, the pioneer Yoruba historian, also lends credence to insecurity in Akoko, “...but the others (*warriors*) who did not fare so well scattered themselves throughout the length and breadth of the Akoko country like hungry wolves seeking for prey”.⁴² J.F.A Ajayi and S.A. Akintoye also corroborate this submission. The influence of Nupe, Ibadan and Ilorin divided military resistance in Akoko, such that concerted effort to exert victory was difficult.⁴³

As highly religious people, the belief system was crucial in this quagmire. Steadfastness in deity worship was believed to herald victory. Hence, to curry the favour of the apotheosised ancestors, connection to reverence, purity and propriety worship was essential. Nudity ritual was one of such connections. For instance, in Irun Akoko, a woman known as Urukuru or *Yeyeorisha Elejemo* (priestess of *Elejemo*) used her nudity and other rituals to fight for Irun for nine years, during Ayorinde Aje war in the nineteenth century. She was noted to physically wrestle Ayorinde at the ninth year which contributed to the end of his invasions.⁴⁴Indeed, it is popular in literature that Aje used Irun as his military base in Akoko in 1856, with outlets in Ogbagi, Afin, Eshe and others.⁴⁵ Urukuru also taught warriors some strategies to wage war. Her intervention made Irun worship her, even in death, especially to prevent an impending calamity. In all, unrest of nineteenth century inspired people’s commitment to deity’s obedience and worship, especially through female nudity.

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Nude Protests in Modern Akoko

While nudity is discussed above as central to deity worship, hence propitiation dress, it is discussed here as protest dress used by women for specific purposes. Indeed, nudity is tailored towards attaining goal(s), because of the cultural meaning and power attached to it. Many scholars have opined that it is because of woman exclusion from decision making. While this is contestable, it is however established in Yoruba history that women used their body as site of power and meaning to achieve some objectives. Besides, knowledge production is an unending dialogue in scholarship; the peculiar use of nudity in Akoko as a form of public protest is the business of this section.

In Akoko, public protest is institutionalised into some specific agencies. In Supare Akoko, it is coordinated by the head of females known as *Olobinrin-Ile*. Few words about this position are succinct. While the head of government is male, head of female and feminine affairs is selected from the Ogbedo lineage and quarter.⁴⁶ Ogbedo is chosen to produce *Olobinrin*, because the lineage is headed by next in rank to king, *Ilisa*. Preservation of female ancestral properties especially ritual items like *Ubale* (big ritual pot) also led to initiation of this female leadership and its council.⁴⁷ Similarly, the *Olobinrin* doubles as chief priestess of the town, who organises ritual public protest.

In chief priestess leadership and nude protest, Agbaje avers the following in Ekiti: “Whenever women were fully naked, they would paint their bodies white with kaolin, or limit the body painting to only a few leaders, usually the priestesses of prominent Ekiti female divinities, such as *Ọ̀sun*, *Ọ̀gbèsè*, *Yemoja* and *Ọ̀rinláṣe*”. Also in Supare, where there is any policy against the welfare of women or there is an impending danger or epidemic, she (*Olobinrin-Ile*) led protest round the town. This protest consisted of her council members and other old women in the community. During this protest, the women would tie their *iro* (wrapper) to the back with bare breast holding *apasa* (cloth weaving tool), broom or cutlass and match round the city chanting:

Agboja Idu o, ayayomo mi gboja
omo re, mo wa gba t’emi o.
Ayay’omo igboja omo re.

Eepa, Aidanwo, eni danwo, o
dan tan.⁴⁸

Translation: There is crisis in
town, every mother strap your
child to your back, I have
strapped mine to my back, the
strapping cloth or *oja* I use in
tying mine will not loosen.

Abomination, do not do it,
whoever tries, is doomed.

Such protest is usually regarded as pensive period as it imposed curfew on people’s movement. Nobody is expected to go to farm or market until the ritual protest is over. In sum, the *Olobinrin* and her court grounded activities in the community with their protest. The current *Olobinrin*, Taiwo Abigael Ikupolati notes that from history, there was nothing the woman wanted that was not achieved after the protest. She further adds, after such protest any human found culpable of wrongdoing would die, such crime had no atonement.⁴⁹ In Sosan Akoko, nude protest is also similar. However, this is restricted to only league of oldest women. This age preference is not unconnected to the system of government in the town, gerontocracy. Governance is controlled by the oldest. Thus, to Sosan, old age among women is symbolism of intellection and experience, both of which are considered crucial elements for ruling the community. Also embedded within the notion of old age is the assumption of integrity and responsibility, which explain the reason old women were charged with the duty of resolving serious socio-spiritual crisis in the town.

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The oldest grade group, who also keeps all female ancestral properties, serves as advisory board to the community, especially when there is communal crisis. They are respected as the grade with knowledge of community endeavours. Matters affecting female misdemeanour were also referred to them to adjudicate. This group could use protest to achieve their goals as respected members of the community. In total nude dress, they could lead protest against any impending evil or unwanted stranger.⁵⁰ During the protest, they used cutlass to mark the ground around the community. This mark was symbolic: it was believed that, immediately any human harbinger of evil or criminal stepped on this mark, it was inevitable death. Thus, women used the power in their nudity to prevent inception of danger to the community. The oldest grade also carried out nude protest in other Akoko communities like Isua, Irun, Ogbagi and Oka. Apart from communal nude protest, there is also lone nude protest in Sosan. This protest is used to question restriction of woman movement, during sacred or ritual festivals known as *Ighu-Fifi*.⁵¹ This is a masquerade festival is forbidden from female spectacle. However, since pre-colonial period, women could use their nude dress to remove movement ban. Culturally, if woman must access public road at this moment, she is required to first announce her approaching presence, after which, *Ighu-Fifi* would allow her access to the road, by moving away from female gaze. However, in cases of denial to access road, especially at odd hour, when she could fall prey to harm, she would grant herself access by *dressing nude* in front of the masquerade and continue her journey home.⁵² However, this nudity had grave consequences on both parties, especially the masquerade.

Taboos operate against beholding of woman's nude by masquerade. Thus, taboo exists for the duo. However, the taboo against woman could be appeased, but, the taboo against *egungun* cannot be atoned, unavoidable penalty is death, because the female nudity has taken away his power potency and exchanged it with death.⁵³ Stiff punishment is inscribed on the sighting of female nudity. Thus, the language coded in nudity as a dress

becomes apparent: power neutralising and death. Female nudity could be regarded as a trajectory through which the power of *Ighu-Fifi* is checked. Abiodun also corroborates the power in woman: "... any man, no matter how medicinally skilful or powerful, can be disarmed by a woman."⁵⁴ Here, the disarming power is rooted in female body.

Nude protest in Akoko was designed to protest unwanted policies or evil. It is the instrument of last resort, especially when they find themselves pushed to the extreme like the case of lone protest in Sosan. It is symbolic as it draws attention to power in woman's bodies. It is usually averred, the act of nudity is even more potent if the women are mothers, especially post-menopausal women. Judith Byfield in her study on how Abeokuta women used protest to unseat King Alake Ademola, observes similar submission:

Within Yoruba society it was taboo to view an elderly woman naked; some suggested that it could even result in the death of the viewer (who was intended in this case to be Ademola). This act of undressing in public expressed the women's deep contempt for the Alake. By removing their clothes, the women symbolically removed their respect for Ademola and ultimately stripped him of his authority. Some suggest that once the protest reached this stage, the Alake had no choice but to leave Abeokuta.⁵⁵

Indeed, the women protest succeeded in unseating the king, which shows that wearing nude dress by elderly women and mothers is particularly symbolic in most African cultures and is considered the deciding factor. Similarly, the nude protest of women in Akoko is symbolic of the power reposed in female body as mothers. This brings Oyeronke Oyewumi's argument to the fore: through matripotency, *ori* and *akunleyan*, *Iya* (mother) becomes co-creator of all humans. Thus, pregnancy, childbirth and nurturing, make woman to be equivalent to givers of life. By

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protesting nude in front of human of all ages, a mother is symbolically withdrawing the life she gives, which attract grave consequences. This is typical of Sosan's lone protest. The nude woman withdraws life from the masquerade, by afflicting him with irreversible death penalty.

Sylvia Tamale corroborates this practice in Uganda: "it is conferring "social death" on those violating their freedoms. It represents a deep traditional curse emanating from women's generative power and a symbolic social execution effected by the "mothers of the nation".⁵⁶ She went further by citing the case of lone nude protest by her friend, Dr Stella Nyanzi, a research fellow at the Makerere Institute of Social Research (MISR) in Uganda — who staged a nude protest against gross maltreatment by her boss in April 18, 2016. In Nyanzi words: "Sylvia, I didn't want to burden you with my problems, but I've had enough. I've complained to the authorities, written several letters but no action has been taken. They have left me with no choice; I've had enough of my boss's tyranny at this place".⁵⁷ The protester used her body, as the last resort to draw attention to her plight. In essence, nude protest is common in Africa culture. The difference lays in the cultural consequences. In all, the female body especially, the pubic area and breast are rooted in web of interconnectedness, which are potent in natural powers.

Conclusion

Public nudity and its cultural meanings are not new in Yoruba scholarship. Various scholars have probed into the reason for power concentration in a woman's body, but Akoko peculiarity in such power configuration is not known in the literature, hence this work has engaged nudity as a form of dress, from women. While pre-colonial nudity was highly sourced as channel of power, probably due to intractable insecurity of the nineteenth century, modern nudity retains its viability because of the inextricable power attached to femaleness. Therefore, the pre-colonial and modern discourse shows that nudity accrues power to women, regardless of globalisation impact. Specifically,

female bodies are symbolic elements of power. Total nudity signified power, especially private parts like clitoris and breast. These parts contain *ase*. This is exemplified in the centrality of nude female virgins during ritual festivals and nudity protest in virtually all Akoko communities. In this research therefore, body is a powerful resource, mobilised as agency for connecting to the gods and controlling public policy. Also, the nude bodies of protesting women reconfigured it as a form of dress; they rewrite and overwrite the scripts connected with their bodies. Thus, the body could be seen as a site of many struggles. Post-structural feminism corroborates this, body is a scene of “power struggle, self-expression and of numerous contradictions. If one imagines the naked body to be a blank slate at the time of birth, culture then proceeds to inscribe gendered, racialised, sexualised, and classist hierarchies that give character to that body.”⁵⁸

In other words, culture as an institution marks the female body with meaning and power which could be used to control the society. Thus, an analysis of public nude involves an evaluation of the body as an agency of connection (festival), as well as a source of disruption (public protest). While procreation and femaleness were used to connect society to the root of existence in deity worship, same parameters are used to compel the society to accede to women demands. Thus, the power attached to nude body is elastic and inexhaustible. The peculiarities of Akoko nudity emphasises the submission: micro history is important in Yoruba knowledge production.

Endnotes

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