

Kinship

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Entry: Kinship

Among the Yoruba, kinship relationships are based on shared descent, co-residence and marriage. In the nineteenth century, Yoruba towns and cities were made up of compounds (*agbo ilé*) in which extended patrilineages lived with their wives and other followers or dependants. Compounds were important units of social and political organisation because they held collective rights to land, chieftaincy titles and other resources, such as traditional deities (*òrìṣà*), and were collectively responsible for each other. Those members of the family who could trace their descent to the founder of the compound were referred to as *ọmọ ilé* or 'children of the compound/ house'. The most senior male member of the *ọmọ ilé* was the *bálé* or head of the compound. The *ọmọ ilé* formed the core of the compound's corporate identity. Although descent was primarily reckoned through the male line, the children of female *ọmọ ilé* were sometimes accepted as members of the patrilineage, especially in parts of eastern Yorubaland including Remo, Ijebu, Ondo, Ikalé and Ilaje. Over time, co-residents, pawns and even slaves could become assimilated into the *ọmọ ilé*.

As people left their rural compounds to move to the cities during the 20th century, kinship relations shaped rural-urban links. Although compound membership has declined in many areas, the claim to membership of a compound remains key to maintaining rights to corporately owned land or titles. In order to maintain access to these resources, many migrant members of families remain in regular contact with those who have stayed in their old compounds or hometowns. Sending remittances and supporting infrastructural development in the rural areas, they receive agricultural products and may even confirm their achievements by building houses or accepting chieftaincy titles in their (family's) home towns.

Marriage is exogamous for kin by descent and co-residence, and it constitutes a bond between corporate groups as well as individuals. Women are expected to leave their fathers' houses or compounds upon marriage to become *obìnrin ilé* or *ìyàwó ilé*, women or wives of their husband's house/ compound. The status of a wife among her new kin is measured by the length of her marriage. Polygamous marriages are declining but still prevalent and the first wife expects respect from younger wives. In compounds, all *ìyàwó ilé* form a corporate group under the leadership of the most senior wife. Every *ìyàwó ilé* considers all male and female relations of her husband as 'husbands,' while she may in turn be a 'husband' to her brothers' and uncles' wives. Women in urban areas often join the other *ìyàwó ilé* for joint activities during weddings and funerals.

The corporate nature of kinship has also enabled many families to negotiate the growth of religious difference as people converted to both Islam and Christianity during the 20th century. Where family members of different religions live together, wives and dependants generally accept the rights of husbands and senior members of the household to determine collective religious practices. As a result, some Pentecostal and Islamic groups are warning about the spiritual implications of kinship ties.

Insa Nolte

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