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Andar M. Ndisi Ph.D
Department of Physical and Health
Education, Faculty of Education,
University of Ibadan

Oye Andar M. Ndisi Ph.D
Department of Physical and Health
Education, Faculty of Education,
University of Ibadan

Ayeni Andrew Umu
Faculty of Education, Department of Science
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Stella, T. G., Ph.D
Department of Adult Education,
University of Ibadan

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Department of Adult Education,
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Ndita M. Ofada Ph.D
Department of Counselling and Human
Development Studies, Faculty of Education,
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Andar M. Ndisi Ph.D
Department of Physical and Health
Education, Faculty of Education,
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Joseph Olasola Femiatale, Ph.D
Dept of Counselling & Human Development Studies,
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University of Ibadan

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University of Ibadan

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Federal University of Petrolium Resources,
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Egwu Francisca Odeh (CLN) Ph.D
Department of Library and Information Science,
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P.M.S. 1, Abraka, Delta State, Nigeria

Issa, O. O., Ph.D
Department of Special Education,
University of Ibadan

Andar M. Ndisi Ph.D
Department of Physical and Health
Education, Faculty of Education,
University of Ibadan

Adedapo, Olamide Grace
Department of Curriculum Studies,
School of Education,
University of Lagos, Lagos State, Nigeria

Adekunle, Olayemi Ph.D
Department of Curriculum Studies,
School of Education,
University of Lagos, Lagos State, Nigeria

Adekunle, Olayemi Ph.D
Department of Curriculum Studies,
School of Education,
University of Lagos, Lagos State, Nigeria

Adekunle, Olayemi Ph.D
Department of Curriculum Studies,
School of Education,
University of Lagos, Lagos State, Nigeria

Adekunle, Olayemi Ph.D
Department of Curriculum Studies,
School of Education,
University of Lagos, Lagos State, Nigeria

Adekunle, Olayemi Ph.D
Department of Curriculum Studies,
School of Education,
University of Lagos, Lagos State, Nigeria

Ayoola Olalekan Ajayi Ph.D
Department of Mass Communication,
Christopher University, Akoka, Ogun State, Nigeria

Umarjaisa Gotsop
Department of Mass Communication,
Federal University Oye-Epe, Ekiti State, Nigeria

Obafemi Agbese Ph.D
Department of Mass Communication,
Babalola University, Ibadan, Ogun State, Nigeria

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The Socio Cultural implications of House-wives rivalry among Yoruba women of South-western Nigeria

Olusegun Peter Oke Ph.D

Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan.
okeolusegun25@gmail.com +2348077023102, +2348023659166

Abstract

House wives' rivalry among Yoruba women has over the years become a teething socio-cultural menace that requires a scholarly attention for family stability and a better society where peace and harmony find their footings. It is a known fact that female gender in Yoruba land and Nigeria in general has been marginalized, stereotyped, decimated and humiliated in various ways by their culture that gives the male counterparts such opportunity which has negatively impacted them in various ways like depression, physical disability, psychological trauma and even death. Existing studies on this subject matter have discussed this menace extensively from the psychological, physiological, sociological, ethics and legal perspectives, with little attention paid to the intra-gender violence that are common mostly among house wives in Yoruba land which on many occasions breaks in pieces the social-cultural bond of unity and well-being that the people are known for. While many scholars condemn the act in its entirety, as it is believed to be incongruity with rights to dignity of human person, personal liberty, private and family life, others are of the view that women are to be seen and not to be heard and for this reason, they are to be continually marginalised and treated as second fiddles. This is the gap in study this paper intend to fill. Methodologically, the research employs a qualitative method to elicit information from those involved in family matters, culture, gender issues and human development. Recommendations will be offered where necessary for an improved inter-personal relationship among women for a peaceful society.

Keywords: Socio, Cultural implications, House-wives Rivalry, Yoruba women, South-western Nigeria.

Introduction

In traditional Yoruba society, the custom permits a man to marry more than one wife (Ojo, 2013). But, it is a taboo for a woman to marry more than one husband as it is contrary to the custom and the norm of the people as it could be deduced from the Yoruba sayings, *Oju kan ni ada ni*. (Daramola and Jeje, 1975). The customary permission to marry more than one wife leads to quarrel due to irreconcilable differences among the wives under the same roof. This irreconcilable differences may not be necessarily physical attacks and battery in most cases, but through power of words by co-wives to express themselves when there were issues to settle (Ajibade, 2011). The use of songs by wives in a polygamous family in Yoruba land is a common phenomenon as it shows emotions, sentiment and feelings about an action performed by an individual or a group of people, especially when it involves the issue of rivalry or

jealousy among co-wives (*Oragun*) (Olabode, 2014). What we gather from most of our interviewees revealed that, though there were cases of peaceful co-existence among wives in some families, (Molagun, 2004) yet the presence of housewives rivalry/violence cannot be denied in any culture and society, of the world (Otiye, 1991) since frictions occur wherever there are more than one person; domestic violence is often literally used as a metaphor for power relationships (Arisi, 2012). Quarrel and misunderstanding are expressed in different forms, and in different contexts (Koyuncu & Chipindu, 2019). It can therefore be defined as any form of act, action or reaction that can traumatize or damage the psychology of another person. The norm in Yoruba land, is for wives under the same roof to be united, tolerant, and cooperate with one another (Awoniyi, 2015). Any act that violates these norms of tolerance, cooperation, mutual respect and unity is

considered a deviant behaviour (Clinard, 2020). Therefore, house-wives rivalry is a social factor characteristic of any polygamous society. (Ajibade, 2011)

Among Yoruba people generally, the virtue of cooperation, unity and 'we-feeling' are held in high esteem (Olatunji, 2021). Wives are expected to have mutual respect for one another. A junior wife (*iyawo kekeke*) who joins the family must respect the senior wives she meets at home. Also, the senior wives as a norm must show respect for the junior wife (Fadipe, 1970). That is, mutual respect and cooperation are encouraged. This is because of the belief according to Mbiti that 'we-feeling' is, "we are because you are, and because you are we are", (Adeate, 2023). Cooperation implies collegialship, co-partnership and tie up relation. Yoruba people believe that where cooperative spirit thrives, there is always the growth of fraternity, solidarity, fellow-feeling, voluntary associations, coalitions, federation, united fronts, common fronts, mutual assistance, reciprocity, the spirit of give and take, mutual concession, compromise and comradeship. It is in recognition of this fact that the people render songs like:

agbajo owo la fi ni so'ya
ajeje owo kan o gberu dori (Balogun, 2013)
Enikan ko ni je awa de
Ai rin po ejo lo ni je won niya
opo ni e rin
E ma se rin lototo
Opo ni e rin

We use a combination of fists to beat our chest
A single hand cannot carry a big load
A single person cannot talk in collectivity
Failure of snakes to work in-group
Results in their being killed individually
Walk in unison
Never walk alone

The song above brings to the limelight the concept of solidarity among the Yoruba people.

We must note here that the spirit of 'we' feeling and the desire for group solidarity constitute important determinant of morality among the people (Doda, 2005). The concept of "we-feelings" is interpreted as the fundamental ideal of morality, which emphasises a need to consider others' interest, and that people in society ought not to remain entirely selfish or self-centered (Ellmers, 2019). One of the basic features of women folks is the African socialism, which according to Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, is the African version of socialism. The spirit of we-feeling being emphasised here has positive implications in the socio-economic life of Yoruba women. All these are done in the spirit of cooperation. (Ayantayo, 2002)

Another aspect of Yoruba social cultural value is truthfulness (Idang, 2015). Truthfulness is an admirable quality in the Yoruba person, but the context in terms of good or evil it can do the community is essential (Oni, 2016). The timeliness or otherwise of speaking the truth is part of the criteria that determines the maturity of an individual in the community. Among housewives, truthfulness (*ododo tabi otito*) embraces reliability, and reliability itself presupposes that house wives (Wives under the same roof must as a matter of norm be truthful in their day-to-day relationship) (Faborode, 2022). While a truthful person will be relied upon to speak the truth when occasion demands. Among housewives therefore, one of the norms that must be imbibed is truthfulness. Although, Yoruba people admire a truthful person, they disapprove of someone who provides truthful information that implicates others and causes conflict at the family level or in the community (Igboin, 2011). In ridiculing such act, they say, *olofofo ko gba egbewa ibi ope lo mo*, meaning, tale-bearing on others does not have any reward, it only guarantees worthless praise.

It is when relationship among housewives turns sour due to irreconcilable differences as pointed out above, that different songs are used by the parties involved to express their resentment. This portends that oral tradition in which song is one of them has a great influence

upon the people who use it and its effects are tremendous on the issue pertaining to domestic violence. Therefore, when a word of abuse is uttered to someone, its effect is like flogging and it generates a corollary reaction. It is very common among women in Yoruba land especially in a polygynous marriage or in an extended family that whenever there is any quarrel between two house-wives or among many, they resort to verbal dialogue that is abusive in nature (Odeleye, 2019). This could be ordinary abusive words or abusive songs. A Yoruba aphorism that, "*Orin ni saaju ija* - singing begets fighting" indicates that singing abusive songs always proceeds fighting. Hence, in Yoruba society, songs can manifest in form of violence in polygamous households.

Yoruba women are generally peace-loving and so, instead of always going into physical assault, they result to verbal attacks through singing and chanting of verbal art in their negotiation for matriarchy (Ajibada, 2011). In other words, their expression of violence is mostly verbal (Rico, 1997). But, this is not to deny the fact that women at times go into physical combat. The norms in traditional marriage institution turn deviant when wife or wives go against the acceptable standard (Oke, 2018). Wives engaging in abusive words or expressions have done contrary to the norm of the communities and the deserved punishment will be given to such wife by the entire members of the community.

Rivalry among wives is very common in a polygamous home where each of the wives would want to exert her authority over the other (Madhavan, 2002). This is usually the case in the traditional Yoruba society where the custom permits a man to marry more than one wife. (Akintan, 2013). For example, in *Ashipa* in 1958, there was a serious rivalry between two wives of the same husband. When the matter could not be resolved by the husband, he called on the elders in the community. They made the two to pound water in the mortar until their palms began to peel. The other case occurred in *Akinlala* in 1962 where rivalry between two wives caused serious

tension in the family (Adegoke, 2014). In fact, the case got to the palace before it could be resolved. The two were made to pay fine and were also cautioned. One other case of rivalry between two wives happened in *Ipetumodu* in 1974, which was eventually resolved at the palace of then *Apetumodu* with the assistance of other chiefs after the *Edi* traditional singers exposed them.

The agrarian nature of the Yoruba people made many men to marry more than one wife. This they did to help them in their farming activities (Akorede, 2011). The belief among the Yoruba people is that, the wealth of a man is determined by the number of wives and children he has. In other words, a man who marries many wives, will have many children, and consequently, such children would provide cheap labour for the man in his farming activities (Baloyi, 2013). On the other hand, polygamy opens door for unhealthy relationship among wives by making them to engage in different types of abusive and retaliatory songs against one another. Since these women came from different backgrounds, and coupled with the fact that inter or intra gender violence is inevitable in all cultures and societies of the world, as we have it manifesting among wives in Yoruba land. More so, it is a social factor and the basic feature of any polygamous society. (Ogundeji, 2011) When house-wives rivalry occurs among wives in any community in Yoruba land, the elders in the affected community were called upon when the husband could not resolve the issue (*Agba kii wa loja ki ori omọ tuntun wo*). The elder are always around to correct any abnormality notice in the community. The elders came together to intervene (*petu si won lokan*).

At times, their presence was not to apportion blame. But, if any of the wives was stubborn and obstinate, the elders dealt with her accordingly. She would be made to pound water in the mortar as the people in the compound sang various songs of warning (Segilola, 2016). The *Edi* choral group came on board when they discovered the incessant rivalry among the wives was not resolved as a result of the

stubbornness of one of the wives. They gathered at the front of the house of their victims. What usually led to exchange of abusive songs is when a dominating spouse or co-wife, through emotional or physical abuse, creates an environment of fear and intimidation that might prevent others from freely choosing how to live their lives. The stubborn ones among them would be cautioned in songs. This they did by describing her not necessarily by mentioning her name. We observed from the information gathered that the best she could do was to remain indoor. If she comes out in an attempt to confront the Edi choral group, they would embarrass her by throwing sticks and stones at her. Pounding of water in the mortar by the warring parties was to

punish the wives and to serve as deterrent to others. As they pound, *Edi* choral group would sing songs against their action.

What on many occasions led to house wives rivalry is the misunderstanding and quarrel which must have reached a level that each of the women involved do not bother what may be the consequence of their actions, they can go to the extent of using body abuse (*eebu ara*) on one another, most especially, if anyone of them has a physical deformity, the other woman uses such a deformity to abuse her. Whenever there was crisis between co-wives or house wives in a compound, the quarrelling woman usually renders the type of songs excerpted below to abuse the other woman.

Ìyalé mi bà mí jé My senior wife assassinated my character
Ó ní mo gbèrú She said that I stole locust beans
Ìyalé mi bà mí jé My senior wife assassinated my character
Ó ní mo gbé'yo She said I stole salt
Kí ní n o fíba 'yalé jé What can I do to spoil her character too
Eléte agbón o The one who has teeth that looks like basket
Ìyalé mi dètè bò mí My senior co — wife cover me with your lips
Ótutu yípò o This cold is too much (for me)

The locust beans and salt in the song above, according to our to the information gathered could be metaphorically described as worthless and cheap, and for anybody to steal such commodities shows high level of poverty. The singer then uses a subtle and mild way to attack her victim. (Ajibade, 2009) Teeth like locust

beans simply mean dirty teeth, loose lower lip. When the recipient hears this kind of song, definitely she will know she is the one she is being referred to and she can also reply with another abusive song. This is nothing more than verbal assault that arises from polygyny. The reply to such a song can go like:

È má rojò m fèsù lònà oko x2 Don't relay my case to *Esu* on your way to the farm x2
È mí rẹ kò lajá It is not with you I fought
Aso lo yo o legbe Your inability to buy group uniform dissociates from the group
È má rojò mi fèsù lònà oko Don't relay my case to *Esu* on your way to the farm

The first and the second lines of this song is a reply as well as a warning to a co-wife who had first abused her not to report her case to *Esu*. In Yoruba land, *Esu* is believed to be a deity that punishes an offender. In the third line of the song, the woman is expressly telling her co-wife that she did not fight with her but her inability to

buy group uniform (*Aso Egbe*) does not give her the opportunity to join the group. This tradition is very common in various communities in Yoruba land. So, any member who does not contribute for one reason or the other will be easily identified and disgraced. This is why the woman is trying to exonerate herself.

In response to this, the other woman may answer her in this form:

Gbigbo laja n' gbo x2

Eniyan gidi ki n' baja gbo nigboro

Gbigbo laja n' gbo

It is the habit of dog to bark x2

No reasonable person barks with dog outside

It is the habit of dog to bark

Barking of a dog is likened to an intelligible noise which is meaningless and serves no purpose. This is just to dehumanize the other woman that all she was saying was mere noise. A situation like this if not properly handled by the husband and the elderly ones in the family, may result into physical combat which will automatically affect the children from the two women. (Oladele, 2014). Most of those we interviewed were affirmative about the prevalence of house wives rivalry in Yoruba

land. They informed us of an incident that occurred around 1959, where a woman out of jealousy killed her husband (Oyewole, 2013).

The woman discovered that her husband was in deep love with her junior wife and in an attempt to woo the husband to her side, the other women (junior wife) killed her husband in the process. The secret of his death was late uncovered and other women (*Obinrin ile*) in the compound in collaboration with the *Edi* choral group turned her to a laughing stock.

Mo n' bokọ sọrọ

Opo gbenu leganna

Opo ma ronu

Oni tire ti d'orun

Pareke, pareke o oni tire ti d'orun

I was discussing with my husband

A widow leaned against the wall thinking

Widow, stop thinking

Your suitor is away to the world beyond

Your suitor is away to the world Beyond.

The song above was used to satirize a jealous woman who killed her husband. She regretted her action and the *Edi* choral group condemned her action in its entirety. The woman though, very young according to our informant could not see anybody to marry due to her behaviour as everybody was afraid of even moving close to her. She remained unmarried till she died (Oke, 2013). Her leaning on the wall, as we have it in the song above, shows, a high level of remorse. From the focused group discussion we had from

Omosu, *Omolé* and *Obinrin Ile*, in *Akinlalu*, there was a bitter rivalry that occurred between two wives of the same husband which generated into a serious tension in the family. Before the crisis was resolved, many songs were sung by the two wives to show the displeasure to the action of the other woman. The younger wife was unhappy about the high handedness of the senior wife and in order to address her excesses, the younger wife sang this song in *Akinlalu* in 1968,

Jé n se temi oo éé x2

Owo ki n' kowo lorun

Jé n se temi

Give me the chance to do my own

A business does not obstruct another business

Give me the chance to do my own.

This song above was said to come from the younger wife who felt that the senior wife was giving her serious problem which she could no longer endure. (Cook, 1997). She wanted to be free from enslavement, oppression and

repression which the senior wife had subjected her to. The leader of the *Edi* choral group in *Ipetumodu* said that on many occasions, when a house wife especially the senior wife is a rumourmonger, a tale-bearer and back-bitter,

they used songs laced with satire to warn such a senior wife to desist from such act of tale-bearing since the tradition does not permit the younger wife or wives to engage in confrontation with their senior. One of such songs rendered by our interviewee is:

*Ìyálé ilé yìí sòfòfó ló
Nijò kẹfà ló tó wọlẹ dé
O sòfòfó ló*

Our senior co-wife is tale bearing around
She returned on the sixth day
She has gone ion tale bearing

The *Edi* choral group did not mention name. But, from the description, the woman knew that she was the one that the *Edi* choral group was singing against. She confronted the group members and she was seriously beaten. The matter was taken to one of the community leaders and she received serious sanction for her action. (Ayoola, 2014). As she was told, nobody dare attack the *Edi* choral group. She apologized and was asked to reconcile with the other co-wives. We observed how the songs were rendered and through interview, we were able to know that those who were satirized either fled

the community or asked for forgiveness. In all these, *Edi* choral group is not left out. They went round to make a compilation of different deviant behaviours that are detrimental to the cooperate existence of the society. They gather information from *Okunrin ile*, *Obinrin ile*, and *Omosu*. According to the group, they do this in order to teach others lessons and to maintain sanity in the society; they sing different satirical songs most especially during the popular *Edi* festival that lasted for 7 days. For instance, a woman who usurped the younger wife's position is satirized thus:

*Mo gbé jemureke mi dé
Jemureke*

Ìwọ nìkan kò l'òkò mọ tojú

Jemureke

B'orun bá kàn yálé, a ní òun ni iyálé

Jemureke

B'orun bá kàn yawo

A tún loun ni yawo

Jemureke

Ìwọ ni kan kò ni baba mọ n tojú

Jemureke

I have brought my fun fair

Fun fair

You are not the only one to be taken care of by our husband

Funfair

She changes her identity from the younger to the older wife

Funfair

She changes her identity from the older

To the younger wife

Funfair

Our husband is not for you only

Funfair

Similarly, there is this other satirical (Ogunranti, 1987) song, used to warn people against their mischievous acts. For example:

Ofofo ile yii yera afe soro awox2

Ka ma gbodo soro

Ka ma gbodo senu wuye

Ofofo ile yii yera

The tale-bearer in this house gives us chance

We must not talk

We must not move our lips

The tale-bearer in this house gives us chance

Other one is:

| | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| <i>Ìyá Aládúkẹ́ fádúkẹ́ mọ́rax2</i> | The senior wife to Aduke cooperate with Adukex2 |
| <i>Torí iwọ́ lagbà o</i> | Because you are the senior wife |
| <i>Ta ni kò mọ́ nílẹ́ yìí</i> | Who does not know in his community |
| <i>Ìyá Aládúkẹ́ fádúkẹ́ mọ́ra</i> | The senior wife to Aduke cooperate with Aduke |

This also was sung:

| | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| <i>Wón ní a mọ́ wíí</i> | They forbid us to say it |
| <i>Àwá ọ́ wíí</i> | We shall say it |
| <i>Ọba ní á wí</i> | The king wants it said |
| <i>Àwá ọ́ wíí</i> | We shall say it |
| <i>Ìyálẹ́ oró p'omọ́ rẹ́ o</i> | A wicked senior wife killed her son |
| <i>Ìyálẹ́ oró f'omọ́ rẹ́ loogunje</i> | A wicked senior wife poisoned her own son |

In the first song above, the senior wife in this song according to the people interviewed who were *Edi* traditional singers said that the senior wife had taken the husband from the junior wife. She does not allow the junior wife to have access to her husband. The head of the *Edi* choral group was informed about this ugly development and a song was composed against her action. This incident happened in 1982 in Akinlalu. When the *Edi* choral group gathered in front of her house singing, the woman pretended as if nothing had happened as she came out with the junior wife hand-in-hand and waved to the people that they were no longer fighting. They quickly resolved their grievances to avoid any public disgrace from the *Edi* choral group and members of the community. That was how the matter was laid to rest." (Olanrewaju, 2015). One other member of the choral group by name Jumoke said that it is important to note from the song above that *Edi* choral group in Yoruba land are not respecters of anybody when it comes to pointing out moral laxity on the part of any individual. She went further that *Edi* choral singers are thugs who are not afraid of anybody (Adebayo, 2017). The only category of people that is free from them are those who have not stained their hands or got involved in any deviant act. (Otitoadé, 2016).

The second song above is an indication that there is a traitor among the wives who discloses their secrets to other members of the family and outsiders, when one hears such songs, one would beware of what to say in such a situation. In the song above, a large proportion of our interviewees

made us to understand that the most senior wife was the tale-bearer. The other wives (*Ìyawó ilé*) ganged up against her with the *Edi* choral group to caution the woman to stop her act. The woman in question was not happy with the choral group for exposing her; nonetheless, she apologized to the group and promised to turn on a new leaf. The third song was very common among the *Edi* choral group in parts of Yoruba land. It is a song which is sung during friction among co-wives. This is in recognition to age grade status in Yoruba land. When frequent misunderstanding occurred between co-wives and it seemed there was no solution, *Edi* choral singers could take it upon themselves to warn such wives in song on the need to embrace peace.

This fourth song was composed by the *Edi* choral group against a woman who out of jealousy killed her own son. The case was a pathetic one. Most of the people interviewed could not remember the year. But know quite well that it happened in a town called Isope, now into extinct. They said it happened long time ago. The woman in question prepared some concoction for rats. The concoction was said to have been mixed with a strong anti-seticide. But, it is quite unfortunate that her last born who slept, woke and went directly to the food, ate it and died. Before, the boy could be rushed to the hospital, he had died. The whole community did not take any pity on her at all as we were told that she was a wicked woman. During the *Edi* festival, they composed the above song to condemn her action and to warn that she should

desist from being wicked". This woman, according to information received from our informant, regretted her action as she wept uncontrollably. On the whole, majority of our informants said that what they observed then was that issues such as house wives rivalry or incessant fight and misunderstanding among wives drastically reduced. In fact, husbands warned their wives on a daily basis not to disgrace them as they usually say this in Yoruba, "E ma ko mi jade bi omọ ojo mejo o, ta lo mo okolo mi l'oyoo" meaning, Don't bring me out like an eight day old baby or I go about quietly, please, don't expose me. These songs above were used to address deviant behaviours associated with house wives rivalry in Yoruba communities.

Though, in the recent times, the culture of having marrying more than one wife has reduced significantly. This is majorly due to the economic reality in the country now. People, most especially, those who belong to some religious faith will tell you that marrying more than one wife is unbiblical. Even, today, many young men who are of marriageable age, prefer to have baby out of wedlock. There reason being that, marriage requires a lot of responsibilities of which they are not ready to bear at all. Culture contact has also reduce the rate at which people marry wives. In many of the developed countries of the world, men marry one wife. Despite this, we still have men who many still get married to more than one wife in Yoruba society and leave peacefully.

Concluding Remarks and recommendation

We have been able in this work to examine the socio-cultural implications of house wives rivalry among women in Yoruba land. We believe that house wives rivalry occur due to irreconcilable factors. This on many occasions has caused a lot of tensions and disaffection in the family set up, making children from such family to see themselves as enemies. It is therefore, important at this point that husband in a polygamous relationship must ensure that peace reign as there is no alternative to peaceful co-existence. Elders in the family should also make it a point of duty to make necessary intervention whenever there is conflict between wives. Non-Governmental organizations can also be of help in this regard by organising seminars, workshops and conferences

where topical issues relating to peace as an obligation at family setting will be discussed. This will help house wives a lot and matters that usually lead to conflict will be settled amicably without washing their dirty attire outside for people to see.

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