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Gendered Visibility and Sacred Authority: A Thematic Analysis of the Oloolu Masquerade Controversy in Ibadan

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ABSTRACT

Oloolu is an ancient masquerade festival celebrated annually in Ibadan, southwestern Nigeria, and remains a significant expression of Yoruba cultural heritage. The customary restriction preventing women from seeing the masquerade continues to raise questions about gender, sacred authority, and access to cultural space. This paper examines the recent controversy surrounding Wasilat Olalere, a TikTok post that was alleged to show the *Oloolu* masquerade and that triggered a contested public narrative, disputed claims about what she filmed, why she underwent traditional cleansing, and whether she did so willingly. This paper primarily draws on Stuart Hall's theory of representation and feminist anthropological perspectives, supplemented by moral panic theory, to account for the controversy's rapid escalation. The study explores how womanhood, tradition, and sacred authority were represented and contested as the controversy unfolded online, using digital ethnography and thematic analysis of Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and X posts, videos, and comment threads. It identifies key themes around gendered visibility, cultural transgression, women's bodies, and competing claims to truth and tradition. The paper argues, cautiously, that the *Oloolu* controversy reveals how women's bodies and visibility become sites through which sacred boundaries and cultural authority are negotiated, not a conclusion the data proves beyond doubt, but one it supports fairly consistently. The paper contributes to broader discussions on gender, religion, tradition, and digital public culture in contemporary Yoruba society.

Keywords *Gender; Tradition; Digital Ethnography; Sacredness; Yorùbá*

1. Introduction

This paper is about how a sacred tradition uses gender to decide who may see and take part in ritual, and about what happens to that rule once social media gets involved. Restrictions on women's presence at masquerade festivals are common in Yorùbá religious life. Among the *Awórí* of Ọ̀lọ́, for instance, women are barred from the *Oro* sanctuary and told to stay indoors during the annual *Oro* festival; the belief is that a woman who sees the masquerade will fall ill or die (Ayodele, 2015). Scholars of Yorùbá gender and religion disagree about what this means. Some read it as straightforward subordination; others read it through indigenous structures of seniority and spiritual protection instead (Morton-Williams, 1954; Oyèwùmí, 1997; Willis, 2016). That disagreement is why the gendering of masquerade space is still worth studying rather than a settled question.

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The *Oloolu* masquerade holds a similar place in Ibadan. The *Oloolu* family runs the festival and presides over its annual outing, held this year between 28 and 30 July 2026. Women are traditionally forbidden from viewing it along its processional routes. Custodians say a woman who sees it risks being cursed, or "held" by it, and that this can lead to death unless reversed through spiritual atonement.

In July 2026, Wasilat Olalere, a Muslim resident of Ibadan, posted a TikTok video showing security personnel and onlookers ahead of the masquerade's procession, captioned to mark its location. *Oloolu* custodians accused her of filming the masquerade itself, in violation of custom, and took her to the *Oloolu* family compound, where she underwent traditional cleansing rites (Akeem, as cited in Vanguard News, 2026a). A video that circulated afterward showed her attributing an illness to the encounter. She later disputed this in a separate interview, saying she had neither seen the masquerade nor fallen ill, and that her earlier statement had been made under duress (PUNCH, 2026a; Tribune Online, 2026b). The story spread across Facebook, TikTok, and X. Activists such as Omoyele Sowore called the cleansing ritual a violation of her dignity (Sahara Reporters, 2026); the *Oloolu* family maintained the rites followed established custom (Vanguard News, 2026a). What started as a local religious dispute became, within days, a networked argument over gender, consent, and tradition, playing out across several platforms at once.

This paper reads that argument through three resources: Stuart Hall's (1997) theory of representation, feminist anthropological work on gender and religion in Africa (Oyèwùmí, 1997), and moral panic theory (Cohen, 1972; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). The Theoretical Framework below explains all three properly; in short, the first two explain how the meaning of the event was contested, and the third explains why the contest moved as fast as it did. Using digital ethnography and thematic analysis, the study examines posts, videos, and comment threads across Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and X to see how different publics framed the controversy. The question guiding it is this: how do cultural traditions regulate gendered access to sacred space, and how do those boundaries get renegotiated once a dispute over them plays out on social media instead of through slower, offline channels? The aim is not just to show that the *Oloolu* restriction is gendered and contested; existing scholarship on Yorùbá masquerade already shows that. It is to show what changes, empirically and theoretically, when the contest happens in real time across several platforms at once, something the literature reviewed in Section 2 has not examined for a masquerade tradition specifically. The paper argues that the *Oloolu* controversy shows how women's bodies and visibility become the ground on which sacred authority, cultural identity, and gender relations get fought over, and, more specifically, that the target of public blame shifted mid-controversy in a way classical moral panic theory doesn't fully anticipate, a finding the Conclusion takes up in full.

2. Literature Review

The literature for this paper falls into four strands: Yorùbá masquerade and gendered sacred space; the wider debate over gender in Yorùbá society; digital ethnography of religion in Africa; and studies of representation, escalation, and digital publics in Nigeria.

2.1 Yorùbá Masquerade Tradition and Gendered Sacred Space

Scholarship on Yorùbá masquerade keeps running into the same tension: the restrictions on women's presence are real and well documented, but what they mean is not settled. Morton-Williams's (1954) early ethnography of the *Egungun* society in south-western Yorùbá kingdoms is still the reference point most later writers work from. Ayodele (2015), studying the *Oro* cult among the *Awórí* of Ọ̀lọ́, a close parallel to *Oloolu*, confirms that the belief a woman will be "consumed" for seeing the masquerade is still current, and that the restriction has real, measurable effects on women's access to public space and

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livelihood. Willis (2014, 2016) pushes back, though: working from colonial archives and his own fieldwork in Otta, he argues earlier Western scholarship overstated masquerade as a simple stage for male domination, and missed women's documented roles as sponsors, ritual specialists, and custodians of the oral histories that give masquerades their meaning. Van Beek and Leyten (2023), looking across the whole continent, make a related point at a larger scale: secrecy and gendered restriction in masquerade cultures vary too much by region to read as one universal pattern of patriarchy.

This kind of contested, unevenly enforced restriction is not just a Yorùbá masquerade problem. Comparable exclusions run through sacred spaces that have no historical connection to it at all. Nas (2022), studying the "Women in Mosques" movement in Turkey, documents women confined to visually obstructed balconies, justified through fitnah, and one telling inconsistency: the same religious authority runs a mosque in Maryland where women pray on the open floor. Restrictions defended as sacred and unchangeable, in other words, often turn out to be locally administered rather than doctrinally fixed. Christian institutions show something similar. Women are the overwhelming majority of active members in the Presbyterian Church of East Africa but have never held its national offices, and where formal inclusion does exist, it can end up recruiting women to police other women rather than represent them (Kairu, Kiboi, & Mombo, 2020; Chisale, 2020; Pillay, 2020). Reversal happens too: Falck (2021) describes ancestral spirits once taken from Nyaura women by force in Papua New Guinea that now possess only female mediums, who lead prayer from a position once held by men, and Gruenbaum, Earp, and Shweder (2022) warn against assuming every women-only ritual restriction is a straightforward loss, since these spaces can also generate political capital and mutual aid among the women inside them. Even the specific mechanism used against ritual transgression, purifying the body instead of arguing about it, recurs widely: Orthodox Jewish niddah law, Islamic ghusl, and Nepali chaupadi all treat a woman's body as something needing ritual correction before it can re-enter ordinary life (Bobel et al., 2020), a comparison this paper comes back to when accounting for what was done to Wasilat's body under Theme 2. None of this settles what the *Oloolu* restriction means for the women living under it. But it does support Van Beek and Leyten's (2023) point: masquerade secrecy doesn't reduce to one universal reading.

2.2 Gender in Yorùbá Society: Contesting the Binary

This sits inside a wider, still unresolved question: is "gender" even the right lens for precolonial Yorùbá society? Oyèwùmí's (1997) foundational argument is that Yorùbá social life was organised more around seniority than a fixed male-female binary, and that colonial contact is what imported the binary that now feels natural. Muraina and Ajimatanraejoje (2023) take this seriously but push back on part of it: contemporary Yorùbá society does hold firmly to binary gender categories in practice, even while recognising historically powerful female offices such as the Íyálóde (Awe, 1977) and *Yèyé Ọ̀ṣun*. Familusi (2012) and Barber (1991) add texture. Familusi documents both the real constraints Yorùbá custom places on women and the genuine authority certain female roles carry. Barber's study of *oríkì* praise poetry shows women as central producers of the oral tradition that sustains institutions like *Oloolu*, not bystanders to it. Together, this work rules out an easy reading of the *Oloolu* restriction as simply "oppressive" or simply "misunderstood tradition." It is genuinely contested, and this paper treats that contest as part of the subject rather than something to resolve before the analysis begins.

This kind of contest over meaning shows up elsewhere in comparative gender scholarship too. Wilson (2012), reinterpreting the Akan "myth of separation" in Ghana, shows that a single origin story can be read either as blaming women or as evidence of their collective capacity, depending on which detail the interpreter foregrounds. Muonwe (2016) cautions against assuming pre-colonial African gender relations were more equal than they were: even the Ọṣmụ title-holders of Onitsha could only take office once menstruation no longer marked them as defiling. Both point to the same thing: mobilising history to

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legitimise or delegitimise a present restriction, exactly what happens around *Oloolu* and gets examined under Theme 4, is a recognised move in disputes like this, not something invented for this controversy. Khan's (2022) broader argument, that the modern category of "religion" is itself gender-coded, feminine, private, and emotional against a masculine, rational "secular" public sphere, is one more way of reading why customary and rights-based framings of *Oloolu* talk past each other so consistently, a point this paper comes back to in the discussion.

2.3 Digital Religion and Digital Ethnography in Africa

A separate strand looks at what happens when African religious and cultural life moves onto digital platforms. Kazira and Pasura's (2026) study of Nigerian and Zimbabwean youth in the UK diaspora is the most directly relevant. It finds that digital engagement with African Traditional Religions doesn't just mirror offline practice; it reshapes who holds religious authority and how belonging gets claimed, with TikTok specifically named as a place where young people reclaim spiritual practices otherwise sidelined in their upbringing. This builds on older work by Ukah (2008), who showed that Nigerian religious actors have long treated whatever media technology is available, radio, roadside signage, now social media, as an extension of religious infrastructure rather than something separate from it. The implication for this paper is that digital platforms are not a neutral backdrop to the *Oloolu* controversy. They are an active part of how sacred authority gets asserted and challenged.

2.4 Nigerian Digital Publics and Escalation

Nigerian media scholarship offers a useful, locally grounded alternative to importing moral panic theory wholesale from its British origins. Uwalaka (2023), studying how the Nigerian military handled an attack on the Nigerian Defence Academy, documents an "online firestorm," a term Nigerian communication scholars use for the kind of fast, morally charged, Facebook-driven escalation this paper examines. The same pattern shows up in the 2020 #EndSARS protests, where viral videos and influencer amplification produced nationwide moral consensus and street mobilisation within days (Abimbade et al., 2022; Akerele-Popoola et al., 2022; Dambo et al., 2022; Ojedokun et al., 2021; Ononiwu et al., 2025). Iwuoha and Aniche (2022) add another layer: the state's own repressive response, most visibly at the Lekki Toll Gate, got tangled up with and sped up by the same online circulation the protest had relied on. Nigerian digital publics, in other words, have their own well-documented dynamics of escalation once an issue breaks and starts moving from pillar to post on social media. A closer structural parallel comes from Bello's (2019) netnographic study of mob justice and social media in Nigeria, which found that social media acts as an extension of the street mob, speeding up punitive public action against an accused person often well before the underlying facts are established, a dynamic that maps closely onto how the Wasilat controversy unfolded. Taken together, these cases show that rapid public reaction, demand for accountability, and the difficulty of correcting a circulating narrative follow recognisable patterns on Nigerian social media, which gives this paper a domestically grounded comparison point alongside Cohen (1972) and Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (1994) classical moral panic model.

Put together, the literature leaves a fairly clear gap. Gendered restriction on masquerade viewing is real but contested in meaning. Digital platforms are reshaping religious and cultural authority across Africa. Nigerian digital publics escalate controversies in identifiable ways. What nobody has done yet, so far as I can tell, is watch all three happen at once, in real time, around one unfolding event. That is what this paper tries to offer through the *Oloolu* and Wasilat Olalere case.

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3. Theoretical Framework

This paper answers that question with three theoretical resources: Stuart Hall's theory of representation, feminist anthropological work on gender in Yorùbá society, and moral panic theory. They don't carry equal weight; they do different jobs.

Hall's (1997) central idea is that meaning doesn't exist naturally inside an event. It gets made, through language, images, and the stories people tell about what happened. He calls this the constructionist approach: things don't have one true, fixed meaning waiting to be found; they get their meaning through how they're represented, and by whom. That matters here because the "event" at the centre of this paper, what Olalere actually filmed and what it meant, was never a settled fact. It was built, contested, and rebuilt through competing accounts: the custodians' claim that she saw the masquerade, Olalere's own denial, and everything the public said afterward. Hall's framework lets the paper treat that disagreement as the actual subject of study, not noise to clear away before getting to "what really happened." Hall also argues representation is a site of struggle: different groups compete to fix the meaning of an event in ways that serve their own standing. Here, the *Oloolu* custodians, Islamic commentators, human-rights voices, and ordinary social media users weren't just describing the controversy differently. Each was trying to make their version the one that stuck.

To track those attempts more precisely, the paper also uses Hall's (1980) earlier account of how audiences decode a message: as a dominant-hegemonic reading, taking the intended meaning at face value; a negotiated reading, accepting parts of it while contesting others; or an oppositional reading, rejecting the intended meaning and substituting one's own. The 1997 account explains why meaning is never simply given; the 1980 typology gives a concrete vocabulary for how different *Oloolu* publics decoded the same restriction differently, custodians reading it as dominant-hegemonic common sense, activists reading it oppositionally. Theme 1 uses this distinction throughout.

Alongside this, the paper draws on Oyèwùmí's (1997) argument, still debated, that gender as understood in the West doesn't map cleanly onto precolonial Yorùbá social organisation, where seniority and other principles historically carried more weight than a strict male/female divide. This is useful in two ways. First, it warns against assuming the *Oloolu* restriction is a straightforward case of "men excluding women," the way a Western reader might first assume. Other scholars of Yorùbá masquerade have shown that gendered restrictions on ritual space are often bound up with seniority, spiritual protection, and role, not a simple gender hierarchy (Morton-Williams, 1954; Willis, 2016). Second, feminist anthropology also insists that indigenous framings shouldn't be used to excuse harm. Studies of comparable restrictions, such as the *Oro* cult exclusion of women in Ọ̀lọ́, Lagos, document that the women affected often experience them as a real curtailment of freedom, regardless of how the restriction is culturally justified (Ayodele, 2015). Holding both points together, taking the tradition seriously while also taking women's own accounts of it seriously, lets the paper avoid two easy but weaker positions: treating the restriction as simple oppression, or treating any criticism of it as Western intrusion. I am not certain I have kept that balance in every part of the analysis that follows. I have tried, but the reader should judge for themselves whether I have leaned too far in either direction at points.

The paper's third resource, moral panic theory, plays a narrower, supporting role. Developed by Cohen (1972) and refined by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994), it describes what happens when a society reacts to something with alarm out of proportion to the actual threat and quickly settles on who or what to blame: concern, hostility toward whoever is blamed, public agreement that something bad happened, a reaction bigger than the event warrants, and a fast rise and fall in intensity. This framework isn't an equal partner to representation theory here; it does one job, explaining the speed and shape of the public reaction to Olalere's post, which representation theory alone doesn't account for. Within days, an ambiguous video

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led to a public cleansing ritual, national news coverage, and a fast-forming consensus that something serious had happened, a pattern that matches Goode and Ben-Yehuda's criteria closely. This isn't a mismatch of unrelated ideas, either: Hall co-authored one of the founding applications of moral panic theory, Policing the Crisis (Hall et al., 1978), so pairing the two continues a line of thinking Hall himself started.

The paper doesn't apply moral panic theory uncritically, though. Cohen's original model assumes a fairly stable "folk devil," one clear person or group blamed throughout, and the *Oloolu* case doesn't fit that: Olalere was cast as the transgressor first, then public commentary reframed her as a victim of coercion, and the *Oloolu* custodians became the ones facing scrutiny instead. I treat that shift as a real finding, not a complication to explain away. It is evidence that blame in a moral panic can move and get renegotiated in real time on social media, rather than staying fixed on one target the way the classical model expects.

So the three resources split the work between them. Hall's theory of representation and feminist anthropology explain how meanings of womanhood, sacredness, and transgression got built and fought over. Moral panic theory explains why the controversy escalated as fast and visibly as it did, and catches the moment the public's target of blame reversed.

4. Methodology

Data came from public posts on YouTube, Facebook, X, and TikTok, found by searching keywords like *Oloolu*, Wasilat Olalere, and Ibadan masquerade. The corpus falls into four clusters: the initial accusation and its spread (Táni Olohun, Mogaji Kola Olótu, and Hajia Mewolaka's posts); the institutional and ritual response (footage of the atonement process and the BBC News Yoruba interview with the *Oloolu* spokesperson); Olalere's own account (her Lagelu FM and Esà Òkè Sunnaatic TV interviews, and Akéwùgbàgold's account of visiting her family); and counter-narratives contesting the restriction's spiritual authority (Sheikh Ajigini's account of Baba Ajagbemokeferi, and other women's claims of having seen the masquerade without incident). I only included public posts, videos, and comment threads that explicitly addressed the case, in Yorùbá or English. Near-identical reposts and posts from accounts with almost no engagement got noted but not separately coded. Collection ran from 26 July to 7 August 2026. By then, new material was mostly repeating what had already been coded rather than adding to it, which is what I mean by thematic saturation here. The primary data is my own first-hand observation of these broadcasts, posts, and videos as they circulated in real time, a position worth being upfront about, since some of what I read as settled may look different in hindsight. Where useful, I triangulated this against contemporaneous Nigerian news coverage, cited separately as secondary corroboration rather than as the source of the ethnographic account itself.

I analysed the data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis: familiarisation, initial coding, theme generation, review, definition, and reporting. Initial, line-by-line coding produced a working list of codes rather than four themes: appeals to ancestral or divine consequence, rights- and constitutional-language framings, descriptions of the atonement ritual, claims and counter-claims about Olalere's condition, and invocations of past precedent. I then grouped these by shared analytic logic rather than surface topic. Competing justifications for the restriction became Theme 1. What was physically done to Olalere, and how it was discussed, became Theme 2. Claims later contradicted by broadcast or police confirmation, and how those corrections were received, became Theme 3. Historical precedent invoked to argue for or against the restriction's legitimacy became Theme 4. I checked this grouping against the theoretical framework rather than reading it straight off the framework: Hall's (1980) reading typology for Theme 1, Cohen's (1972) and Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (1994) moral panic

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criteria for Theme 3. One candidate theme, provisional sympathy for Olalere among commenters who otherwise accepted the punishment's logic, got folded into Theme 2 after review rather than kept separate. It recurred too thinly to stand on its own.

5. Case Description: The Wasilat Olalere versus Oloolu Narratives

This section reconstructs the controversy as it played out across social media and broadcast platforms. The primary data is first-hand ethnographic observation: named Facebook accounts, TikTok posts, and the Lagelu FM and Esà Òkè Sunnaatic TV broadcasts where Olalere gave her own account. Where relevant, I triangulate this against contemporaneous news coverage of the same events, cited separately as secondary corroboration rather than the source of the account itself. Two competing narratives come out of this material: the one *Oloolu* custodians and their supporters put out, and Olalere's own account, once she was able to speak publicly in her own words.

5.1 The initial accusation

The controversy began with reports from several Facebook accounts, most prominently Tan Tolorun, a traditional worshipper, and Mogaji Kola Olootu, a well-known radio broadcaster. Both claimed that during one of *Oloolu*'s public appearances, Olalere had disguised herself as a man, entered the crowd along the masquerade's route, filmed the *Oloolu* masquerade itself, and posted the footage to her TikTok account. Hajia Mewolaka, a female Muslim public commentator, then posted her own condemnation of Olalere on Facebook, criticising her for allegedly cross-dressing to record the masquerade. From these first posts, the claim spread fast across Facebook, YouTube, X, and TikTok, with many other accounts repeating the same version of events.

5.2 The atonement ritual and the death rumour

A few days later, videos began circulating showing Olalere at the *Oloolu* shrine undergoing what custodians described as an atonement process, footage that matches contemporaneous news reporting of the same events (e.g., Vanguard News, 2026a; PUNCH, 2026a). Not long after, a rumour spread widely across social media that she had died from encountering the masquerade, a claim also picked up independently by several news outlets at the time (Tribune Online, 2026a; QED.NG, 2026; Leadership, 2026). This rumour was directly contradicted when Lagelu FM, a prominent Ibadan radio station, brought Olalere onto its programme *Ibi Ayé ń Lọ* by phone, an interview I observed directly as part of this study's data collection and which was also reported by several outlets (Tribune Online, 2026a; PUNCH, 2026b; Vanguard News, 2026b). On air, she confirmed she was alive and gave her own account of events for the first time. She said she had not filmed the *Oloolu* masquerade and had not disguised herself as a man to do so. What she had filmed, she said, was the *Àmọ̀tẹ́kùn* regional security personnel and the crowd gathered in the area, posted on TikTok under the account name "Adeola tí ó care," with a caption noting that *Oloolu* was passing through the Atolu area, meant, she said, as a public alert for people to avoid the route. Once the video started circulating, other users pressured her to take it down, which is what prompted her to speak publicly and clarify that she had not died.

Her account was corroborated soon afterward. The *Oloolu* festival's official spokesperson, interviewed by BBC News Yoruba, also confirmed that Olalere had not died.

5.3 Olalere's fuller account

In a further interview with Esà Òkè Sunnaatic TV, broadcast on Facebook and observed directly as part of this study's data collection, Olalere gave a fuller account of what had happened to her. She said that on the Friday after the video's circulation, people came to her home saying they had been sent to arrest her on the order of the Olubadan of Ibadan, the city's traditional monarch. She was taken to Ode Aje

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Police Station and held overnight until the following Saturday. She repeated that she had not filmed the masquerade itself, only the security vehicles and the crowd, and that she had meant to warn others away from the area, not to violate any restriction. In an interview with Alwazeer Akéwùgbàgold, she added that even the police officer who checked what she had posted confirmed she had not filmed *Oloolu*, only the crowd. The *Oloolu* people, led by Sokoti, took her to the *Oloolu* compound anyway, an account that broadly matches the *Oloolu* compound secretary Oluwo Ishola Akeem's own public confirmation that she was taken from her home and later underwent the traditional cleansing rites (Vanguard News, 2026a; PUNCH, 2026b).

She then described the atonement process in detail. *Oloolu* custodians collected ₦400,000 from her husband, on top of several sacrificial materials already supplied, including a live goat, which she herself was made to carry around her neck, as shown in circulating video footage. Parts of this sequence are corroborated by a separate account from her mother, Mrs Sekinat Wasiu, who confirmed to Tribune Online (2026a) that she personally shaved her daughter's hair as part of the rites. Olalere was stripped of her clothing except for a red wrapper, and her mother was instructed to cut and shave her hair. The goat was then killed and its blood poured over her body; she was told not to bathe until the next day, so the blood could dry. After this, she said she was brought into a room with *Oloolu* custodians present, where another video was recorded and broadcast live on Facebook. In it, she was instructed to say she had felt unwell upon seeing the masquerade, that she had bled, had a severe headache, and other symptoms she attributed to spiritual affliction from *Oloolu*. She maintains none of this happened to her, that she had neither seen nor filmed the masquerade at any point, and that she was told to make these statements regardless.

6. Findings and Discussion

Data collected across Facebook, YouTube, X, and TikTok show several recurring themes in public commentary, organised below. One thing worth saying before I go further: the boundaries between these four themes are not as tidy as the headings suggest. Several comments and posts could sit under more than one. I placed them where they did the most analytical work, not because they belong there exclusively.

6.1 Theme 1: Rights vs. Tradition

In the days before *Oloolu* appeared, two audiences read the same restriction in strikingly different ways. Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model captures this well: a message is never guaranteed to be understood as intended, because audiences interpret it through their own beliefs and social position. For the custodians of *Oloolu* and their supporters, the restriction on women viewing the masquerade needed no defence. It was accepted as sacred and self-evidently correct, what Hall (1980) calls the dominant-hegemonic reading. Muslim activists such as Ajiginni, Alagusiy, and the Office of the Grand Mufti of Yorubaland, Ile-Ife, Osun State (Sheikh Daud Molaasan), read the same restriction very differently. They rejected it outright and replaced the language of taboo with the language of constitutional rights, an example of what Hall (1980) calls an oppositional reading.

This divide was not just among activists. Ordinary commenters expressed both positions clearly. One defended the tradition and turned the rights-based framing back on its own authors:

> *"Muslims put women in hijab for life, yet their aafas are coming out to say Oloolu is discriminating against women."*

This does more than defend *Oloolu*. It argues that if Islam may restrict women's dress, Yorùbá tradition may equally restrict women's movement, a plain, everyday instance of the contest Hall (1980) describes:

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an audience declining the oppositional reading on offer and defending its own interpretation as equally legitimate. That matters because it shows the disagreement was never confined to elite spokespeople on either side. It was being fought out, line by line, in the comment sections themselves.

A second commenter made the same defence more gently:

> *"please let us respect peoples belief systems."*

A third, responding to claims equating *Egungun* (masquerade) with religion, insisted on *Oloolu*'s standing as an indigenous cultural institution in its own right:

> *"Egungun is not religion, iam older and mature than you, Egungun is our festival pls don't mislead the public."*

Against these stands the oppositional reading, most fully expressed by X user @Yusuyfasunmogejo, who rejected the sacred framing altogether and recast the restriction as economic and gendered harm:

> *"Tell me what is more than the oppression of locking women in their homes and preventing them from going to work in the one of tradition? ... women are the ones who constitute the major traders in the Ibadan markets. What is the sense in this? What about pregnant women who may need emergency services? ... Our daughters, sisters, mothers, and aunts will come out and nothing will happen. This is 2026, we are not in 1960."*

Read side by side, these are two incompatible ways of coding the same restriction. The custodians and commenters defending them speak in the register of customary authority, respect owed to inherited belief. @Yusuyfasunmogejo speaks in a different register entirely, not religious at all, but economic and practical: women locked out of the markets they trade in, pregnant women unable to reach emergency care, a restriction she treats as simply incompatible with 2026. It would be a mistake, though, to read this second voice as an imported, secular rights discourse displacing an authentically Yorùbá one. Elsewhere in the controversy, Muslim preachers and activists such as Ajiginni and Alagusiy make a related but distinct argument, not that the restriction violates women's rights in the abstract, but that Islamic religious freedom exempts Muslim women from a restriction that was never theirs to begin with. That argument draws on a vocabulary, Islamic-reformist reasoning, that is every bit as indigenous to Yorùbá Muslim communities as the custodians' own. Oyèwùmí's (1997) account of how gender categories were reshaped through colonial and religious encounter is useful here mainly as a caution against the tidier story: what looks like tradition versus outside rights talk is closer, on this evidence, to two internally Yorùbá systems of legitimacy, customary and Islamic-reformist, contesting the same ground, with @Yusuyfasunmogejo's economic argument sitting alongside them as a third, more secular voice rather than the only alternative to tradition.

6.2 Theme 2: Punishment on the Body

Theme 1 was fought through words. Theme 2 is where the matter actually got settled, on Wasilat's body. Douglas's (1966) classic account of pollution and taboo argues that societies police their symbolic boundaries most intensely at points of perceived contamination, and that the body is often the surface where that boundary-work happens. Ortner (1974) takes this further into feminist territory: women are cross-culturally positioned as the symbolic site where nature and culture, order and disorder, get negotiated, which is one reason, she argues, why female transgression tends to be punished more visibly and more bodily than the equivalent male transgression. The ritual performed on Wasilat, seated naked in a mortar, doused in a goat's blood, her head shaved, then paraded around the shrine while being filmed, fits this pattern with unusual precision, I think. The punishment was not incidental to the controversy. It was the controversy's resolution, staged, it seems, specifically to be witnessed and redistributed on the very platforms that carried the original accusation.

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Looking through the comment threads beneath the ritual footage (posted by Abidex000 on TikTok), what struck me most was how little resistance there was to this logic, even among viewers who seemed a little uneasy about it:

> *"That will be a good lesson for others. I still believe they sent her for that to really know what will happen. Don't joke with tradition and culture."*
>
> *"person wey want to do content now be content for others"*

Even the more sympathetic comments stopped short of questioning the punishment's premise:

> *"She was only doing that because she don't want you people kill her... deep down she don't want to... you're only forcing her."*

Whether Wasilat submitted to the cleansing willingly or under duress is hard to settle definitively from the data I have, but what evidence there is points, on balance, toward coercion rather than consent. Her own account, given separately to Lagelu FM and Esa Oke Sunnatic TV, describes being "whisked" by *Oloolu*'s people led by Sokoti and held overnight in police custody before the ritual took place, a sequence that does not, at least to my reading, suggest a voluntary approach to atonement. Al-Wazeer Akéwùgbàgold's later intervention, securing an agreement that the ₦400,000 collected from her husband be returned, also suggests that even within the community mediating the dispute, the payment and ritual were understood as something extracted from her family rather than freely offered. The one comment that gestured toward her agency, "she was only doing that because she don't want you people kill her... you're only forcing her," is telling less because it describes real choice than because it shows how thin the line was between the ritual being framed as chosen and the ritual being coerced under threat. That ambiguity is worth sitting with: cultural transgression narratives often depend on the appearance of voluntary submission to stay legitimate, even where the underlying reality is closer to compulsion.

What is striking, and analytically significant precisely because it is missing, is that almost none of the commenters asked why this restriction falls on women specifically, and not on men who might equally record the procession. That silence is itself data, in a way. It matches what Ortner (1974) and later feminist anthropologists describe as the naturalisation of gendered taboo: the norm survives not mainly through active agreement, but through the absence of a question that would otherwise seem obvious to ask. Whether this silence reflects real acceptance of the restriction or just a kind of collective fatigue with arguing about it is harder to say from the comment data alone.

6.3 Theme 3: Rumor and Moral Panic

Theme 3 follows a moral panic sequence that closely matches Cohen's (1972) original model and its later refinement by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994): a perceived transgression, rapid amplification by moral entrepreneurs with large audiences, the construction of a folk devil, and a punitive response that escalates as the story travels. Tani Olohun's video alone drew over 13,000 views. Mogaji Kola Olootu's account carried the claim to his 1.8 million followers. Mewolaka's page, with over 700,000 followers, spread it further still. Each retelling added a more dramatic detail; Kola Olootu's version claimed she was "bleeding from her private part" with "seven days left to live."

Underneath this amplification, though, ran a second, much quieter evidentiary track. Lagelu FM interviewed Wasilat directly, and she said she had filmed only an *Amotekun* patrol vehicle and the waiting crowd, never the masquerade, and that she had not died. Mr. Gbolahan Ishola confirmed this account to BBC News Yoruba (2026). Esa Oke Sunnatic TV visited her residence and recorded the same account, including her statement that the police had confirmed the footage showed nothing more than the crowd. Two established broadcast outlets and a direct police confirmation landing on a materially different account than the one reaching over a million followers is a fairly clear example of what Goode

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and Ben-Yehuda (1994) call the disproportion criterion of moral panics: public reaction bearing little relationship to what could actually be verified.

What is most revealing, at least to me, is that the correction did not replace the rumour. The two circulated together, on the same threads, competing for the same audience:

> *"Dey play, if you find out Wasila is alive tomorrow what will you do? She's alive doing well at oremeji area in Ibadan. Believe social media at your own risk 😂 😂 😂"*

against, on the very same thread:

> *"O ti ku saiye..." (She's a living dead)*

and, further down:

> *"Stop spreading fake news. Wasila is alive and well at her home in oremeji / sokoti area of Ibadan."*

That the death narrative kept going even after a verified correction had entered the same comment space points to something Cohen's (1972) model anticipates without, I think, fully capturing at this level of detail: once a rumour has symbolic value, here, confirming the punishment of a transgressive woman, it can keep circulating more or less independent of whether it is factually true, because its social function has already been served, in a sense. Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (1994) framework does not fully anticipate this either. Moral panic here worked not just through exaggeration but through outright refusal of correction, which says something about how much power digital amplification now holds over which version of events actually sticks.

6.4 Theme 4: History as Argument

The final theme shows this same contest over meaning stretching backward into history. Ajiginni's invocation of Ajagbemokeferi, who reportedly let his wives view *Oloolu* in 1977 without fatal consequence, one of whom, he says, is alive today, remarried to a professor, and mother of twins, works as a deliberate counter-memory. He uses it specifically to challenge the claim that female viewing carries automatic spiritual consequence, recasting the restriction as a socially maintained rule rather than an unchangeable law of nature.

This counter-memory was immediately contested by the Isedale Abinibi Wa account, which held that only one wife was involved, that Ajagbemokeferi suffered a slow and disfiguring death, and that his wife died only nine days after him. Ajiginni disputed this directly, placing live calls to Ajagbemokeferi's friends, with whom he had performed Hajj together in 1991, who reportedly rejected the Isedale Abinibi Wa version on air. Because Ajiginni's account rests on this direct, first-hand testimony gathered live, it strikes me as somewhat more credible, on balance, than the Isedale Abinibi Wa version, which relies on secondhand narration without comparable verification, though I would stop short of calling either version fully settled. Ajiginni cited further instances showing how Ajagbemokeferi went on to live what he called a fulfilling life after the 1977 confrontation with *Oloolu*, including that he conducted his children's weddings in the 1990s, and that he gave his house to the Osun State Government to serve as the state house when Osun State was carved out of Oyo State, until the state secured a permanent government house, at which point the property was returned to him. Ajiginni publicly challenged traditionalists to debunk the facts he had laid out.

Deciding which version is correct is not something the data lets me settle, and I am not sure it needs to be. What matters is that even history became something people argued over rather than a settled fact. Both sides understood that winning the argument about what happened in 1977 would also mean winning the argument about whether today's restriction makes sense. Amadiume (1987) offers a useful comparative warning here: customs that look ancient and unchangeable often turn out, on closer

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inspection, to be more recent and more flexible than they present themselves as being. The dispute over Ajagbemokeferi's wives may never be fully resolved, but its persistence, the fact that people are still fighting over a 1977 event, is itself telling. The past was never really neutral ground in this controversy to begin with.

Put together, these four themes are really one dynamic showing up on four different surfaces. An argument about constitutional rights, a punishment carried out on a woman's body, a rumour that outran its own correction, and a dispute over historical memory all trace back to the same underlying anxiety about eroding customary authority. Wasilat's body became the site where that anxiety got, in effect, settled, while spectacle and rumour made sure the punishment resonated far beyond the shrine itself. This fits Oyèwùmí's (1997) argument that access to sacred and cultural space in Yoruba society stays deeply gendered, a woman's presence, or even the mere suspicion of it, treated as transgression more or less regardless of intent. It also suggests struggles over tradition here are inseparable from struggles over gender, visibility, and the right to move freely in public space. Whether that inseparability is unique to this case, or a wider pattern worth testing elsewhere, is a question this paper can only gesture toward.

7. Conclusions

This paper examined the Wasilat Olalere controversy, a Muslim TikTok user in Ibadan accused of filming the *Oloolu* masquerade in July 2026 and then made to undergo a cleansing ritual for it, to ask how a customary, spatially contained restriction on women's presence becomes a networked, multi-platform argument once it is disputed online. Four things came out of that. The dispute over rights and tradition turned out to run through at least three distinct, and not equally acknowledged, vocabularies rather than a simple two-sided fight. The punishment inflicted on Olalere's body, the goat's blood, the shaved head, the forced statement, worked as boundary maintenance regardless of what she had actually done, which is why the correction that followed changed nothing about how she was treated. The rumour and its correction moved through the same platforms at the same speed, and the target of public blame shifted mid-controversy, from Olalere to the *Oloolu* custodians, inside about two weeks. And the argument over Ajagbemokeferi's wives showed that even the historical record used to settle the dispute is itself unsettled, and still being fought over nearly fifty years on.

The paper's contribution is narrower than "gendered exclusion exists and is contested," which the literature already establishes. It is that this case does not fit the tradition-versus-outside-rights framing most of the comparative literature in Section 2 relies on. Since two of the three positions arguing it, customary and Islamic-reformist, are both indigenous to Yorùbá Muslim life, and that Cohen's (1972) model of a fixed target does not survive contact with a controversy where the accusation and its correction share the same platform in real time. That matters beyond this one case because both of those literatures, on gendered sacred space and on moral panic, tend to be built from single-tradition or pre-digital examples; if either pattern, a three-vocabulary contest or blame that moves mid-panic, turns out to be common rather than unique to Ibadan in 2026, it would mean two fairly established frameworks need updating for how these disputes now actually happen. Testing that would mean returning to this case once it has settled, or watching whether the same two patterns show up the next time a Yorùbá tradition has this kind of argument in public.

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Declarations

Ethics statement

This study analysed publicly accessible social media posts and news coverage rather than data obtained through direct human-subjects research. My institution does not require ethics approval for this kind of research.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest in this research work.

Funding

No funding was received for this work.

Data availability

The underlying social media corpus can be shared, for example as links only, subject to platform terms of service and the identifiability of named accounts.

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