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WOMANISM IN NIGERIAN FOLKLORE AND DRAMA⁺

by

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A topic of this kind demands that we establish or, at least, identify a fundamental set of assumptions in society upon which womanist conceptions are often based. These are usually the aggregate of stock representations from which ideas about a social group, here women, are abstracted before artists attempt to match them into frameworks of literary or dramatic constructs at all.

The intention of this essay, therefore, is to present through analyses the earliest formulations of womanist and matriarchal responsibility within the power structure of society; its endurance and attenuation, and finally, its contemporary transpositions within evolving allegiances and groups in the plurality of the various communities that make up the society.

The latter part of the essay appreciates the presentational nuances of each individual writer's articulation of womanist (or feminist) symbolism but does not account for, or accept responsibility for, the way they are fashioned in such dramas as have been cited. The instances that are dramatized in the plays of Duro Ladipo or Wole Soyinka are examined as stages of formulations in contemporary conceptions and dicta. References and citations are also taken from the ancient divination poetry of the Yorubas.

In the corpus of Ifa divination poetry, under the sign *Oturupon Meji*, there is the following story: At the very dawn of time, two classes of protagonists set out from the recesses of the heavens (or primordial chaos) to settle the earth. One class of these is described as *Eniyan*, or witches. In other circumstances, they are often described as *Eleye* meaning the Bird Inearnate, or the custodian of the mystery of birds.

They are implied antagonists. The other class called *Eniyan* are humans; non witches (the general idea here is that these are men or symbols of male personality). Thus there is a covert hint that all women are potential witches.

The two groups we have named above were each asked by divine guests to perform ritual sacrifices before setting out on their hazardous journeys, to appease the forces of passage. The men (or humans) refused. Before they set out however, the witches vaunted readily of what will be their inexorable intent to antagonize and frustrate the endeavours of humans. On earth, that intention got the better of the humans who then rushed back to complain to the divine guides. Man subsequently performed the sacrifices he had hitherto neglected. His hierophants thereafter released to him the secrets of, and the whereabouts of, the paraphernalia of the ancestral cult of the *Egungun*. The *Egungun* is the enacted form of an ancestral spirit in worship or in celebration. Into this costume of disguise he 'enters' and terrorizes the witches. We must note however that this does not mean a resolution of the conflict. Rather, it will recur in more subtle forms for the control of power as invested in the ancestral medium of *Egungun* hierarchy.

A somewhat more subtle and comprehensive version of this myth is rendered under the sign *Osa Meji* where it is explained that women, personalized as the mother superior, were actually primal witnesses to man's earliest formative influences. It is told that the mother superior, Odu, protested to Olodumare, the supreme Being, that He was partial

in giving Ogun the sole patent over Iron (and by implication, other earth energies), that over creation to Obarisa (also called Obatala), while she, Odu, in their company was not assigned any office in the pantheon. Olodumare thereby entrusted her with the mysteries of fertility, bounty, and mystical vision — the cult of 'eleye'. She could enter the most secret places or the darkest precincts of the Egungun and Oro temples. She however became drunk with power, and against the gentle caution of Olodumare, perverted her sources of goodwill.

Obarisa, a male personification, earnestly consulted Ifa on this score and through painstaking diligence, outwitted Odu by guile. While he had extracted the secret of the Egungun mysteries from her, he modified it, spoke in the weird voices of ancestors and heaven dwellers. All, including Odu herself, were terrified. However, she recognized the costume of Egungun with which she had earlier initiated Obarisa into the cult and knows that her man was the one under the cover. She sent her bird to perch on Egungun's shoulder from where she had become the medium for the re-enactment of Egungun mysteries.

I have often been fascinated by the hieroglyphic parallel of this phenomenon in Western mythologies, an example of which is the vignettes of the English poet, William Blake, where birds are consciously used as visionary elements. David Erdman has noted that an instance on which a bird in one of Blake's paintings carries a golden apple in its mouth represents bird as serpent metamorphosed.¹ Though the varied connotations of this are outside the scope of our concerns here, they nevertheless highlight the symbolic correspondence in both contexts.

In line with our euhemeristic interpretations, the loss of the essential regalia of the Egungun cult meant that women were divested of a sizeable proportion of their religious and political authority. They consequently became more concerned with the largely ceremonial aspects of their status. They, of course, were also concerned with the function of regenerating life; re-enacting forms as opposed to the embodiment of actual, tangible essences in those dramas. That is why it is women who give birth to human bodies (the forms) while it is the men who conduct and give the seminal essence, as it were.

These statements and extrapolations must, of necessity, be put in the context of social relations, conflicts and exchanges between groups and society. From the earlier Ifa sign which we cited, there is the hint that it is from social pressures within, and antagonism between, these groups that it became the

prerogative of the Egungun cult to ferret out, and punish, witches in those ancient communities. There is no gainsaying the fact that such an arrogation may be perverted and used to subvert domineering females. Their male counterparts who found them too influential or unsuccessful in any venture might accuse them of witchcraft and invoke sanctions and penalties against them.

Men gained political and judicial ascendancy and thereby subjugated their female counterparts. These, however, were not without provisos: that women, having lost the essence of power, would be appeased only if they shared authority, even if it were largely nominal. Thus they took over the ceremonial reins of power. The circumstances of this are rather complex and would need copious illustration.

In spite of the *coup de grace* by Obarisa which we have mentioned, some of the highest initiates of the Egungun cult are still women. In the political headquarters of ancient Yoruba — Oyo — the head of the Egungun cult is the *Iyamode*.² She is in charge of the royal mausoleum, she worships the spirits of dead kings and invokes their Egungun, or dramatic, personages. She is generally acknowledged as 'Father' and the king refers to her as his father.³ The head of the Ifa mystagogues in the city, *Iyaaleemole* (i.e. mother of mysteries), is also female. Another female heads the worship of the hunters' deity, *Osoosi*. On state occasions she is seen in a hunter's garb, armed with a bow.⁴ The very striking parallel between this character and her Greek equivalent, Artemis, is unmistakable, especially as Artemis is known for her terrific retributions against violating males, and whose destruction of Actaeon is underscored by a stern assertion of feminine integrity.

One notable fact about these cult or earth mothers is that once they attain such lofty positions, they become celibates and drift inevitably towards androgynous consumation.⁵ This is why they annex, or rather, 'usurp' an aspect of the masculine invigorating agency, and become a 'father'. This cultural motif manifests in other forms in Yoruba concepts as is evidenced in the plays we shall discuss later in this essay.

To return to my earlier point on the implications of the mystic bird, the symbol becomes a hieroglyphic medium of enactment and representation, it becomes the transformational as well as unifying stage of male and female complementarity. Historically, it was the period when the influences of both sexes became balanced in agreeable fusion. A rather startling phenomenon is the fact that many emblems of Yoruba ancients (sacred staves, or other sceptres

of authority from which kings and chieftains derive mystical as well as political power) are almost always surmounted by the symbol of *Eleye*, the primeval bird, in any of its adapted variations. Could this be an indication that the instinct of vision and regeneration are largely derived from the power of women or the feminine channels of force?

If we take for granted that the sceptre of authority held by monarchs and chieftains is a hieroglyphic derivation of the phallic force or male authority (and this it is, for women chieftains and priestesses do not possess such staff), then just as the bird mounted the costume of Obarisa's Egungun figure to facilitate enactment, this will most likely be the case in this instance as well. To confer authority on male offices of power, women lend the moral and institutional support. There is a parallel also in the idea that at the coronation of a major Yoruba king, the Alaafin, it is a woman who physically places the crown on his head. This woman called *Iyakere* also has custody of the king's regalia.⁶

To further illustrate this contention, we will cite the example of a staff Dennett found associated with the kingly office in Benin, in Nigeria. The *Ematon* staff is a Yoruba and Bini emblem adorned with the figures of chamelions (symbols of wisdom), and floral elements. It is surmounted by a bird. According to Dennett, the bird has been described as "the first one who sees".⁷ This corresponds with the relationship between Obarisa and Odu as we have narrated from the divination sign, *Osa Meji*. The bird; the woman, was the one who had been granted the precedence of vision — before all else. She was therefore the first one to see and know before all else; even before Obarisa, the grand patriarch.

The fascinating, though often laborious, analyses of Olumide Lucas seek to identify this bird with the Egyptian phoenix, which is a bird of vision. This is true only so far as they are understood as points of cultural correspondence rather than a direct derivation. His linking of this bird emerging from the flora with the springing of the god Ra from the lotus in the form of a bird seems to me far-fetched, especially as Dr. Lucas's thesis stems from an *a priori* argument of determining a probable Egyptian ancestry of the emblem.⁸ Aside from this however, his gleanings of various graphic motifs and his particular interpretation of the Phoenix as a fecundating principle conform to the regenerative purposes which we have ascribed to the archetypal bird here.

Thus we reach a stage in mythic or historic chronography where women affirm their influences in ceremonial matters so that in ritual they become the

influential priestesses harnessing the collective beneficence of choric will and ritual dirge as a major fertility emblem through which society may propagate, renew and celebrate itself. In Pierre Verger's account of religious conventions in ritual drama among the Nago sub-tribe of the Yoruba in Dahomey, there is a climactic instance when one of the main priestesses, Iyafero sings:

I direct all the priests of the Orisha
I am stronger than them all.⁹

In an earlier essay where Verger discusses the cult of *Eleye* in detail, and where he also cites the *Ifa* sign of *Osa Meji*, he interpretes the myth, with remarkable perspicacity, as reflecting the relative importance of men and women in society through three distinguishable periods. I recreate his model here with slight modifications: The first stage was the arrival from primordial heaven to earth, representing the geographical migration of the Yoruba and their arrival in Ile-Ife. The men, because of their prowess as warriors and hunters led and dominated the tribe. These qualities were essential to ensure the safety of the race. In this respect, Ogun was in the lead. Ogun, as we know is the god of war and patron of technology, full of innovation and daring.

The second stage was when society gave up nomadic existence and settled on the land to take up sedentary and agricultural prospects. The fertility of the land, and of women, became a necessity of labour and economic value. Society at that stage was matriarchal, women holding sway over men in politics and in religion. The cult of the Egungun was a political tool used by women to boost and protect their status.

In the final period, the women over-exercised the power at their disposal, the men protested and seized back the power that devolved from them since the days of adventurous migration. Women however retained a measure of control: they procreate to boost the race.¹⁰

I have cited at length the essentials of Verger's historical interpretation because I agree entirely with him on those points. The ceremonial aspects of political and religious power to which women adhered will preoccupy us presently.

The facts of Gelede festival drama, especially as documented by Ulli Beier in the Western part of the Yoruba country, give some interesting details. Though the major roles in the Drama are played by men, the heads of the cult are women; supreme among them is *Iyalashe*. The performance is linked with the festival of Odua, the female manifestation of the creator-god of forms, Obatala. It is not difficult

to see that Odua derives from Odu, the designation of the primeval mother. Hence the cult is dedicated to the cult of witches, to the appeasement of female malevolence. In addition to the subordinate roles played by men in the cult, all other male cults which exercise political influence in that community, especially Oro and Egungun, cannot operate without the express permission of Iyalashe, the mother-superior and Earth force. This arrangement serves concessionary ends:

The Gelede dance is the expression of the bad conscience of the men towards the women, dating from the changeover from matriarchal to patriarchal society. The great mystic powers of woman (originally used creatively in working the ground etc.) can be turned into a destructive weapon in the angry woman. Therefore everything must be done to placate woman, to appease her and to compensate her loss of political position.¹¹

That women guard the mysteries of the community shows that they are the gateway to its cosmos. The matriarchal commune, its maintenance of stock allegiances through the control of hierocratic rights is borne out by the classic saying: "All women are united through the flow of blood". This is the same as saying that the rudiments of solidarity are bound by the integral source of active biological life. For society to continue to have life and prosper, the dynamic agency of blood as held and declared by women is necessarily a decisive factor. In controlling society's rite of passage, women became the 'door'; the opening not only for physiological regeneration but also in associative reference to monthly cycles and other seasonal mutations of cosmic revitalization. This pattern is corroborated in another more cosmopolitan study of cultures:

In different languages and among various peoples there is . . . an apparent connection between the terms, and the corresponding ideas, of "woman" and "door", that would seem to be a confirmation of the fact that the earliest altar was at the threshold of the woman, and of the door.¹²

A mythic example of this covenant of blood is illustrated with an ostensibly ribald and light-hearted story found under the Ifa sign *Eji Odi*. It is the story of a certain character, a physical impersonation of this sign who consulted Ifa, the divination deity, about his failure to gain knowledge of the mysteries of womanhood (under the sign however, it is always translated literally as carnal knowledge). Ifa demanded sacrifices of honey from him, and ritually relieved him of the trouble. He went to the populous market of *Ejigbomekun*; and on getting there accosted

Iyaloja, the market matron, with whom he then cohabited. Through this act, he aroused others into desiring the charm and mysteries of *Iyaloja*.¹³

Iyaloja is the titled head of women traders and the women traders and the women community. Sometimes the title goes by *Iyalode* or *Iya-egbe*. She is always a woman of immense social influence and charisma. For such positions, mother superiors in the sense we earlier discussed are usually elected. A dramatic illustration of this phenomenon is found in Soyinka's play, *Death and The King's Horseman*¹⁴.

The implicit warrant of the play, which installs *Iyaloja* as the *charge d'affaires*, over Elesin's ritual passage through the complex network of female choric dancers, is a useful example of the Eji Odi citation. One salient fact here is also important: that instead of the candidate in the rite passing through the 'gateway' of *Iyaloja*'s medium herself, as Eji Odi did, the duty is transposed unto her daughter-in-law whilst the function remains the same. Thus *Iyaloja* is not only the gate-keeper at the doorway of that night of mysteries, she is also the mystagogue. Fragments from her statements are of true import:

. . . It is those who stand at the gateway of the great change to whose cry we must pay heed. . . Now we must go prepare your bridal chamber. Then these same hands will lay your shrouds. (pp. 22, 23).

At last Elesin resorts to prevarication to avoid the death he is under vow to die. It is *Iyaloja* who, in the end, confronts him with the inevitable signals of an uncompromising feminine chorus, swaying to the threnodic chants of their cult. The allegiance of blood he seals in the bridal union of that night must be carried to conclusion.

One of the topics treated in *Madmen and Specialists*¹⁵ is the reality of the conflict and struggle between this class of women, earth-mothers, and the domineering attitudes of men. It is actually because Dr. Bero, the heavy-headed, lettered professional, has refused to acknowledge the goodwill and control of these women whose metier is to tend emerging life — flora and fauna — that they set his world ablaze. They assert and demonstrate their control over the balance of natural and metaphysical forces. *Iya Agba* discusses with the impertinent Bero:

IYA AGBA: Your sister owes us a debt.

BERO: (stops, turns slowly). If you know what is good for you, you will never let me hear that again.

IYA AGBA: We took her into the fold — did she tell you that? To teach what we know, a pupil must come into the fold.

BERO: And what cult is this?
IYA AGBA: Not any cult you can destroy. We
 move as the Earth moves, nothing
 more. We age as Earth ages.
 (p. 259).

Here is the bastion of the female solidarity cultus enlightening a morbidly rational and 'scientific' Bero. Earlier, his sister, Si Bero had pleaded with these mothers to grant him protection. Consequent on Bero's recalcitrance, they withdraw all remedies of life (the stored medicinal herbs) apropos the agency of fire.

Other instances in Nigerian drama furnish us with complementary examples of such politics. An even less recent example is *Moremi*,¹⁶ an eponymous adaptation of a legendary event dramatized by Duro Ladipo. *Moremi*, the heroine of the play is the Iyaloja who, prompted by the huge losses of her fellow traders on account of persistent raids by the Igbo, a neighbouring ethnic group, allows herself to be taken captive so that she may discover the secrets of Igbo invincibility. She seeks the support of *Esinmerin*, a river daemon who, as is usual in Yoruba mythographies, is something of a woman; a mother and life-source. Hence the address:

Esinmerin,
 Mother of the world,
 accept our sacrifice
 and let it buy us peace.

(p. 28)

The river (or its daemon) pledges support for *Moremi's* cause on account that she will give up her only son for sacrificial consumption. This, of course, she fulfils with great pain as soon as she returns from her adventurous sojourn among the Igbos, armed with the secret of their successes.

One major fact however, as we pointed out earlier, is that accredited earth mothers are usually celibates, emphasising androgynous tendencies. For *Moremi* to properly enter and fit into this cast, and transcend the particularities of individual motherhood, she must lose her only issue. Only then can she truly become the mother of all. I suppose it is this kind of tendency in traditional hierocracy that is responsible for commonplace speculations that women who ascend to such ranks are witches, even if they are not necessarily malevolent. Among the *Nupes* of Nigeria, the *Lelu*, who bear the title of female elders, are also generally thought of in this way.¹⁷

The headship of the market women has great responsibilities attached to the office, and the post is almost always associated with economic success. Among the *Nupe*, as among the Yoruba, it is always

thought that the position of the female elder (or the *Lelu*) is a hazardous one, not merely because it is meant to protect women against the domineering influences of their male counterparts, but because it is thought that the incumbent must be capable of controlling all women within her constituency; harnessing their solidarity, and curtailing whatever she perceives to be dangerous or pernicious intentions. To occupy such a post and function effectively within it, it is generally presumed that she must acquire some kind of extraordinary power, usually witchcraft (in *Gelede* conceptualization all women are potential witches). From this premise, and coupled with economic independence, the tangible fears of their male counterparts are all too clearly seen. Hence it can also be deduced that if women have begun to nurture some economic tendencies, it is dangerous to allow them to cling on to political power as well.

The conclusion at which we logically arrive in the light of these analyses is that women have tended, in more recent times, to be excluded from the core of political power. While they still maintain their ceremonial roles, the concept of political power and hierarchy in hitherto traditional societies has changed and has inherited aspects of colonial or neo-colonial power structures which are usually establishment-based. In this sense, the cult of traditional communities no longer inhere in contemporary institutions as they used to; the link has been weakened with old anthropomorphic allegiances, the traditional symbols, institutions and gods – all of which were the fundamentals which validated hierocratic conceptions. Those have been replaced by new economic networks and other constricting tunnels of civil and judicial bureaucracies modelled after alien patterns.

Confronted with this reality women, as represented in some contemporary Nigerian dramas, seek an alternative route to dominance through trade and economic ventures. In this respect the association of market women and other such institutions are a means of valid study, and of especial interest to both writers and critics alike. There is no gainsaying the fact that women still wield a great measure of political influence, even though it is often demonstrated as sumptuous ceremonial patterns in procession and dance.

It must also be noted that in spite of the loss of power inherent in traditional polity, and the latter-day struggles to secure economic power and moral independence by women in those societies, the prevailing mythography and application of symbols (in circumstances of male-female contrast or complemen-

tarity) show subtle or virtual balance. This point becomes clearer if we illustrate it with Sango's passion play, *Oba Koso* (The King Did Not Hang), as dramatized by Ladipo,¹⁸ the power of which emanates from the phenomenal personality of Sango, the apotheosized king of ancient Oyo.

In the royal court of Sango in Oyo, the concept and the position of the queen mother, who is usually a very dominant figure, seems absent or suppressed, so that the king indulges excessively in draconian male authority without the checks or restraint of any prominent queen mother. However, this tempering role is subtly assumed by his wife, Oya. The king's biological mother, a Nupe native, does not feature to any appreciable degree even in the historical life of the man. By symbolic transposition, however, his mother and his wife will be found to be manifestations of the same matriarchal principle.

The point to note here is that both Sango and his wife, Oya, have become apotheosized. First Sango, and then Oya, on account of her being transformed (it is often told) into the River Niger. The truth of this code will yield its core if it is understood that contrary to Sango's fiery disposition (for he is the god of thunder and bonfires), she is identified with a river. Furthermore it is the same river, the Niger, that demarcates the Nupe country (the land of his mother) from the Yoruba country (his geographical paternity). While he will fling thunderbolts, his wife is the promulgating force behind windstorms and tornadoes. However this is further interpreted, there is a near-conscious array of motifs here, neatly ordered to balance elemental and symbolic principles. The tendencies merge to become even; they dovetail to a perfect complement for each other.

In Sango's case, this balance, or equity, is inherent in the balanced selection of powers between the sexes (male-female), and it dialectically inheres within that milieu; consequently it affirms the reversal in the balance of his anti-heroic propulsion, especially when his inclinations have been fiercely patriarchal. Hence the affirmation of the ancients that after Sango's fall, he sets out on exile towards his mother's homeland. He does not get there because the hold of passionate maternal and feminine feeling upon his subconscious has been neglected for so long. Its prompt psychic recall is therefore vague and almost completely unregistered at that point in time. We recall the incident that we quoted earlier from the Ifa sign of Osa Meji: that when Odu, the sole woman in the primeval pantheon, felt that the sharing of the controlling patents over creation, iron etc. (as allocated to Obarisa and Ogun) worked against her interest,

in that she was not granted control over anything, she went back and complained to Olodumare, the supreme God, who balanced this 'irregularity' by giving her authority also over the archetypal birds of enactment, proclaiming her the mother to the other gods. Thus the dialectic expressed through such conflict, tension, and resolution has always been there and still remains. Conflict and tension are after all the invigorating resources of drama.

The analyses in this essay subtly suggest that the feminine principles highlighted are accretions of a long historical process, and that post-colonial Nigeria has a new arrangement of class and status distinction: that traditional womanhood is quite distinct from the modern concept of womanhood. The latter would be found to be Western oriented. It thereby follows that the Nigerian polity of the present day has compounded the dimensions of womanist symbolism because the man-woman relationships in metropolitan arrangements identify more with symbols of class relations and minority struggles within a capitalist democracy. Nevertheless the conflict is intensified by the fact that the system is still largely under a patriarchy almost comparable to the relationship of the sexes in the court of ancient kings. That is, the King versus the queen mother.

In either of the polities, the symbols and the paraphernalia of the feminine forces have remained enduring principles.

NOTES

* First presented to the eleventh annual conference of the African Literature Association, Michigan State University, East Lansing, 16-19 April, 1986.

1. David V. Erdman, *The Illuminated Blake* (London: Oxford UP, 1975), 19.
2. Samuel Johnson, *The History of The Yorubas* (Lagos: C.M.S. Bookshops, 1921), 43.
3. Samuel Johnson, 55.
4. See R. C. Abraham, *Dictionary of Modern Yoruba* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1962), 21.
5. See for instance Samuel Johnson, 55.
6. Samuel Johnson, 45, 65.
7. R. E. Dennett, *At the Back of the Black Man's Mind* (London: Macmillan, 1906), 194.
8. J. Olumide Lucas, *The Religion of the Yorubas* (Lagos: C.M.S. Bookshops: 1948), 302-304; 169.
9. Pierre Verger, 'Trance and Convention in Nago-Yoruba Spirit Mediumship', *Spirit Mediumship and Society in Africa*, ed. John Beattie and John Middleton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969) 50-66 (60).
10. Pierre Verger, 'Grandeur et Decadence du Culte de Iyami Osoroga', *Journal de la societe des Africaines*, 35 (1965): 141-160 (151-153).

11. Ulli Beier, 'Gelede Masks', *Odu: A Journal of Yoruba and Related Studies*, ed. S.O. Biobaku and H. U. Beier, 6 (June 1958): 4-23 (7).
12. See for instance the varied but allied references of H. Clay Trumbull, *The Threshold Covenant* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1896), 252-257 (252).
13. For a straightforward rendition of this story, see Wande Abimbola, *Ifa Divination Poetry* (New York: Nok, 1977) 67.
14. Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman* (London: Methuen, 1975).
15. Wole Soyinka, *Madmen and Specialists, Collected Plays 2* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1974).
16. Duro Ladipo, *Moremi*, trans. Ulli Beier, *Three Nigerian Plays* (London: Longmans, 1967), 1-34.
17. S. F. Nadel, 'Witchcraft and Anti-Witchcraft', *Nupe Religion* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954), 163-206 (168).
18. Duro Ladipo, *Oba Koso* (The King Did Not Hang), transcribed and translated by R. G. Armstrong, Robert L. Awujoola, and Val Olayemi (Ibadan: Institute of African Studies, 1972).

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