



ISSN Print: 2394-7500  
ISSN Online: 2394-5869  
Impact Factor: 5.2  
IJAR 2020; 6(10): 267-271  
[www.allresearchjournal.com](http://www.allresearchjournal.com)  
Received: 08-08-2020  
Accepted: 12-09-2020

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## **African (Oral) cultures, myths and superstitions in the formation of female identity**

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### **Abstract**

This article spins around the issue of woman. It is not a study that seeks to justify the direct link that lies there in between the different categories of African oral cultures, traditions, myths and superstitions; and their representation in contemporary African literature, but rather attempts to bring to light the factual causes these aforementioned categories yoke together to negatively impact the female subject's self-betterment and awareness. The paper is based on female characterization and African imagination, but specifically revolves around the quest of woman's cultural identity in the midst of harsh conventions and man's total "inventiveness" to remain on top of the social ladder.

**Keywords:** African cultures-self-betterment-categories-identity

### **Introduction**

Human kinds live in societies purely governed by norms and precepts that generally shape the code of conduct people abide by within their own contextual environment. The African continent is not an exception to that behavioral and culturally-based code of conduct:

[...] 'Africa never spared those who did what they liked instead of what they had to do.'

As a result, it is everybody's daily task and duty to promote the teaming up of minds so as to ensure the spirit of continuity and togetherness of the community. Pre-colonial, traditional Igbo society is known as being very concerned with the permanent championing of its heritage and values. (Sow, 2008: 296) <sup>[16]</sup>.

This uncovers the common agreement of African communities regarding individuals' conformity to culture, as a whole. But beside, the rigidity of African traditions imposed upon people in general, there are pervasive categories like myths, superstitions that subdue people's lives, especially the woman subject, that condition her life. In effect, if we agree that there is a close relationship between oral traditions, imagination and writing, we will surely understand African literature as a continuity and inking of oral culture, myths and superstitions that can be considered as "unwritten laws", if applied to woman: there is no culture that does not involve both oral and written tradition. (Kortenaar, 2011:11) <sup>[9]</sup>.

It goes without saying that oral cultures merge with writing, therefore the question that rebounds is, do African imagination and writing bring to the fore the empowerment of female identity with the triptych: oral cultures, myths and superstitions? Moreover, oral cultures, myths and superstitions primarily vow to educate the young generations on the past glory days and the virtues of ethics through storytelling narrated by elders under the palaver tree or praiseworthy epics of African heroes and ancestral spirits that griots sing their praises in order to keep societies in the straight and narrow way. But conversely the reality is that oral cultures, more often than not, impede women's progress as society draws boundaries for them. This uncommon rule triggers us off to delve deep in literary works of some African male and women writers to study the question of female entrapment in relation to empirically-based ideologies and their own development through mainly characterization. As an approach, the study will be woven from an African feminist point of view which fits best the issue:

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African feminism differs from Western feminism because it has developed in a different context. Today, African women are seeking to redefine their roles in ways that allow them a new, culturally attuned activism. This is not a totally novel challenge, since there is evidence of gender hierarchy, female subordination, and women's struggles to reshape their statuses and roles within traditional African cultures in earlier historical periods. (Mikell, 1999:740.)<sup>[11]</sup>

As a structure, our analysis will be articulated on two points, the first one turns the spotlight on the anti-feminist conceptions and promotion and in the second point we will be discussing the self-disclosure of the female protagonist and quest of personal growth in a totally restrictive environment.

### **The promotion of anti-feminist conceptions**

Oral communication is one of the most common media human beings and animals resort to in their interactions and daily communication in any given society or ecosystem. Culturally speaking, orality holds a peculiar place in African societies. With its various genres, riddles, storytelling and epics full of praises, to name but a few, oral cultures and traditions have played a major role in African literature, the structuration of African societies and the establishment of children's moral shape. Thus the advent of colonialism stands as a threat and a crisis of African cultural values. Its side effect ignites African writers' literary productions and defensive discourses, whose ultimate goals were to gain independence, but most importantly to restore and revive African cultures:

... [T]he West was wrong to regard Africa as having had no culture, no literary tradition of its own and no civilization. The fact of writing in itself was a weapon. It was not only a way of fighting colonialism but of putting Africa on the literary map of the world and of proving that Africa could no longer be regarded as a world without a culture, a continent without a literary tradition. (Ngara, 1988: 129)<sup>[12]</sup>.

It is of paramount importance to give intensive conceptions about the concept of culture before we delve deep into the subject matter. In his article, « Power to the People : Power to Creativity », the South African poet, Mogane Wally Serote, sees culture:

... [A]s the way people organize themselves to harness nature so as to better their lives, they make rules for themselves so that they know how to relate to each other in the process of harnessing nature, ensuring that the rights of individuals, groups, and the nation are protected, in order that the national collective talent contributes to progress, joy and peace of the world in general. (Serote, 1988 : 194)<sup>[14]</sup>.

If we agree that it is commonplace culture, as a whole and together with categories like myths and superstitions, should be understood as conventional agreements strongly encapsulated in the way society functions to ensure communal cohesion heedless of gender belonging and class, one should ask how come the aforementioned categories subdue woman. It is from this postulate we are going to

analyze the paradoxical stance of oral culture and other categories on the female protagonist, the prejudices they bring about and the promotion of masculinity and male chauvinism, at her expense.

In the African context, there are countless unwritten laws, myths and superstitions that reinforce the male subject's social status which push woman into the background. For example, at an early age, the community as social body disseminates some negative ideologies towards the female person that are based on nothing rational but male-oriented inclinations and self-esteem. The mind of the female child is shaped in such a way as to make her pessimistic about herself that gives way to a development of inferiority complex towards the opposite sex. Since the consideration is fuelled by male ego, it becomes then irrationally and morally condoned. What is more, the value-judged myths over woman have even given birth to the misconception, ostracism or unattractiveness of African women writers' works in the mainstream literary tradition :

“[...] it has been difficult for critics to consider women novelists and women's literature theoretically because of their tendency to project and expand their own culture-bound stereotypes of femininity, and to see in women's writing an eternal opposition of biological and aesthetic creativity. (Showalter, 1978:7)<sup>[15]</sup>.

In the same token, superstitions hit the raw nerve of African woman's psyche as they bequeath on men enough power to secure a high profile while reducing the female subject to a minimum. In actual fact, superstitions represent collective ideological agreements, which do not often concur with reality and are profoundly engrained in people's minds whose question or infringement brings about misfortunes that befall the challenger. The issue of marriage is a good example. Marriage which is supposed to be the most joyful moment in any individual's life is not such for the bride because of superstitions that are attached to its celebration. It turns around the bride price that represents a key element in any marriage celebration.

For that matter, there is a caution concerning the cash payment or the payment in kind of the bride price that works against the marriage celebration, but more importantly against the woman's life. In other words, it is generally believed on Igboland that the infringement of the bride price payment will inevitably make it impossible for the woman and/or her baby to survive if the husband does not see to it that the payment of the bride price is done, and in good quality if it is done in kind. *The Bride Price* by the Nigerian woman writer, Buchi Emecheta, is a good example. Emecheta uses her writings to show the extent to which the Igbo culture in particular and African culture in general, with superstitions and myths, can crush women's brains. In *The Bride Price*, the female protagonist, Aku-nna, has committed two big mistakes that are culturally unacceptable. First, she dares marry an outcast, Chike, and second, her husband does not fully pay the bride price. Consequently, since nobody can scorn the code of conduct dictated by society and live happily, a tragic fate befalls the woman at the end of the novel that can be interpreted as a « poetic justice », i.e., in the eyes of people, her death and lack of potency are seen as a knock-on side effect of her challenge to the social convention over the principles of marriage.

This surely triggers Marie Umeh in her work, "Procreation Not Recreation: Decoding Maman in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*", to question the utilitarian perspective of marriage. To Umeh, a closer scrutiny of marriage gives a pessimistic view of men whose understanding is purely grounded in satisfying their sexual inclinations and perpetuating the lineage of the family:

[T]he glory of a woman is a man; a woman without a son is a failure; marriage is for the production of male heirs to continue the husband's lineage; and a complete mother is a mother of healthy sons. (Umeh, 1996: 192) <sup>[13]</sup>.

Not with standing the cultural and superstitious impediments which relegate women to the periphery, there is still the African myths that also cross the thin line between female identity and women's growth. On top of that, the myths attached to the woman subject yield in stereotypes that disclose her *femininity* and vulnerability, hence her dearth of human value. Once again, this is how we should understand the manifestation of structural violence and the subjugation of women in African literature, especially in situations in which the stakes that should help move up a few ranks at the social ladder are high between the two sexes.

For instance, school represents the golden opportunity for the colonized subject to assimilate the Western culture, and more importantly to achieve the pinnacle of hope in this world. Very often than not, the use of myths is a common practice for men to justify and legitimate the discrimination against girls' education in order to enjoy that preferential treatment. In her novel, *Nervous Conditions*, the Zimbabwean woman writer, Tsitsi Dangarembga, satirizes the stereotyping of women through education based upon nothing but sexism, cohesive myths and classical realism: The needs and sensibilities of women in my family were not considered a priority, or even legitimate. (Dangarembga, 1989 :12) <sup>[5]</sup>.

To some extent, it is unquestionable that cohesive myths, cultures and superstitions do not help assure a mental balance to women, but rather represent three intersecting paths where women's « progress » is buried in. If we look closer at the matter at hand, we will see on a larger scale that in terms of spirituality and religion; cultures, myths and superstitions are fully steeped in African indigenous people and have profoundly impacted and stirred the Deity. In *Things Fall Apart*, the intrusion of the White missionaries on Igboland can be depicted as a jeopardy of traditional African divinities. « The Evil Forest » is a damned portion of land where people dare not live or build their shrines since it is haunted by malicious spirits. Thus it represents the place where sacrifices are made and where twin baby girls are thrown or buried to death. The sticky question that arises here is how the same unworldly land is given to the missionaries, tongue in cheek, to dwell on and nothing bad befalls them. This betokens the irrelevance and questioning of such beliefs by African indigenous people; and the White man's challenge to the ancestors and traditional African divinities and superstitions:

They offered them as much of the Evil Forest as they care to take [...] The next morning the crazy men actually began to clear a part of the forest and to build their house. The inhabitants of Mbanta expected them

all to be dead within four days. The first day passed and the second and third and fourth, and none of them died. Everyone was puzzled. And then it became known that the white man's fetish had unbelievable power. (Achebe, 1958 : 149) <sup>[11]</sup>.

Partially, we can maintain that African cultures, myths and superstitions are cohesive agreements based on social conventions enacted by the community whose infringement engenders non-reversible misfortunes to the offensive party. The woman subject is the poor relation as the triptych categories (culture, myth and superstition) pave the way for man's personal development while enticing her into chaos and hybridity.

### Self-disclosure and Quest of Personal Growth

Once again it is undeniable that the backbone of traditional African cultures rest on the sacredness of the Deity, superstitions and the unyielding faith in them. These values are commonly shared and respected:

You have seen Eru, the Magnificent, the One that gives wealth to those who find favor with him [...]. Eru only harms those who swear falsely before his shrine [...]. When he likes a man wealth flows like a river in his house, his yams grows as big as human beings, his gods produce trees and his hens hatch nine. (Achebe, 1958: 9) <sup>[11]</sup>.

It is clear that there exists a certain binary relationship between fate and spirituality, the same as there exists a vicinity between righteousness and divine retribution. In other words, any individual's good fate or bad fate is shaped and defined through the respect or disrespect of the traditional gods or divinities. More importantly, this actual fact accounts for the resort to witchcraft to solve inter-personal conflicts between people:

The belief in witchcraft is strong among the Yoruba arising from [...] the conflicting relations of a husband and wife [...]. Sickness, premature death and misfortune are all attributed to the activities of the witch. The Key figure in the traditional religious system was the diviner-healer of the cult, the *babalawo*. He was consulted with great frequency for spiritual advice prior to life or, when sickness or some misfortune occurred. (Mitchell, 1967: 307) <sup>[10]</sup>.

But however sacred and uncompromising the enforcement of the spiritual principles are on the general populace, what still rebounds is that it sets its cap on woman. Thus, given the backpedalling of restrictive cultures, superstitions and myths that hinder the woman's worth and advancement in life, some women writers use their female protagonists as ploys and mouthpieces to voice and disrupt the orthodox misconceptions towards women that African orality is woven from. From then on, it becomes obvious for these women writers to start re-evaluating the discourse of oral traditions and gender in African literature as a whole and give an avenue to the subjugated woman to get out of her comfort zone and alienation to build up a brighter future.

In this respect, the novelty of African women writers resides in how they astutely use the same African oral cultures and mythology in their works to restore women's image. This is

all the more important given the prominent roles some iconic women figures have played in the struggle of gender bias, the decolonization of Africa and wars of independence. Likewise, the story of Sojourner Truth comes vividly back to our mind for the major role she has played in African-American freedom. In fact, she is one of the pioneers of the nineteenth century *Abolitionist Movement* in America, a great proponent of equal social justice and women empowerment. Even though Truth was deprived of the right to education, she has managed to gift herself with a good grasp of *la parole*, the art of public speaking to make a changed. The interesting point about Truth's story is her smartness to manoeuvre, use her oral talent and challenge White supremacist conceptions and male chauvinism through the power of her own words. In her preaching, songs and debates she extols the virtues of her own aesthetic body, divine power and comeliness heedless of *inferiority complex*, but more importantly questions man's tendency to overemphasize the teaching of the Bible to remain on top:

She wished to compare the teachings of the Bible with the witness within her; and she came to the conclusion, that the spirit of truth spoke in those records, but that the recorders of those truths had intermingled with them ideas and suppositions of their own. (Gilbert, 1997: 64) <sup>[7]</sup>.

It is true that Truth's most valuable asset is her critical stance towards man and his own interpretation of tradition and religion that entangle woman to come in on the ground floor. That is what accounts for the presence of the concept of *counter-discourse* in her most outstanding addresses, a term coined by Richard Terdiman to characterize the theory and practice of symbolic resistance. (Ashcroft and others, 2008:50) <sup>[2]</sup>.

Likewise, the same reinterpretation of the social conventions, restrictive superstitions and cultures appear as *double-colonization* of woman that are to be ruled out. That was the same vigor and dedication some African heroines like Ndatté Yalla Mbodj, the Amazons of Benins, the Women of Ndër and Aline Sitoë Diatta put up against the patriarchal order to reshape the trivial trajectories of women that society defines for them.

Thus if there is an intrinsic connectivity between history, orature and literature, we will easily understand the destructive and reconstructive stances of some writers, especially the « reinvention » of the woman subject in the works of pioneers of African female writers. They come up with a vow to remedy social injustice. Given that some oral traditions and cultures collude to suppress woman, these authoresses' literary works weave their plot from the fibres of traditional and cultural oddities to redress the heresy of man's omnipotence.

In effect, the fact that orature is mostly used as a weapon to extol a man's worth at the expense of woman, female writers are imbued with a sense of commitment to outfix man's feat through the projection of their rhetoric works and transitional female characters. Another good example of women's retort and resistance to stereotypes is *The Book of A Thousand Nights and A Night*, specifically in the tale titled, *The Story of King Shahryar and his Brother*.

The tale evidences women's social commitment and transitional inclination towards themselves. Following the high treason of his wife who commits the suicidal sin of adultery he catches in the act, King Shahryar, the king of the

Islands of India and China, takes the oath to exterminate the women on his land by marrying maidens he slays on the next day in revenge for their unfaithfulness and malice. Shahrazad, the last maiden King Shahryar lives with as a concubine is the epitome of the feisty protagonist as she is indicative of woman's genuine-oral talent that can be used as a ploy to subvert the hegemony of men, female bondage and entrapment:

Shahrazad [...] had perused the books, annals and legends of preceding kings, and the stories, examples and instances of by-gone men and things, indeed it was said that she had collected a thousand books of histories relating to antique races and departed rulers. She had perused the works of the poets and knew them by heart; she had studied philosophy and the sciences, arts and accomplishments; and she was pleasant and polite, wise and witty, well read and well bred: (Burton, 2007:20) <sup>[4]</sup>.

In fact, the comeliness of the tale revolves around the feisty narrator, Shahrazad, who succeeds in digressing King Shahryar and entice him in her daily stories and wonders of the world and, eventually; has born him three children and is condoned to survive and marry him by the power of her sole words. This accounts for the reason why the character of Shahrazad is often heralded in orature as the epitome of the transitional female character that wages a protest against gender oppression based on myths, superstitions and cultures to save herself, her own children and community as a whole. More importantly, her narration is seen as the glue that puts together oral and written expression in modern history:

In due time King Shariyah annoned chronicles and copyists and bade them write all that had betided him with his wife, first and last; so they wrote this and named it The Stories of the Thousand Nights and a Night. (Burton, 2007 :526) <sup>[4]</sup>

Once again, the story of shahrazad evidences the importance of the voice, but also the extent to which knowledge, literacy and wisdom are paramount in the formation of female identity and quest of emancipation. The voice is instrumental in women's empowerment, but it should, firstly, rest on woman's full recognition of themselves, self-worth, knowledge and cultural background the liberating voice should be based on to liberate them.

Likewise, in *Ambiguous Adventure*, the Most Royal Lady strategically uses the same pretext to remind the *Diallobé* family her nobility and power the community should confer upon her and her lineage. When her community is at the crossroad of modernity and tradition and does not know which side to turn on, the Most Royal Lady draws her plea from the high-ranking profile of her family lineage and oral talents to voice the stakes, trials and tribulations that threaten her own people and draws the whistle on the essential need to educate on Western cultures for the sake of survival:

“[W]e must go to learn from them (the White men) the art of conquering without being in the right [...]. The foreign school is the new form of which those who have come here are waging, and we must send our élite there.... (Kane : 1969 :33-34) <sup>[8]</sup>.

Furthermore, in Mariama Bâ's novel *So Long a Letter*, at the climax of conflicts between her two female characters, Aunt Nabou who belongs to a noble family and Aïssatou, a goldsmith's daughter, Aunt Nabou resorts to the same virtues of oral cultures and traditions to remind her daughter-in-law, Aïssatou, of her second-class status and repel the legitimacy of her marriage to her son. The same as most transitional female protagonists in quest of personal growth or reconciliation, Aunt Nabou digs deep in her nobility inking to initiate Young Nabou into her cultural privileges before waging the war against supplanting Aïssatou:

It was especially while telling folk tales, late at night under the starlit sky, that Aunt Nabou wielded her power over young Nabou's soul [...]. This kind of oral education, easily assimilated, full of charm has the power to bring out the best in the adult mind, developed in its contact with it. Softness and generosity, docility and politeness, poise and tact, all these qualities made Young Nabou pleasant. (Bâ, 1981 :49) <sup>[3]</sup>.

The aforementioned passage uncovers that the dearth of cultural identity ultimately sows the seeds of doubts and the feeling of not belonging for the individual, and that cultural self-consciousness is inevitably instrumental in the psyche's good balance for the individual to break loose from any kind of hybridity and mental alienation.

### Conclusion

From the above, we can safely say that the categories of oral cultures, traditions, superstitions and myths are primarily social inventions, defined as a structural code of conduct to quell strained relations between people and to humanize the society they live in. But with the adversity of life, the advent of colonialism and the wind of modernity blowing in the air, a displacement of purpose springs from that unprecedented situation as far as those categories are concerned and their enforcement on the woman subject. Therefore, it becomes crystal clear that the effete perceptions and stereotypes of women that are heard on the grapevine are the sole outcome of patriarchal control, i.e., man's chauvinist and exclusivist nature that yoke together with Western cultures to alienate women. What is more, given the presence of men's celebration of *power superiority* legitimated by *primitive laws* or *unequivocal cultures* in African male writers' literary works, some female writers bring to the fore the same restrictive traditional beliefs in their works through female characterization, specifically woven from the oral legacy their mothers or grandmothers tell them to reconcile with themselves and their communities. As a result, the revival of the female protagonist's cultural self-awareness tilts the balance away from men and allow women to reinvent themselves and act as transitional individuals with a new look on the world around them.

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