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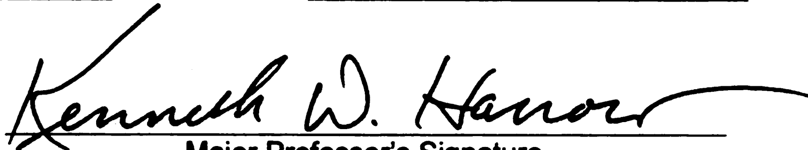

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NEGOTIATING SOCIETAL SPACES: THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN NIGERIAN ORAL LITERATURE

By

Shaina Osaretin Amienyi

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ABSTRACT

NEGOTIATING SOCIETAL SPACES: THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN NIGERIAN ORAL LITERATURE

By

Shaina Osaretin Amienyi

African feminism is concerned with women's impact on political, economic, religious, and social segments of society. A sample of approximately thirteen oral narratives from the Kaltungo region in Northeastern Nigeria and from the southern region of Nigeria, especially Delta and Edo states, reveals that the narratives characterize women as archetypes—daughters, barren women, mothers, old women, and jealous wives. The archetypes and common tropes about women reveal societal anxieties, and the morals of the stories aim to reinscribe societal values by demonstrating the consequences if one does not abide by society's rules. The tales are also about women achieving or attempting to achieve some sort of power, whether in political, social, familial, communal, or economic spheres. They speak to the complex matrix of power that is involved in relations between women and men and women and other women. Further research could compare stories that female and male narrators tell in order to determine if the gender of the narrator affects the anxieties that the stories deal with.

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Introduction

In Ruth Finnegan's influential book *Oral Literature in Africa*, she called on scholars to analyze oral literature like any other literary text. She also argued that "any analysis of African oral literature must take account of the social and historical context—and never more so than in the case of oral literature" (Finnegan, *Oral Literature* 48). Since Finnegan's work, other scholars have performed literary analyses of African oral literature, and they tried to do so without making claims about the society as anthropologists or ethnographers would do.

When analyzing oral literature, one faces the issue of how to analyze a performative body of literature. As Isidore Okpewho reminds scholars,

> so many factors are involved in the delivery of words that to understand the meaning or impact of the words themselves in their proper context, we have to take these factors into consideration [...] oral artists use much more than their mouths to express their words; to consider the effectiveness of the words, therefore, we should examine the usefulness of those accompanying resources where such information is available or can be deduced (*African Oral* 46).

When the oral narrative gets transcribed and translated into written form, there are many elements lost.

Nevertheless, this paper intends to analyze tales taken out of their original context[1] (the oral performance) and focus on the contents of the narrative, while realizing the limitations of not having the intonation, gestures, etcetera. By

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[1] The oral narratives discussed in this paper are taken from four compilations, which were written or edited by the same scholar who collected and translated the tales. See Shoki (1999), Offodile (2000), Jungraithmayr, (2000), and Schaefer (2000). The collections are from the Emai, Tangale, and Igbo ethnic groups, as well as ethnic groups from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

focusing on the narrative content, this analysis differs from that of literary critics and folklorists who, according to Karin Barber, "have taken up a stance which combines a limited contexualisation (the emphasis being on 'performance' and the immediate conditions of performance) with a formalist analysis of texts (with emphasis on the incidence of wordplay, repetition and other literary devices): thus ignoring by and large what the texts actually *say*" (1). This paper is not only interested in what the texts say, but more so what tales from various Nigerian ethnic groups and regions say about women. In the various tales, women are defined by their functions in society and the family—in other words as queens, mothers, daughters, sisters, wives, old women—and must negotiate these positions to acquire a certain level of power.

The majority of the tales to be discussed were collected and told or retold by men, yet they contain an element of African feminism. Diedre Badejo argues that African feminism "recognizes the inherent, multiple roles of women and men in reproduction, production, and the distribution of wealth, power, and responsibility for sustaining human life" (94). Furthermore, she argues it "is always poised and centered in womanness. It demonstrates that power and femininity are intertwined rather than antithetical (Badejo, 94). The tales this paper will analyze are all about women achieving or attempting to achieve some sort of power, whether in political, social, familial, communal, or economic spheres.

Cultural Background

The Tangale people live south of Gombe, Gombe State, Nigeria and are divided into Eastern and Western Tangale. The texts discussed here were collected from 1982-1983 in the Poshereng quarter of Kaltungo, the main city in Eastern Tangale (Jungraithmayr, xiii-xiv).

The Emai people live in the area north of Benin City and between the Edion and Owan rivers in Edo State. Afuze is the principal political village for the Emai, and it is where the tales were collected (Schaefer, 1). Four main storytellers—Chief Ohioze, Mr. Omogafen, Mrs. Omogafen, and Mr. Afengbai—told the tales from 1981-1985 (Schaefer, vii).

The Igbo also live in southern Nigerian (southeastern) near the lower Niger River. Like the Emai, the Igbo are geographically close to the Bini (descendants of the Kingdom of Benin). The Igbo, along with the Edo (Bini), Urhobo, Ibibio, and Ijaw, are the major ethnic groups in the Niger Delta region, which is comprised of nine states: Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo, and Rivers.

From Being Barren to Achieving Motherhood

A common trope found in Nigerian oral literature is of a woman who is barren, which is seen as a condition that must be cured. Children are seen as necessary to keep the society going; a woman who does not conceive is seen as a failure. Few other virtues she might possess make up for not having a child. Some of the tales place a strong emphasis on children by portraying characters who want children from any source or by any means.

For example, "The Calabash Child[2]" starts out with the familiar dilemma of a king who is worried because he has no heir to succeed his throne. His wife, whose role it is to produce the heir, prays for a child. The narrator makes a point to tell the audience that the queen farms her own land, therefore defying social conventions. Already she is depicted as a woman with her own mind, though she still has to answer to societal pressures about childbirth. The king's wife's success with her crops is compared to her ability to take care of a child. When she meets the Calabash child in the fields, the child only agrees to go with her and be her daughter because of her commercial success.

While the king and his wife are not named at first (they are referred to by their role in society), the so-called Calabash child, Onunaeliaku, is. The fact that she is a girl and is still considered a legitimate heir is a unique aspect to the tale, though it does come to be an issue with the characters. The narrator tells us, "Although some people were not happy with the prospect of a female king, they

[2] This version of "The Calabash Child" comes from the Igbo and was told by an unspecified source, and then retold by Buchi Offodile.

had no choice but to rejoice in the good fortunes of their king" (Offodile, 159). The king appears to hold women in unusually high regard. He will not let his daughter marry so that his kingdom will stay in the family.

The servants do not have as high an opinion of the girl as her father does. The way the servants treat the girl reveals some of the class issues within the society. The Calabash Child was not born a member of the upper class, so the servants do not respect her or feel she is above them. They only serve her because the king orders it, and their lives will be in danger if they disobey. However when the king and queen leave, they insult the girl and drive her away.

What sets this tale apart from others of its kind is how the king feels about his daughter. For example, the narrator says,

> Seeing that he had lost his daughter for good, the king's eyes became red with tears, which began to roll down from the corners of his eyes. We all know that it is very hard for a man to cry. The welling up of a man sends goose bumps over all those who see it. And here was not just a man, but a king who had the power to do anything, yet didn't try to force a little girl to go against her will. (Offodile, 161)

For the love of his daughter, the king breaks the stereotype that only a weak man would cry. This moment of tenderness is what makes Onunuaeliaku go back and live with her parents. However this emotional moment is juxtaposed with physical violence. The king orders all servants to be killed, hoping to "restore Onunuaeliaku's honor" (Offodile, 161). By killing the servants he also releases Onunuaeliaku from being a calabash. A spirit told her, "You shall be bound to remain a calabash [...] until human blood has been shed for your sake" (Offodile, 161). The narrator does not give background information to shed light on why the

spirit cast such a spell on her. The more interesting question, however, is why the violence was necessary.

The story ends with Onunuaeliaku becoming the Eze Nwanyi, the queen of the village. The narrator tells how she ruled with compassion and "marked the beginning of female leadership in the village, which has been traditionally ruled by men" (Offodile, 161). The ending continues the pattern of unconventional characters defying stereotypes. Onunuaeliaku does not get a prince because that would mean he would rule the kingdom instead of she, and the narrator wants to emphasize female sovereignty to show that Igbo women did and could still participate in the political sphere.

The Emai have a tale similar to "The Calabash Child." In "A Barren Woman and her Cowife[3]," a woman is insulted and degraded by her co-wives because she cannot bear children. Therefore, when she sees small and large gourds, she asks them to be her children. They agree on the condition that they will not be called gourds, thus establishing a contract between a mother and her children. The woman goes from having no kids to having fourteen, which would surely build her up in the eyes of her husband and co-wives. Tales like this demonstrate that having children, no matter their origin, is better than not having children at all. The emphasis on having children is not about the familial bond that comes from childbirth. Among other things, children are a labor source, as

[3] With the tales from the collection of Emai narratives, it is unclear which of the four narrators told each story.

seen when the fourteen children help the woman on the farm. Because she has many helpers, she is able to reap the economic benefits of a good harvest.

Aside from the desire to be a mother, another common trope in this tale is that of the jealous co-wife, or in this case jealous co-wives. They wonder how the woman could come back from the bush with fourteen children who now help her with her farm work. The jealous co-wives break the dish that the gourd-children eat from. What differentiates this tale is what happens between the mother and the particular co-wife who breaks her children's dish. The mother and the co-wife go for firewood, both armed with knives that they thrust into each other's stomachs. The narrator ends the story saying, "The mother gripped the co-wife's intestines, the co-wife gripped the mother's also, she twisted them, they joined together. They joined as one. Those are two vines which are in the bush" (Schaefer, 819). That the two who previously had animosity end up joined suggests that women should work together and support each other instead of fighting. However, the joining also suggests that discord can lead to harmony, and it teaches the audience to work through issues with another person.

"The Origin of Female Chiefs," another Emai tale, offers another perspective on the issue that comes up in the Igbo version of "The Calabash Child." The tale starts with a man who marries an infertile woman, and then marries another woman because he wants a child. The first wife sabotages the second wife by calling her name at the witches' court every time the woman is pregnant, thus taking the fetus and killing it. The wife that is a witch sabotages the other wife's pregnancy seven times.

After consulting an herbalist and visiting a man who can see the spirit world, the husband and wife get instructions on how to have a child safe from the first wife's magic. The husband is told, "This woman you should give to an elderly woman who is opposite your house. Take your wife to her to care for. In this way she will have a child for you" (Schaefer, 1014). The old woman is also a witch—the leader of the witches. When the first wife goes to the witches' council they penalize her because she did not contact the leader. Therefore, she has to take matters into her own hands and deal with the second wife herself. The old witch defeats her and takes care of the child (a male) until he grows up.

The story carries the moral, "everyone should be doing good things. Don't bear hatred toward another person" (Schaefer, 1017). It goes on to say, "In the time we are now in, a man marries a woman. The woman which he first takes, she does not bear children. When he has taken another one, when this other one bears, her co-wife will start bearing children. This co-wife did not have patience" (Schaefer, 1017). The first wife is able to bear children after her co-wife. She marries a king and has seven children with him. She still has hatred towards Izeloa, the second wife's son. She sends some villagers' children to the spirit-world, and Izeloa goes to rescue them.

The witch hopes he will die in the spirit-world, but Izeloa returns victorious, and to celebrate, the people want to make his mother a king. However,

> Because Izeloa's mother was menstruating, they couldn't make her king. So they decided to make Izeloa's mother a female chief. Izeloa's mother could have been king because indeed her son's actions were impressive enough. Because she was menstruating

> they couldn't make her king. So she became a female chief. This explains the origins of female chiefs today. (Schaefer, 1018)

This story about female chiefs differs from the story where the girl becomes the chief of her village. In this story the woman attains respect and prowess because she has given birth to a son who becomes the hero of the village. It is interesting that she is selected to be king instead of him or his father. She is not a supernatural being. The old witch—who is the reason the boy has the powers he has, including the power to be unscathed in war—is dead by this time. The mother being given the title of chief signifies that a woman is respected. To have birthed and raised such a man is considered very honorable and deserving of a title and all that comes with a title—land, subjects, wealth, etc. The girl in the other tale is an heir to the chiefdom since she is the daughter of the chief. Unlike in the tale discussed above, she receives her title at the cost of human blood. There is no human blood spilt in the Emai tale. Izeola fights with beings in the spirit world, so the violence does not affect the village.

The name of the tale emphasizes that it is a story which aims to explain why there are female chiefs in contemporary society. The audience members would probably be familiar with Benin history since their cities are surrounded by Edo-speaking people. The story has traces of what happened to Princess Edeleyo, the daughter of a fifteenth century Oba (king) who could not ascend to throne because of prolonged menstruation (Egharevba, 76).

The story also discusses how a woman could take the throne. A woman could gain power if she was a daughter of a king because at least then she would

still be of royal blood. It was harder for wives, however, because they were often non-royals. There are documented cases of wives and mothers gaining power in the Benin Kingdom. The title of Iyoba or "Supreme Mother" was a position of "supreme authority and power" (Nzegwu). In fact, "the early Iyoba title was an office with extraordinary powers and duties much higher than its present status of senior chief, that contemporary accounts represent as equivalent in status to the Eghaebho n'Ore or town chiefs" (Nzegwu). The tale speaks to the power women had in pre-colonial era in order to compare the various forms of power women in contemporary society can exercise. The tale also posits childbirth as a way of gaining and exercising power.

The Niger Delta tale "The Envious Wife," narrated by Ahwinahwi Caro O., is a different version of a well-known tale involving barren women. A man or king has multiple wives but none has produced a male heir to the throne. The king consults an herbalist who creates peppercorn that will allow whoever eats it to conceive and birth a male child. The king has a most favored and least favored wife. The least favored is ostracized because despite being a king's wife she is poor, meaning she probably came from a poor family, and does not have anything to offer the household. Amebo, the wife the king likes most, is described as "the stereotyped-beloved wife in African myths" (Shoki, 40). She is also the stereotypical wife who conflicts with others and is in competition with one of her co-wives.

The medicine makes all the wives pregnant, but only the medicine with the alligator pepper makes one of the wives have a male child. All the wives become

pregnant at the same time and go to their parents' houses to have the babies. The poor wife, Inarie, does not have family so she must wonder around and look for a place to have her baby. During her wanderings, she sees an old woman who asks her for help standing up. She is afraid of the old woman, thinking the woman might kill her. When she lifts the old woman up, the old woman "roar[s] like thunder on her and heaven and earth [thunder] back on the old woman" (Shoki, 41-42). The references to thunder, heaven, and earth signify the old woman's spiritual powers.

The old woman essentially adopts Inarie; after hearing of Inarie's problems she takes her into her hut as the other wives' parents do for them. The old woman also serves as protection for the new born child, whom she throws into a magical pot for three months. When he emerges, he will be protected by her magic. Inarie does not know she gave birth to a male, however, and starts to leave before the old woman brought out the boy. Eventually the old woman gives Inarie her son and gives her instructions for getting home. Inarie is told that she "will come across two paths but should not pass the path that is smooth and clean but should pass the dirty road" (Shoki, 43). The significance of taking the dirty road is that Inarie should not expect life to be without complications just because she has a son and the king's heir. Taking the dirty road would remind her of where she came from and how she was poor, but through her child could be made rich. However, she does not take the old woman's advice, which results in consequences. Inarie meets one of her co-wives on the path she takes, and the co-wife takes Inarie's baby and throws it into a river. However, we are

told "the child did not die because the woman gave the child protection that will sustain him in any danger that he will encounter" (Shoki, 43). The child is rescued from the river when he sings out to one of the king's daughters, claiming that he is the king's son.

There must be a test to determine who the boy's mother is, and in this tale the herbalist devises the test—all of the wives will cook meals and whichever meal the son likes will be revealed as his mother. Six of the wives have fancy plates and cutlery for the boy to eat from. Inarie, on the other hand, only has broken plates and a meager meal. This tale calls into question why there is such inequality between the wives. Despite what those in her family and the rest of society think about her, Inarie is the mother of the future king. The boy proves this when he ignores the rich food in fancy dishes and chooses the meager meal with a meager presentation. All of the tales of this sort end with the boy choosing his rightful mother and recognizing her by her cooking. This supports the idea that there is an inherent bond between a mother and her children and that family will remain close. The issue of family members being close could be an issue if some family members go to the cities for work or school. The idea is that children will not deny their parents.

Okpewho discusses a tale similar to "The Envious Woman" but told by Charles Simayi of Ubulu-Uno. Okpewho argues that "the image of a young man raised at the outskirts of the domain becoming poised to succeed to the fabled monarchy is as much a symbol of subaltern wish-fulfillment as of a stress between two political systems" (*Once* 118). He reads Simayi's tale as an allegory

for conflicts between the Kingdom of Benin and surrounding groups. "The Envious Woman" suggests the same tensions. The future king's mother is not a respected member of society so is regarded as an outsider. She comes across the old woman once she leaves the city, which becomes the symbol for order and rules because it is where the monarchy is established.

One can argue that because the old woman lives far from the city, she dwells outside of the rules that govern the society. Before she meets the old woman, Inarie "[passes] through forests upon forests" (Shoki, 41). The forest is contrasted with the town, and the symbol of the forest can be read in various ways. The "forest" or the "bush" could be the realm of dangerous characters and where human and non-human beings live together (Okpewho, *Once* 127). The forest could also symbolize a place where one can tap into one's supernatural powers in order to restore justice and harmony (Okpewho, *Once* 127). The woman demonstrates her spiritual powers when she roars like thunder and the earth roars back at her. The thunder signifies power and authority, yet the old woman has a different type of authority than the king. Her authority challenges the king's because she helps his detested wife, who he at first did not let drink the medicine to conceive, raise the child who would one day take the king's place.

The tale speaks to anxieties about the rich manipulating and controlling the poor or the strong dominating the weak. This is what was at stake for communities that were dominated by the Benin Kingdom. The narrator's name is an Urhobo name, and the Urhobo were one of the groups that came under the

rule of Benin and then migrated from the kingdom in the twelfth century (Ekeh, 11). Such emigration was "most likely discouraged and possibly severely punished [because] the kingdom and empire needed manpower whose consolidation was hurt by emigration of citizens" (Ekeh, 11). This tale uses the idea of a pauper prince to demonstrate tensions involved in challenging the monarchy.

Aside from the historical significance of a tale that ends with justice restored, the tale gives an example of poor people who are not dominated by wealthier people. The audience can rejoice that "the poor and helpless may yet win against the rich and favored [...] while the poor woman who has nothing to wear but her shame and her humility turns out to be the mother of the young man destined to rule the land and everything it holds" (Okpewho, *Once* 118). Read this way, the tale is an allegory of how the Urhobo, at least for a time, escaped Benin rule and remained independent. On the other hand, it can be read as a story to inspire hope by showing a world in which even the underprivileged can gain power.

Old Women: The Case of Nanamudo

Old women, like the one in "The Envious Woman," are in one sense similar to childless women because they are no longer of child-bearing age. The old women are also single women, so their lives are not governed by another person's will, not even that of a child or a husband. As a result, we see old women enter into direct conflict with men, sometimes even physical conflict as is the case with Nanamudo, a character in various Tangale folktales told in the Poshereng quarter of Kaltungo in 1982/83.

Though old women can exist outside of the societal order and follow their own rules, oftentimes old women characters will show up to assist the hero/heroine, using their supernatural powers. Therefore, on the one hand they can defy the established order, yet on the other hand they can use their positions as outsiders to come in and correct a situation (i.e. when someone has been tricked out of getting what he/she deserves.) The trope of the old woman exposes the weaknesses in the social, religious, and spiritual orders even if the woman is not a complete outcast. Old women are not "cast out from the family circle, unless they have revealed questionable traits of character or perpetuated unspeakable acts that automatically disqualify them from continuing to enjoy the fellowship of decent folk" (Okpewho, *Once* 127). Nanamudo, a character in a few tales told by Manga Lakwada, is an example of an outcast who commits unspeakable acts and therefore is feared by others.

In the first tale in which she appears, translated as "Nanamudo and the Groundnut Diggers," Nanamudo is a figure to be feared. For example, the villagers in this tale warn a child to stay away from her, though the child ignores them. Nanamudo is an example of the type of woman who shows up in many tales—the old woman on the outskirts of society who is feared and/or considered to be a witch.

The child that the groundnut diggers order not to go down Nanamudo's path chooses to go down the path anyway. She and Nanamudo develop a bond, as demonstrated by calling each other "grandmother" and "grandchild" and deciding to travel together. When people see them walking together, they question why the girl is associating with Nanamudo. Even saying Nanamudo's name makes people walk faster and leave the girl and her companion alone.

The people's fear of Nanamudo is not explained, but it is justified when she captures the girl, all the groundnuts, and all the people in a sack. This figure is a woman who abuses and disrespects humans as well as nature. As she goes on her journey she encounters various trees—a palm, cherry, and kolgokok tree—but they will not help her carry her sack because she insults them. The thorn tree is the only one that will help. Eventually, everyone in the sack is freed by a group who has not heard of Nanamudo and does not fear her. When she confronts them about freeing her slaves, their response makes it clear that they do not fear her.

The confrontation scene is unique because it seldom occurs in the tales analyzed here that a woman is involved in physical conflict. Here, Nanamudo is not only involved in conflict but is victorious once her enemies' weapons are used up. In this particular tale, Nanamudo has supernatural powers, which she uses to turn some of her enemies into anthills. Mbokaga, one of the men who free the slaves, deceives Nanamudo when "he cut a rope and hung it around his neck (sign of sorrow) [and] he coloured his mouth with red powder (in order to feign sickness)" (Jungraithmayr, 17). They engage in a verbal exchange where he convinces her to feed the anthill. Meanwhile, he told the people in the anthill to grab Nanamudo's tail and beat her with it. His clever trickery leads to Nanamudo's death, yet even in death she is feared. The community draws lots to determine who would sit near her corpse. One would expect the story to end once the main character is dead, but Nanamudo's function in society does not stop at death.

Nanamudo appears in another one of Lakwada's tales, "Kwanga's Child and Nanamudo." Nanamudo is a figure who enjoys playing tricks on children and scaring them, as she does with Kwanga's daughter. She plays a trick on the daughter by hiding in the bushes and imitating the girl, repeating everything the girl says. When Nanamudo presents herself to the girl she has been imitating, she is described as "a tall, lean thing" who makes "the child [begin] to shiver and her bowels [begin] to empty" (Jungraithmayr, 51-52). Nanamudo frightens the girl into giving away all the food she had brought, which Nanamudo swallows. When the girl tells her parents about what happened, she says, "There is something

which causes me suffering" (Jungraithmayr, 53). She says "something" instead of "someone." Later, she uses the neutered pronoun "it" instead of the feminine pronoun "she." This helps to establish Nanamudo as an otherworld being, one who is not fully human.

Nanamudo emerges as a being that can scare children as well as adults. For example, Kwanga goes with his daughter to find out why she was suffering. However, when Nanamudo comes forth, even Kwanga "[begins] to shiver and his bowels [begin] to empty" (Jungraithmayr, 55). His presence does not deter Nanamudo from eating all the food again. When the father drops his spear and shield, she swallows those too. The father is so affected by Nanamudo that he cannot walk "because his legs had become weak" (Jungraithmayr, 58) and his daughter has to carry him. Saying he will accompany his daughter to try to protect her is Kwanga's way of asserting his manhood and fulfilling his role as her parent and guardian. Because of Nanamudo, he cannot fulfill his function; she debilitates him. The daughter and Nanamudo prove to be stronger than the father figure.

The mother, who also confronts Nanamudo to end her child's suffering, is not stronger than the father figure. She is described as helpless when she meets Nanamudo. Just as she is not strong like the other female characters, the father's brother is not weak like the father. When he sees Nanamudo "approach in a lumbering way," (Jungraithmayr, 61) he is not frightened. Instead, he takes action to get rid of her.

Kwanga may have been inept at dealing with Nanamudo, but his brother is able to put a hot stone on her head, causing her to catch on fire. The narrator tells us "crashing down, she came. The fire then killed her off, the fire lifted her and threw her down, breaking together she died" (Jungraithmayr, 63). Once again, the story does not end with her death. Nanamudo's ashes become salt that tastes sweet to only Kwanga's daughter, who continues to eat the ashes. The daughter ostracizes herself by eating the ashes, and she ends up in a lake, then married to a lizard. Even in death Nanamudo wreaks havoc on the family unit. Her character exposes the male characters' inability to completely defeat her. Her figure, which can be described as what Okpewho calls the "liminal old lady," can be read as "an imprint on the mythic imagination of irrepressible [...] womanhood, forever haunting the margins of patriarchal power" (Okpewho, *Once* 134).

Lakwada's next tale that features Nanamudo is called "The Blade of Kwanga." A bird gives Kwanga a marking-knife in exchange for its freedom. Kwanga carves markings into his daughter's stomach, which she shows to Nanamudo when asked. The people of the place all line up to get similar markings, including Nanamudo and an old woman—the last ones in line. That they are last in line can be interpreted as them occupying a subjugated position in society. Both are outcasts for one reason or another. When the marking blade is stolen (by the one-legged, one-armed old woman), they are the last two to be acquitted. When the old woman jumps to prove her innocence, the knife falls out, and Nanamudo swallows it. (Nanamudo's character is always marked by

swallowing something. She is associated with excess consumption, in addition to trickery.) The daughter is punished and not allowed to eat because the knife may have been eaten. In this tale Nanamudo has a daughter who meets Kwanga's daughter. Nanamudo's daughter helps Kwanga's daughter; however Nanamudo still has certain powers, such as the power to will Kwanga's daughter to come and go.

Nanamudo disappears from the tale after Kwanga's daughter escapes with the blade. Kwanga, however, reappears and, similar to the other tale, he is a less-than-perfect father who does not protect his daughter. In this tale, he steals a pot from a woman, then is caught and tied up. Because of this he is unable to fulfill his role as a father, and his daughter must fend for herself. Like the daughter in the previous tale with Kwanga, this daughter rescues him from his potentially dangerous situation. She becomes a song bird that makes Kwanga's captors dance. However, an old blind woman is left to watch over Kwanga because she is not allowed to dance with the others. Therefore, Kwanga goes free and returns home. In the end, Nanamudo and the old woman, who both represent an outside element, are defeated and the familial household is restored.

The last tale of Lakwada's where Nanamudo shows up is "A Man and His Sister." This story starts out with a conflict over the possibility of an incestual relationship. The brother wants to marry his sister, but she replies, "Same father, same mother, how could [we] marry each other?" (Jungraithmayr, 178). The sister is adamant that she will not marry her brother, so she leaves home and

climbs up a tree. Her brother cuts off her legs to get her back. The friend she has been traveling with hoists the sister on her back and climbs a tree, where they stay until some visitors come. The chief of the villagers chooses the sister as his wife and, after much coaxing, gets her to come to his home.

The narrator then tells of an old woman who comes by the chief's house and says, "Oh, the chief has married a leper, no legs, only two arms, both legs are lacking!" (Jungraithmayr, 186). Many villagers were with the king when she chose the girl as his bride. However, only the old woman dares critique the chief's choices. Her opinion is respected because of her age, and as a respected elder she can say things others cannot. The wisdom associated with her age also makes her a voice of reason so he would have to heed her advice. As an outsider and a wanderer, she would have a more privileged position to critique what goes on in the society. Whatever the reason, the old woman has an influence on the chief who thinks "if that woman, that is the eighth, newly arrived one—besides his seven wives—is found a leper, having no legs, then the people will kill him" (Jungraithmayr, 186). Rather than cause trouble for the chief, the girl throws herself down a hill and then meets Nanamudo.

Unlike in some of the other tales, Nanamudo does not function as someone to be feared. Instead, she is helpful and restores order. The girl tells her the whole story so Nanamudo instructs the girl to enter her throat. The girl comes out of Nanamudo's throat with her legs restored. Because of Nanamudo, things are as they were before, except the girl can now legitimately be the chief's wife. Nanamudo's interference, however, is not good for everyone. Because it

appears the old woman has lied to the chief, the chief and the people decide that her punishment is death.

Nanamudo is not a figure who only shows up in one storyteller's tales. She is also featured in "The Hungry Man" told by Ingila Kokde. The tale is about a man who is hungry but has no food to feed himself or his wife. He stumbles upon a horn that beats out food. What is interesting is that the townspeople see his change in fortune and they tell Nanamudo. She is up to her usual tricks; she takes the horns and makes them beat food for her. Then she burns them in the fire so that they only give a little food. The hungry man goes to confront her, and she is described as "very huge" (Jungraithmayr, 267). Even though she is "standing over there, very huge," (Jungraithmayr, 268) the man is not afraid to confront her. Of course she lies about burning the horns, so he challenges her to come to a place to prove her innocence. When Nanamudo gets to the place, only the man's daughter is there.

The daughter has what seems to be a usual reaction to Nanamudo's presence—she "was afraid and her bowels began emptying" (Jungraithmayr, 270). One can question if this particular Nanamudo is the same figure that shows up in Lakwada's tales. However there are certain tropes and characteristics that persist. One persistent trope is Nanamudo's insatiable appetite. She is often associated with excess consumption. For example, when the girl empties her bowels, Nanamudo asks what dropped. Believing the girl's lie that it was food, Nanamudo swallows it. When the girl's urine starts to come down, Nanamudo believes the girl's lie that it is water and she swallows it. Because Nanamudo is a

figure who cannot be satisfied, she asks if that is all that the girl was given. Then, like in some of the other tales, she eats everything the girl has.

This tale has further similarities to "Kwanga's Child and Nanamudo." For example, here the girl gets home and is questioned about why she looks so thin, to which she replies, "There was something in the fields which used to take and eat the food they give her and which is causing her suffering" (Jungraithmayr, 273). The wording is similar to that of the other tale. And as in the other tale, the father sets out to resolve the situation and end his daughter's suffering.

Kokde makes it clearer than Lakwada why Nanamudo is considered to be a frightening, larger than life figure. He describes her saying, "Nanamudo's head was as big as the roof of a house [...] with much hair all over" (Jungraithmayr, 273-274). Unlike Kwanga, this father is able to solve the problem with Nanamudo. He places a smoldering boulder on her head, and while she eats the child's food again, she does not realize that the smoke she smells is coming from her head. Nanamudo dies, and the ashes from her corpse taste like salt.

Like with the previous tales, the story does not end with Nanamudo's death. The women from the town taste the ashes, but the taste only pleases the last girl. Nanamudo continues to be a menace even in death. The girl does not realize she is eating the ashes of a dead woman, so she continues eating. The narrator says the girl "was no longer able to go home. Nanamudo had overcome that child, and she kept her" (Jungraithmayr, 279). The girl is only able to go home after, at her father's request, the townspeople pray to God that the girl be

allowed to go home. She is finally able to move, meaning their prayers have been answered. God is the only one able to fully defeat and override Nanamudo's power. Therefore this tale casts her as a sort of evil spirit, which goes beyond being a deceitful character.

Nanamudo symbolizes a pre-Islamic belief system and is outside of her society's religious system. Consequently she is characterized as an evil spirit who is only rivaled by God; therefore she occupies a high position among those in the spirit-world. The Islamic influence on the tale manifests itself in the dichotomy of God versus Nanamudo, two competing authorities associated with good and evil, rules and chaos, respectively. The type of chaos Nanamudo incites is not desired, thus the audience is implicitly encouraged to embrace Islam. Although Nanamudo as a character is often at odds with members of society and counteracts society's rules, the narrator uses her character to reinforce aspects of contemporary Tangale and Kaltungo culture, such as the Islamic religion.

Jealous Wives and other Conflicts Wives Face

Whereas old women like Nanamudo operate outside of the societal system, and therefore are not much subject to its rules, wives are a part of helping the system run. Wives have specific functions in society, for example maintaining their households. A disruption in the household can translate into a disruption in the community. When wives in a household have friction there are negative effects on the family unit, such as in "The Wicked Stepmother and the King[4]."

"The Wicked Step Mother and the King" is another tale from the Niger Delta region about the ramifications of conflict between wives. In it a king has two wives—one with one son and a beloved junior wife with many children. The first wife "faced a lot of temptation and trouble caused by her mate. Eventually she died" (Shoki, 77). The junior wife tortures the first wife's son just as she tormented the first wife. This woman also controls and manipulates the king to the point where he does everything she says. The junior wife puts the son through many trials, which he overcomes with the help of his mother who hears his cries from the land of the dead. The last trial the son must face is a decree that everyone should bring his or her mother to the king's court, and anyone who disobeys will be killed.

The junior wife easily manipulates the king because he does not think for himself. He does not realize his wife's plan, or that his son cannot possibly bring

[4] It is unclear which narrator told this tale because of difference in titles in the body of Shoki's collection and the table of contents.

his mother. This weakness is his downfall, and the step-mother's downfall is that instead of embracing and caring for the orphan child, she mistreats him as she mistreated his mother. When the dead mother comes back from the grave to save her son's life, she fans a deadly wind that kills all those who came to kill her son, including the king. The dead mother is the one the audience identifies with because she has purer motives. She has been victimized for no valid reason, and even worse, her child has been made a victim. The audience will therefore identify with the mother whose main concern is protecting her child.

Wives are not shown only to be jealous of other wives. Sometimes they are also jealous of daughters, such as in the Igbo tale "Apunanwu" retold by Offodile. A chief has many wives but no children, which he prays for every day. He wonders "why is it that I do not have a child to succeed me when I die? [...] I have done right by my forefathers. I sacrifice to them and observe the laws of the land, yet I have no heir to continue my good deeds" (Offodile, 142). The chief is emphasizing his contribution to his society. The heir to the throne is expected to continue his function and role in society.

His God answers his prayers, and delivers him a beautiful girl made out of the palm oil the chief's subjects were pressing. Much later, one of his wives has a daughter, Nwanma. The problem is "Nwanma's mother was not happy that Apunanwu was always looked upon as Nma's first daughter. Or the fact that everyone was always talking about Apunanwu's beauty, with little mention of her own daughter's" (Offodile, 144). Because of her jealousy, Nwanma's mother will not feed Apunanwu and often unfairly scolds her. The girl has to cook her own

food, but the fire she uses causes her to melt. The chief is distraught, but there is nothing he can do. The tale ends with God decreeing that no one can wish for a child out of an object; children can only come from natural means (though there are many more tales about children who come from objects). The tale reaffirms social values relating to childbirth and human relations. Unlike other tales involving jealousy, the moral is about having kids naturally and not about jealousy. The jealous person in this tale does not learn a lesson, but the audience learns how dangerous jealousy can be.

The moral of "The Jealous Woman[5]," another of many tales about competing co-wives, is indeed about jealousy. Oboriwarekoro-ere and Ebiere are both married to Seidougha, yet he "never wanted to see Oboriwarekoro-ere the first wife, who grumbled, complained and screamed without any positive result other than the husband's hatred which increased manifoldly" (Shoki, 53). Oboriwarekoro-ere consults a doctor to help her gain her husband's favor. The doctor lets her know that he will not do anything to hurt her husband, but he will give her something to earn a good living. This is because "in those days, it was believed that whenever a woman was able to provide all that her husband and her children needed, if she was not loved by her husband, she would be loved gradually" (Shoki, 53). Instead of the idea that the husband should be the provider, the woman is the one expected to take care of the family. If she has the material means to do so, she has a higher value in the eyes of her husband and society.

[5] The narrator is Tebekaemi O.

The doctor gives Oboriwarekoro-ere special instructions so she will become a productive fisherwoman. The plan works because as she becomes more materially wealthy, her husband and children eat well, and her husband spends more time with her than his second wife. This increases the animosity and competition between Oboriwarekoro-ere and Ebiere, who spies on Oboriwarekoro-ere to discover her secret. However she does not know all of the instructions, and Oboriwarekoro-ere discovers that Ebiere is trying to gain their husband's favor back. She tries to spoil Ebiere's attempt and Ebiere ends up in crocodile form with the fins of a catfish stuck in her throat. The villagers find out what happened and pity Ebiere. The narrator tells us "the whole village blamed the husband for not loving the wives evenly, Oboriwarekoroere, for ever going to see a native doctor and Ebiere for being so primitively jealous" (Shoki, 56). The tale ends with the characters learning their lessons and living happily ever after, as one would expect. Not only do the villagers admonish the wives for being jealous and disrupting the harmony of the household and the village, but also they admonish the husband, whom they see as the cause of the whole situation.

In addition to tales about wives put in difficult positions because of their co-wives, there are tales about women who are put in adverse positions because of their husbands and who escape from their situations. In another of Lakwada's tales, "The Chief and His Son," we find a woman determined to be a wife, though she "does not farm, does not prepare food" (Jungraithmayr, 160). Her value as a wife is called into question because she does not farm or cook, yet she is so beautiful all the men want her for a wife. She chooses Daniya, son of a chief, and

would not have another. The chief and his slaves tell Daniya the woman is too good for him. The chief wants the woman for himself, so he asks Daniya to draw water from a well, then traps him in the well.

The chief then tells the woman her husband, Daniya, is dead so she should marry the chief instead. Her answer is silence, and it is said that since that day she "...had been lying prostrate without moving and without saying a word to anybody" (Jungraithmayr, 167). The woman resists the idea that she should be married to someone she does not choose. Not only does she resist if she does not agree with something, but she plans to get her way. She only agrees to marry the chief when she hears Daniya is back. She, not Daniya, creates the plan to get them back together. Instead of Daniya confronting his father, he waits until he knows what his wife has planned. She is the one who tells the king he is betraying his son and then takes charge to set things right again. After she is back with Daniya, she disappears from the story. Only then does Daniya go to see his father. After asking for the people's advice, Daniya kills his father. One could read the two resolutions as gendered—the woman uses her intelligence and the man uses violence. Violence is the only way Daniya can break free of his father's authority over him and get the woman he desires.

Conclusion: The Importance of Narrative Tropes Involving Women

Whether as wives, mothers, daughters, or old women, women appear in every folktale about humans, just as they appear in many written literatures in Africa. Some critics of African literature, folklorists included, have analyzed how women are depicted and have drawn conclusions about how African people treat women based on literary tropes and representations. Salome Nnoromele argues that "The list of evils that scholars accuse Africa of heaping on its women is long" (178). She argues that scholars,

> claim that the African practices of polygamy and bride price degrade women to the status of goods and chattel; that husbands dominate their wives and that fathers dominate their daughters, ensuring a system of perpetual subjugation of women; that girls do not have the same opportunities as boys because they are valued solely for the money that they bring to their fathers through their bride price; that girls have no choice in whom they marry and that sexual relationships are unromantic because fathers sell their daughters to the highest bidder; and [that women are relegated] to the background of social and political decisions in the family and the community. (Nnoromele, 178-179)

These tales, the majority of which are collected and told by men, offer tropes that conflict with the above characterizations of women. The women in the tales discussed are not ruled by their husbands or fathers. The critiques of the polygamous practices are not that the women are reduced to goods, though they are valued by their ability to produce children. The main issue with polygamy, according to the tales, is that it breeds jealousy and competition between women. However it is not the polygamous practice itself that causes this problem. As one of the tales says, if the husband treats his wives equally they will not fight with each other.

These tales also do not imagine a scenario of perpetual subjugation for the women. Happily ever after comes to mean that women get what they want (if those desires are virtuous and not evil or harmful to anyone else) and not what men impose on them. Furthermore, the tales portray women who are involved in the political, social, and economic aspects of their communities. Even women who seem to be marginalized members of their communities, like Nanamudo and other old women characters, contribute in some way, whether through their ashes becoming food or by helping the hero achieve what is rightfully his/hers.

Though the tales depict women who in some way try to achieve power, the tales do not demonstrate a flawless depiction of women. The way the women try to gain power is often through stereotypical means, such as motherhood. One can argue that typecasting women as mothers, wives, daughters, or old women shows a limited way of seeing women. Nevertheless, the women do exhibit agency, which makes complex the issue of how women are represented in literature.

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