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## **Concept of Witchcraft in African Drama and Negative Female Stereotyping in Select Nigerian Plays**

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### **Abstract**

Drama as the saying goes is as old as man. It is an integral part of every human society. The mimetic bodily gestures of primitive man necessitated by the in-adequacies of spoken language gave birth to drama. Drama and theatre have over the ages been appropriated for diverse human purposes. It has at one point or the other of human development or civilisation been a tool for education, entertainment, propaganda, confrontation, opposition, socialisation, mobilisation and therapy amongst other purposes in society. This essay is an exploration of the concept of witchcraft as it is appropriated by playwrights in their dramatic creations. The thrust of the essay is the portrayal of female characters as witches in African drama. The essay is limited to the Nigerian dramatic tradition; it examines three selected dramatic texts: J.P. Clark's *The Wives Revolt*, Irene Isoken Salami's *Emotan* and Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*. All three dramatic texts explore the subject of witchcraft in female characters from three different trado-cultural perspectives.

### Introduction

Since this work revolves around the tripartite concepts of drama, society and negative female stereotyping brief definitions of those three keywords will be given preparatory to further discourse. G.B. Tennyson cited in G. J. Watson's (1988), defines drama as "a story that people act out on a stage before spectators (1). Eric Bentley on his part gives a very compact definition of drama. For Bentley, drama happens when: "A impersonates B while C looks on" (150). Drama to all purposes therefore, is the creative imitation of life, re-enacted for various purposes. Society, according to the Encarta Dictionary: "is a structured community of people bound together by similar traditions, institutions or nationality". Scott and Marshall describe female stereotyping as "those one-sided and exaggerated images of ... women which are deployed repeatedly in everyday life" (242)

In addition to these three key terms, it is also pertinent to briefly define "Witchcraft" and "Witch" to aid our discourse. Ellwood Robert (2008) defines Witchcraft as "practice of magic or sorcery by those outside the religious mainstream of a society, while *The Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary* defines a Witch as, "a woman thought to have evil magic powers (1370). The above terms will be expanded upon in the course of our discourse.

### Concept of Witchcraft in the African Context

The definition of Witchcraft advanced in our introduction is one of the most uncomplicated in a wide array of definitions of the concept, yet it captures the essence of the term. Witchcraft involves the use of magic and powers. Witchcraft like drama is almost as old as the human race, and it is, or was, present in almost all human societies regardless of the light in which various people perceive of it. In addition to 'the use of magic and evil powers', here presented also are definitions of other scholars. John Scott and Gordon Marshall define Magic, witchcraft and sorcery as 'the art of performing charms, spells and rituals, to seek to control events or govern certain natural or supernatural forces' (375). The Sterling Dictionary of Anthropology defines witchcraft as 'an explanation of how or why certain events occurred,' when science fails to offer an explanation (Ram Narayan Das 144). Ellwood Robert (2008) defines witchcraft as 'practice of magic or sorcery by those outside the religious mainstream of a society.

Witchcraft is an art that is located within the religious realm of a society. Religion is a powerful force that moves and shapes a society, it is derived from the Latin noun '*religio*,' which denotes both earnest observance of ritual obligations and an inward spirit of reverence. Religion, defined by Scott and Marshall (560) is 'a set of beliefs symbols and practices which are based on the idea of the sacred and which unites believers into a religious community. Globally, there are two major religions in contemporary times, Christianity and Islam. In between the two however, are whole

gamuts of religions some of which are Buddhism, Hinduism, Scientology, Hare Kristina Paganism, Neo-Paganism and Satanism (Scott & Marshall 560).

Of the above mentioned religions, witchcraft is more closely associated with Satanism or Luciferianism. This association is founded on the medieval premise that “all magic and miracles that did not come unambiguously from God, came from the devil” (Ellwood 2008). This assertion is a direct offshoot of the abhorrence and opposition to witchcraft in the middle ages.

Ellwood in his essay further asserts that: “in societies that lack formal political processes, sorcery accusations are often indications of other socio-economic tensions and conflicts within the society and the killing of accused sorcerers [witches], a form of control through which anti-social people are eliminated and social cohesion enforce” (2008).

Witchcraft in the African concept is a real phenomenon that is almost always indicative of harmful supernatural activities. These activities can best be described as forms of sorcery that are capable of inflicting emotional, psychological, spiritual and physical harm on victims. According to Quarmyne Maakor, “every evil misfortune that is incapable of rational explanation is attributed to witchcraft: (477). He goes further to give two definitions of a witch in the African context as “a person with an incorrigible, conscious tendency to kill or disable others by magical means”, and “someone who secretly uses supernatural powers for nefarious purposes” (477). Quarmyne’s definition of a witch in the African context, sharply contrasts with that of the old English definition of ‘She who casts spells’.

Quarmyne stresses that some of the common notions of witchcraft are that “witches are nocturnal beings that travel at night to remote locations where they cavort with other witches and feast on unsuspecting relatives, causing physical and physiological harm”. He asserts further that while witches may be of any age or either sex, women are the most common targets of witchcraft accusations (478).

Based probably on the biblical injunction of “suffer not a witch to live” (Ex. 22:18), oftentimes, people accused of witchcraft have been persecuted and killed when and if found guilty. That was how grave the crime of witchcraft was in the medieval global society. But in the African continent, Witchcraft is still real even in contemporary urbanised locations. Considering therefore, the gravity of the crime of witchcraft in the African worldview, what would be the purpose of ascribing such an attribute to a woman without proof because in towing Quarmyne’s view, women are the most common targets of such accusations? What would be the motive when such accusations are translated to themes upon which dramatic works are created? The answer to that question may be found embedded deep in the heart of negative female

stereotyping evident in both the physical world and the fictional world of creative writing.

### **Negative Female Stereotyping in Dramatic Works**

Generations after generations across global society and cultures, the female gender has been subordinated to her male counterpart. Most African societies are deeply rooted in patriarchy. Africa is one society where women could be seen but never heard. In such patriarchal societies women are placed in disadvantaged positions which robs them off their voices as they have no say either in the affairs of state (public sphere) or in affairs bordering on their persons, or wellbeing even within her families (domestic sphere). In the words of Paulo Freire women, especially those in developing societies are cowed by cultural practices into the “culture of silence” (Agaku, Jacob Manase 120). Women in the African socio-cultural environment are schooled by their culture into passive docility.

As a natural phenomenon, not everybody can be cast into the same mould, from time to time women who would not be cowed into silence, passivity, or docility emerge. It is this category of women that usually bear the weight of patriarchal derision and venom, because they refuse to conform to patriarchal dictates. It is therefore evident that there are two kinds of women: the passive, docile type and the assertive type of woman.

Since drama does not exist in a vacuum, characters, plots, themes and spectacles are drawn from the societies and cultures of particular dramatists. Creative works, irrespective of genre, are derived from the pulse and rhythm of a society, hence every dramatist writes according to the socio-cultural consciousness of his times. Given the fact that most African societies even in contemporary times are patriarchal, it is to be expected therefore, that the presentation of female characters within a patriarchal system would logically follow the prevailing cultural trends of the society.

In earlier times the field of dramatic creativity was to a large extent the prerogative of male writers. Consequently character portraiture of both male and female roles, were reflective of how the dramatists perceive of the genders in their societies. This situation which may have prompted Irene Salami cited in Agaku to assert that:

The problem appears in drama as a carryover from the larger society. These societies in most parts of the world see women as second class citizens as such their portrayal in most works of literary art is seen in the negative perspective (Agaku 120).

Most of these works of art portray women as weaklings, unfaithful, incestuous, docile wives or daughters. In works where they are portrayed contrary to the above mould, they are usually seen as: vicious, wicked, mad, murderous, demented or demonized.

Rarely are female characters portrayed as calm, rational, progressive minded beings. And this once again, brings us to the crux of our discourse- the attribution of female characters with the diabolical propensity for practicing witchcraft.

From our literature on the concept of witchcraft in the African context, not a single scholar of African Studies advanced a positive or socially tolerable argument for witches or those accused of witchcraft. Therefore it stands to reason that in the African socio-religious clime, witchcraft activities are feared by potential victims, not tolerated by society and a heavy burden on the accused. We ask again as we have done earlier: what then is the rationale for portraying a character as a witch in a dramatic work. The answer we might discover is steeped as is everything else, in the male genders' agenda to dominate the female gender; to successfully and perpetually relegate her to the margins of humanity. It is puzzling to think that, given the gravity and the likely punishment for practicing witchcraft if found guilty, is it an accusation that should be bandied lightly?

#### **Women and Witchcraft in the Selected Plays**

For the purpose of our discourse, thematic analyses of J.P Clark's *The Wives Revolt* (2003) Irene Salami's *Emotan* (2001) and Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* (1972) will be carried out. All three dramatists hail from the Niger Delta extraction of the Nigerian entity. The thematic significance of these three works can provide insights on the seriousness with which such issues are viewed within the religious belief systems of the Niger Delta people. Set in three different tribal locales, the plays replay the lives and experiences of women living in patriarchal societies. From a thematic perspective, *The Wives Revolt* and *Emotan* are similar while *Wedlock of the Gods* with thematic relevance is a sharp deviation from the other two.

*Wedlock of the Gods*, thematically crafted after William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, tells the tragic story of a young Nigerian couple, Ogwoma and Uloko and their ill-fated love which ends with their death. The young lovers are separated when Ogwoma's younger brother fell grievously ill and the only way her parents could raise the money to cure his mysterious ailment, was to marry her out to Adigwu, a man she did not love. Three years into the marriage, Adigwu dies mysteriously of 'swollen stomach'. Adigwu's mother Odibei did not believe her son died a natural death. For Odibei therefore, the perpetrator, according to the "an-eye-for-an-eye" theory, must pay with her (Ogwoma) own life for the death of Adigwu. Odibei's resolve to carry out her threat that Ogwoma must die for killing Adigwu is not an idle one as she is known for her evil supernatural abilities.

In the stage directions of the opening scene, Odibei is described as being "bitter and sad" (5), a lethal combination that can result in dire consequences. In subsequent

scenes, other characters also testify to Odibei's dark side. Ogwoma's friend Anwasia is seen warning Ogwoma, the tragic heroine: "dont forget your mother-in-law ... Odibei is not an easy woman to deal with" (10). To which Ogwoma responds: "I know how wicked she can be" (13). Much later, an irate but very anxious Ogoli (Uloko's mother) while addressing Anwasia, berates Ogwoma for dragging her son into a dance of death. According to her:

Her husband died, but rather than wait and let his spirit return to the world of the gods, she has enticed and dragged my son into an act of death (23).

When Anwasia tried to defend Ogwoma's actions, Ogoli's hot retort was: "Everybody in town knows Odibei. No life is safe in her hands" (23). Odibei herself confirms the fears of everybody when she confronts Uloko with his abominable act: "young man, you make me laugh with pity for you ... one does not play with Odibei like that" (156) from that moment, Ogwoma and Uloko's fate was sealed.

To exert her revenge for Adigwu's death, Odibei nocturnally conjures Ogwoma's spirit directs to go home and drink the contents of a little pot hidden behind Ogwoma's water pot. Ogwoma's spirit form obeys Odibei's command. With her last breath she tells Uloko "Odibei took me" (54). In his pain and anger, Uloko fulfills the biblical injunction "suffer not a witch to live" (Ex. 22:18) by killing Odibei. He also drinks from the pot Ogwoma had drunk from, and dies beside her (56).

*The Wives Revolt* was written in the mold of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*. It narrates the revolt of the women of Erhuwaren, a community in Delta State Nigeria, against the perceived injustice and oppression of the men in the community against them. The genesis of the revolt was in the sharing formula of the money given to the community by the oil company operating in their region as compensation. The revolt may initially have been a show of indignation on the part of the women over how the money was shared between the men and women of the community as reported by Okoro the Town-Crier in his proclamation:

The amount is known by all. This sum after due debate... has been shared out in three equal parts, one going to the elders in the town, the second, to the men in all their age groups and the third ... to the women also in all their ages ..." (1)

Aggrieved by the action of the men in the matter of sharing the money, they responded as women in such situation would. They mobilized themselves and resolved to shirk their domestic and public civic responsibilities. From Okoro the Town Crier's reportage, the women's actions transcended the natural as, according to him:

our good women not content... have taken to harassing the community by all sorts of unpatriotic practices, some even assuming, by power of witchcraft, the insidious forms and shapes of goats to terrorize honest, clean living citizens of our peace loving community (2).

The proclamation does not end there. By way of punishment for charges of witchcraft and to serve as deterrent to any future re-occurrence in the community, Okoro gleefully continues his proclamation:

these wicked activities must be terminated forth with. To stem these evil forces from our society before they take indestructible roots in our blessed soil, it is hereby decreed as a penal measure that as from the first crowing of the cock tomorrow, it shall become an offence for any citizen of Erhuwaren, whether female or male, adult or child, to own a goat whether as individuals or body corporate for whatever reasons ... Accordingly, all good citizens now in possession of the above mentioned creatures shall as from the time of this announcement, take all steps to remove their holding ... far from the confines and precincts of our beloved town failure to do so will attract the penalty of immediate forfeiture of the animals ... to the community ... any member of which shall be free and entitled from that point onward to seize and dispose of the said animal in any manner that he may deem fit without any encumbrance whatever. This is the law of the land. (3)

The punishment decreed by the elders makes a mockery of the seriousness of the offence the women have been accused of. Events that unfold as an aftermath of Okoro's proclamations are dire for the men and women of Erhuwaren. The women totally abandoned their domestic and public responsibilities and staged a walk-out on their families and the community at large. Though the women are eventually brought back home it is on record that albeit falsely, their men folk had at one time, accused them of the practice of witchcraft.

The circumstance leading to the branding of Emotan as a witch tows a similar line as that of *The Wives Revolt*. The play *Emotan* tells the true life story of the conviction and consequent actions taken by the eponymous heroine of the play set in ancient Benin Kingdom of Nigeria. Emotan, the tragic heroine, in the face of apparent injustice to Prince Ogun the rightful heir apparent to the throne of the kingdom, systematically strategised and executed a flawless plan which dethroned Oba Uwaifiokun, the usurper, in order to enthrone Prince Ogun as the legitimate Oba of Benin land.

When Oba Uwaifiokun the usurper, noticed that Emotan was not enthusiastic at his coronation ceremony, he confides in his chiefs (21) who attempts to allay his

fears by dismissing Emotan as “a mere woman who cannot hurt a fly” (21). The king’s fears were however not allayed by his chiefs’ reassurances as Emotan was determined to right the wrongful enthronement of Irughe (Uwaifiokun) as Oba of Benin. The chiefs concocted plan after plan to stop Emotan. Initially they attempted to abduct Emotan and make her a concubine in the Oba’s harem. Emotan resisted and foiled the abduction (22, 41-2).

With the failure of the abduction plan, the men go overboard in their next plan to prevent Emotan from dethroning Uwaifiokun in favour of Prince-Ogun. The chiefs conspire with the consent of the men to call a meeting with the women of the Kingdom at chief Iyase’s house to warn them against fraternizing with or aiding and abetting Emotan who they claimed, is a witch. Overnight, the loving, humble, amiable, Emotan, also known as the mother of all children in *Eki-Oba* becomes a witch.

As is usually the case in patriarchal societies, the women are used against Emotan. At the market the day after the meeting, all the women had to talk about was Emotan:

Iriowen: Were you not at the meeting in chief Iyase’s house yesterday when the chiefs told us and our husbands about how dangerous Emotan is? (56)

Eki: you know they had earlier called our husbands to warn them to control us and ask us to desist from any action that may amount to assisting a witch to destroy the kingdom of Benin (57).

When Imade asks: ‘who is this witch?’ Adesuwa is quick to reply ‘Emotan of course’ (56).

Though the chiefs succeed for a brief while to turn the women against Emotan, she remains committed to her course. Emotan goes ahead, in spite of the many obstacles, to raise an army with which Prince Ogun gains victory over Uwaifiokun and his forces. On winning the battle, Ogun is crowned Oba Ewuare the Great of Benin Kingdom.

In the three plays, we have seen female characters accused of witchcraft. It is pertinent at this point to attempt to determine the rationale behind the accusations of women labeled witches in some dramatic works.

### **Rationale for the Allegations of Witchcraft in the Play texts**

Most parts of the Nigerian society like other African societies are patriarchal. The woman has no voice in any sphere of her existence. At the community level she is not recognized as a human being capable of logical reasoning. At the domestic level, she exists basically to care for the needs and wellbeing of the male members of her family. In the more secularized impersonal urban settings where women strive, out of

necessity to gain economic recognition, they find themselves boxed mostly into such professions as nursing, teaching, catering services, textile factory workers, cleaners, secretaries, fashion designers/seamstresses, hairstylists and other related professions which are corporate extensions of her domestic chores. In effect, even in the formal and non-formal economic arena, the woman still functions in those capacities determined for her by society.

In the Niger Delta region of Nigeria in which the three plays are situated, some negative harmful cultural and traditional practices tend to negate the humanity and worth of the female members of the society. In this region, as in most other parts of the country, women exist under the shadows of the men. The woman is not included in political decision making processes at the communal level. At the domestic level, she is constrained by such negative cultural practices as; early and forced marriages; teenage pregnancies; obnoxious widowhood rites, female genital mutilations, male child preference, high degree of illiteracy amongst other practices. The above practices while evident in both the rural and the urban centres are more obvious in rural societies of the region.

Given the above scenario, any attempt on the part of the women to break free from the invisible chains of cultural incapacitation; any attempt whatsoever to rock the status quo of patriarchy are tenaciously resisted. In *Wedlock of the Gods*, Ogwoma is given out in marriage to Adigwu to save the life of her mortally sick younger brother. Her feelings or happiness or even consent is not sought or considered by her parents before perpetrating the act. Being the typical Nigerian girl-child, she endures a loveless unhappy marriage for three years. With the demise of her husband, she is expected to undergo tortuous dehumanising widowhood rites so young in life.

Rather than completing the mandatory three months of mourning which entails amongst other practices, having to sit on the floor in ashes, she chooses to revolt against a tradition that sees her as less than human. She rekindles her relationship with Uloko her first love and is impregnated by him, a month into the traditional mourning period for a dead husband. The consequences of her actions, was condemnation from society. Her mother-in-law decrees the death penalty for her because she believes Ogwoma had killed Adigwu, her son.

In most parts of Nigeria traditionally, when a wife dies it is a natural occurrence. But when a husband dies, the general belief is that he was killed. The first and possibly only suspect in the eyes of the deceased husband's family is the wife, until proven otherwise. Given the African viewpoint on such issues, it is not surprising then that Odibei concludes that her son was killed by his wife, Ogwoma. And for Odibei, Ogwoma also has to die.

While the tragic heroine of *Wedlock of the Gods* is not accused of being a witch, she is killed through the evil supernatural manipulations and conjurations (Witchcraft) of Odibei, the mother of her dead husband. *Wedlock of the Gods* is different from the other plays in genre and mood.

In *The wives Revolt* and *Emotan*, women are accused of being witches. The women of Erhuwaren are accused of being shape-shifters through the use of witchcraft powers. *Emotan* is also accused of witchcraft by the chiefs of ancient Benin Kingdom. Were these women in actual fact witches? Were the people who accused them of being witches justified in their accusations? What was the overriding motive behind the accusations?

Accusations of witchcraft are common in African societies. Some scholars argue that allegations of witchcraft and the subsequent punishment of suspected witches, if found guilty, serve a social purpose. According to Quarmyne, “the accusation of witchcraft, founded or unfounded, bring suppressed tensions and conflicts within the community into the open and allows for mediation by traditional leaders. It is also argued” he adds that “threats of witchcraft accusation curb anti-social behaviour and provide incentive for people to treat each other well” (482).

Quarmyne’s assertion holds true to a large extent as evidently there was tension in all three communities. The tension in the otherwise peaceful Erhuwan arose from the lopsided sharing formula which results in the women shirking their domestic and public responsibilities. In there was conflict of interest in Benin Kingdom as *Emotan* is convinced that an injustice is being perpetrated against Prince Ogun, the legitimate heir to the throne. On the domestic level, Odibei, distressed by the loss of her son, is in conflict with all the parties she believes to be responsible for Adigwu’s death. Money sharing formula, ascension of Irughe (Uwaifiokun) to the throne of Benin and the death of Adigwu create tension and conflict in all three communities. Odibei’s motive for her supernatural manipulations, while not socially acceptable, is understandable from the traditional point of view. Through conjuration, she actually kills another human being to avenge the death of her son. Expectedly, for taking a life, she loses hers thereby restoring equilibrium in her society.

A critical look at the rationale behind accusing the women of Erhuwaren and *Emotan* of witchcraft reveals that the women of Erhuwaren were accused of ‘assuming, by power of witchcraft the insidious forms and shapes of goats to terrorize honest, clean-leaving citizens...’ (2). The reasons given for the women being accused are (i) the women’s repudiation of the men’s fair and reasonable distribution of the compensation money, and (ii) the women’s refusal to perform their assigned duties (1-2). *Emotan* on the other hand is accused of witchcraft because she refuses to condone the injustice being perpetrated against Prince Ogun.

The rationale deducible from the above discourse is that, to pursue purely selfish agendas, without proof or the pricking of conscience, the male members of Erhuwaren and ancient Benin societies accuse their womenfolk of a 'crime' punishable by death, a crime that they did not commit. To presume that accusing the women of witchcraft was intended merely to deter them then, and in future from demanding justice and equity is not tenable. Rather, it proves that to maintain the status quo of a preferred patriarchal society, the men would go to any length to keep the women perpetually suppressed, docile and voiceless.

### Conclusion

In spite of the efforts of pro-feminist thinkers, scholars, activists, and pro women empowerment groups to create a new social order in contemporary African societies, female subordination, discrimination and oppression persists in many parts of Africa. *Wedlock of the Gods* written by a female dramatist at the dawn of the new wave of feminist movements in this part of the world clings to the old cultural order, even while introducing the new ideology of women's emancipation into a patriarchal society. At that time however, the force of the old ways were still too powerful to shake off, as Ogwuoma in the spirit of the new movement attempts to break away from tradition. Odibei on the other hand holds on to the old religion and cuts her down. In the process, Odibei also loses her life, thereby restoring equilibrium.

For reasons contrary to the principles of equity and justice, in the pursuit of purely selfish ends, and for the perpetuity of patriarchy, the men of Erhuwaren and Benin accuse their women of possessing witchcraft powers. Naturally, because their accusations were baseless and unfounded, truth prevails eventually as Emotan, her army and Prince Ogun successfully dethrones Oba Uwaifiokun and installs Ogun as Oba Ewuare the Great of Benin Kingdom. The women of Erhuwaren who staged a walk-out on their families and community are brought back home, all the obnoxious new laws repealed and restitution made to the aggrieved women of the community.

In the face of discourse in contemporary women empowerment issues, Zulu Sofola with *Wedlock of the Gods* stands at the crossroads between the old and new social order, cautiously pointing towards the possibility of better cultural practices in the new order. J. P. Clark and Irene Salami in their more recent works, employ their brand of creativity to champion the cause of women empowerment as they advocate for equality of the sexes, a level playing field for all, an egalitarian society where peace and justice will be the order of the day irrespective of sex or creed.

There will still be, for some time to come, dramatists who will continue to perpetrate patriarchal doctrines with their works, but as the trend is changing, there will also be more and more dramatists who are, and will continue like Salami and the host

of other pro-womanist writers, to challenge patriarchy in the move for a more balanced egalitarian African society.

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