



Oral Narrative and Cultural Memory: A Critical Perspective on the Male *Self* and Female *Other* in Ayélála Myth

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Abstract: Among the Ìkálẹ̀ and Ìlájẹ̀ in Ondo State, female marginalisation is sustained through various communal agencies considering the patriarchal nature of the societies. Ayélála ritual worship which is one of such societal agencies has been studied from the perspective of the female deity's potency in dispensing justice and in traditional oath-taking with scant or no focus on female displacement in the ritual worship. This study, while utilizing feminist hermeneutics of ritual as theoretical foundation, was structured to examine strategies of female marginalisation within Ayélála narrative myth, with a view to establishing the oral narrative as a platform for the reinforcement of gender ideologies and hierarchy. Certain elements in the Ayélála myth were found privileging men. Through its deployment of conflict and characterisation in plot structure, the Ayélála myth foregrounds male hegemony, a gendered social memory and the legitimisation of negating stereotypes against women. As part of its finding, the study shows that, the narrative in various renditions, while serving the function of the Ìkálẹ̀ and Ìlájẹ̀ collective memories of a completed past, invariably undermines the place of women in the historical trajectory of the people.

Keywords: Ayélála; power; narrative strategy; ideology; gender otherness

1. INTRODUCTION

Quite phenomenally, the subtext of gender and its allied manifestations have remained a most contentious site given its predominance in all cultures stemming from human evolution. Understandably so, gender relations have seen a constant and continued (re)negotiation with shifting alliances and re-definitions. For a long while, gender relations became repeatedly captured through the prisms of religion, culture, collective perception and the social environment. In the opinion of Emenyi (2005: p.36), "human life is structured in relation to the aspirations and expectations or constraints which the society designs for the two sexes." Such role constructs delved into the subconscious of the individual eventually surfacing in presupposed responses to life's realities. The current study also implicates the symbolisms that accompany the socio-cultural context of gendered power relations. This is because, within the locus of genders powers, forms and appearances produce both assumed and understood meanings with often systemic implications.

The polarisations occasioned by society's prescriptions structured the roles into a rigidly 'acceptable' male *self* and female *other*. Oniemayin (2010) has argued that within the traditional past "the woman was expected to be contented with her traditional role of home making, child minding and providing satisfaction for the husband, who is the total head of the home, and the important others whose satisfaction or not can determine her continued stay in the husband's house" (p. 143). Such expectations not only limited the aspirations of the female but provided a long-held cocoon within which her overall existence was grotesquely guaranteed.

In broadening an understanding of these realities, the present study situates and examines the worship, ritual performances and the historical evolution of Ayélála (a female deity venerated among the Ìlájẹ̀ and Ìkálẹ̀ people in Ondo State) and the impact of such worship on gender space and power relations among adherents. Today, the Yorùbá sub-groups known as the Ìkálẹ̀ and Ìlájẹ̀ are majorly found in Ondo State. The Ìkálẹ̀ are largely found in Okitipupa Local Government Area of present-day Ondo State. Ìkálẹ̀ communities comprise Igbinsin-Oloto, Ode-Aye, Erinje, Idepe, Ikoya-Ìkálẹ̀, Osooro, Omi, Ode-Irele, Igbodigbo, and Ayeka. Osooro is made up of communities such as Igbotako, Iju Odo, Ilututun, Iju-oke, Omotoso and Erekiti. The Ìlájẹ̀ are regarded as a clearly different, migratory (coastal) group and are prominently domiciled in Ìlájẹ̀ and Ese Odo local government areas of Ondo State.

2. HIGHLIGHTS FROM EXISTING LITERATURE

Existing studies have authenticated the famed potency of the deity among adherents; however, the ritual worship throws up an interplay of gender dynamics and power relations worthy of interrogation. Despite the female subject (Ayélála) which became the sacrificial lamb and the eventual entity of worship, there is a deliberate male arrogation of the ritual space and the perpetuation of the silence of the female ‘other’ within same ritual praxis. This provides the basis for the present study.

Also, Erinoso *et al* (2020) has shared the opinion that, apart from having common boundaries, “the Ìkálè and Ìlàjè people share some ethnic attributes with appreciable cultural affinities” (p.3). These shared cultural correspondences and ethnic characteristics between the Ìkálè and Ìlàjè people are noticeable in their socio-cultural leanings and religious peculiarities. These realities have formed the basis for the present study. Among the Ìlàjè and Ìkálè, the worship of Ayélála, a female deity, occupies a centrality that guides not only their epistemology but also reveals the dynamics of female marginalisation among them.

While discordant narratives seem to yet subsist on the ontology, rise and deification of the goddess, available oral and written accounts are united on the gender of the deity: a woman. In detailing the efficacy of the deity’s power, Awólalù (1968) posits that the cult of Ayélála arose out of the vicarious sacrificial compensation of the life of an Ijaw slave woman, killed in substitution for the atonement of the sin of an adulterous and runaway Ìlàjè man.

Continuing, he adds that, as a scapegoat, the slave woman was made to bear the consequences of the sin of another who had run to take asylum among the Ijaws: an act which caused serious disaffection between the Ijaws and the Ìlàjès. While being sacrificed, the slave woman, in great pain and anguish, could only mutter the words “Ayélála”, meaning “the world is incomprehensible” or “the world is a mystery”. From then on, Ayélála became the name by which she is known and called.

A more comprehensive account of Ayélála’s emergence was provided to this researcher in an interview with a foremost Ìlàjè traditional ruler in Ese-Odo Local Government Area of Ondo State. This account of the ontological foundations of Ayélála is what is generally held among the Ìlàjè people in Ondo State.

In an interview¹ with an Ìlàjè traditional ruler, the Alaboto of Aboto, Mahin Kingdom in Ese Odo Local Government Area of Ondo State, 63-year-old Oba Beniah Adeola Ìdogbè, while tracing the historical trajectory of the deity, explained that there were frequent fights between the Ijaw-Apoi people (led by Agbeleki, leader of the Ijaw-Apoi) and the Ìlàjè people (led by Ìdogbè, leader of the Ìlàjè).

The Ijaw-Apoi people recognising their defeat in one long battle decided to sue for peace. They met with the Ìlàjè people at a point where three paths crossed. The Ijaw-Apoi people decided to go into a covenant with the Ìlàjè people so that the fighting would come to an end. A slave woman was brought. The slave woman, who became the symbol of peace, the propitiation of atonement and the basis of covenant between the Ìlàjè people and Ijaw-Apoi people, as Oba Beniah Adeola Ìdogbè recalled, was already gasping for breath while being sacrificed. According to him, in pain, desperation, she shouted ‘Ayélála!’ The expression is Ìlàjè. It means ‘this world is large and incomprehensible.’ She died a most gruesome death.

However, among the Ìkálè people, despite areas of convergence, there is a slant in the narrative of Ayélála’s rise and deification. In an interview conducted by this researcher on June 9, 2020, an Ayélála priest, in Igbotako, 57-year-old Ugbehinayeejumo, hinged Ayélála’s death on betrayal, while also asserting the potency of the deity. According to him, there was an innocent woman who was caught in the middle of some disagreement which led to a war. She knew nothing about any of the allegations that led to such war. She was very angry; she was bitter. She was forced to atone for what she knew absolutely nothing about. This feeling of grievance and a deep sense of injustice drove her out of her immediate community. She walked away and interred herself. While doing so, she shouted ‘Aye yi o ma lala o’ (the world indeed is big and incomprehensible). It was from the point where she interred herself angrily that she began to visit vengeance on the wicked and perpetrators of evil.

¹ Conducted by this researcher on June 8, 2020

While establishing the gender dynamics within the ritual process, Balogun (2013) has argued that cultural heritage and social vision are deployed as instruments through the exploration and utilisation of ritual imagination and folklore. These further account for the semiotic interpretations well nuanced in the discursive formation of gender roles. Foremost African female dramatists who utilise ritual as basis for literary imagination are Ama Ata Aidoo and Zulu Sofola. Their male counterparts include J.P. Clark, Wole Soyinka and Ola Rotimi. Ayélála possesses the accoutrements (plot, characterisation, language, instruments, etc.) of a ritual text/drama. The performance-oriented nature of the Ayélála worship therefore provides that interface between ritual and drama/theatre.

3. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND DIRECTION

Given its gender textual imports, this study clearly establishes its theoretical posture in feminist hermeneutics of ritual. Feminist hermeneutics recognises role complementarity in many African traditional religions. It does this with caution. Masenya (1995) while outlining mutuality and equality as the basic principles of feminist hermeneutics argues that despite the recognition of the strong presence of complementarity as seen in the creation narratives of many African traditional religions where both male and female energies coalesce to ensure cosmic balance, there are fundamental inequalities on the basis of gender. Sharing Masenya's stand, Dube (2012) in "Postcolonial Feminist Perspectives on African Religions," states that prevailing research on gender constructions among African indigenous religions does not imply a single sex gender arrangement that completely sidelines and eliminates women from economic, political and spiritual powers. Dube also affirms that the two co-exist but with a lot of indication about patriarchal efforts to usurp power from the matriarchal divide.

4. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The present study is the outcome of an emic research. In other words, the researcher had the uncommon advantage of cultural membership of the societies under examination. Data for this study largely derived from ethnographic research which includes structured and semi-structured interviews and direct observation of Ayélála ritual practice during fieldwork among the Ìkálẹ̀ and Ìlájẹ̀ sub-ethnic groups of Ondo State. The researcher was able to reach a number of cultural actors who served as key informants, consultants and field guides. Hence, the authenticity of data was assured through well-guided quality assurance underscored by the trained capacity of the researcher.

5. DISCUSSION

The analysis that follows is therefore descriptive and interpretive, highlighting the discrete aspects of the data and their implications for oral literature, ritual performance, gender politics and the nuances and subtext of power contestations between the male and female sexes in the context of Ayélála rites, rituals and gender relations.

6. ÌKÁLẸ̀, ÌLÁJẸ̀ WOMEN AND GENDER ROLES

Just as in many traditional African societies, Ìkálẹ̀ and Ìlájẹ̀ communities in Ondo State have not only evolved but sustained a patriarchal structure which has gained ascendancy, well into modern times. This reality permeates their social structure and it is reflected in their lived experience, namely in the context of religion, in cultural expression and creative diversities, as well as artistic vision. In his interrogation of African culture and the status of women, Familusi (2019) further highlights the idea that the Yorùbá nation, like many other African societies, is essentially patriarchal where men are more privileged than women. Ubrurhe (1999: p.82) has described such societies as "characterised by male super ordination and female subordination."

While there are arguments on role complementarities between the genders in traditional Yorùbá communities, patriarchy is recognised as defining the core of these societies. Within the corpus of oral traditions of these Yorùbá societies, noticeable among the Ìkálẹ̀ and Ìlájẹ̀ people, the agency of the family unit, complemented by that of religion, commerce and the distribution of wealth, not only celebrates the male gender but also regulates social expectations from women. Gender roles, therefore, in Ìkálẹ̀ and Ìlájẹ̀ communities, are based mainly on the people's customs and religious prescriptions.

In her assessment of the gendered history of the Ìkálẹ̀ and riverine folks of Ondo communities which include the Ìlàjẹ, Adesina (2017) asserts that the social foundations of their history highlighted the fact that economic activities were conditioned by kinship, age and sex. Women had the domestic burden of the home and also participated in fishing, farming and processing of food crops. Among the Ìlàjẹ people, female expectations have always been guided and re-directed by the overarching patriarchal system despite the Ìlàjẹ woman's commitment to family, adaptive skill, and sense of industry.

While it is indeed true that both Ìkálẹ̀ and Ìlàjẹ women hold chieftaincy titles and other positions among their people, there are however institutionalised restrictions to their ambitions. Female expectations and the larger gender labelling have always been expressed and encapsulated in their belief systems. Adesina (2010:p. 44) informs that these belief systems "became ritualized in various institutions which took on more than local significance by constituting a powerful influence in keeping alive the spirit and traditions of the whole group." Even religious cult followings are used to reinforce gender categorisations and practices. Ayélála ritual worship, therefore, falls within a structural framing of this nature.

Female social expectations among the Ìlàjẹ and Ìkálẹ̀ are woven around stereotypes and are given structural regularity. Women are hampered by multilayered expectations. For the man, the birth of a girl-child casts a shadow of a missing virility, which is part of the society's bases of manliness. The girl-child is raised to be a good daughter to her father, a passive, subservient wife to her husband; a mother to sons, and also an economic property. Her existence and ambitions are tied to a male nomenclature and measured in terms and by standards that are delicately masculine. Even in instances when she assumes leadership positions within religious, economic or social circles, this is done with caution. It must be within the ambit of social recommendations approved by a predominantly male domination.

7. AYÉLÁLA: RISE, DEIFICATION AND ORAL TRADITION

Before the advent of the written text, the Ìkálẹ̀ and Ìlàjẹ people had structured their worldview, mores, laws, religion, culture and epistemology. Available oral tradition which includes ritual performance, orations, festival dramas, recitation and chants, folktales, riddles, songs, epic narratives, proverbs, myth and legends, among other shared productions, still authenticates the veracity of the belief systems of Ìkálẹ̀ and Ìlàjẹ people.

The rise, deification and modern-day worship of Ayélála among the Ìlàjẹ and Ìkálẹ̀ people find an enduring relevance in Akporobaro's (2012) definition of oral literature when he elucidates that oral literature is the unwritten traditions of a nation, their religious beliefs (in this regard the ritual worship of Ayélála), stories, myths and legends which express the artistic life and moral beliefs of the people.

It is significant to mention that, within the performance of Ayélála ritual worship, the people's oral compositions, with great artistic integrity and oratorical merit, are imbued with their history, mores, religious beliefs, values and validation, and also gender relation. These performative and semiotic features, which have survived into contemporary times, form the very staple of the present research.

Available oral and written opinions on Ayélála have traced the trajectory of the evolution, worship, rejuvenation and present spread of Ayélála ritual worship among the Ìlàjẹ, Ìkálẹ̀, and Edo people of Nigeria. However, not much attention has been provided to creating a broader understanding of female marginalisation in the ritual worship of the deity. The spiritual prominence of the deity in the adjudication of criminal justice and morality has been explored in earlier studies (Awólalù and Dopamu, 1979; Akhilomen, 2006; Jemiriye and Akinola, 2007; Ehinmore, 2010; Oladosu, 2010; Atolagbe, 2011; Oviasuyiet *al.*, 2011; Ajetunmobi, 2012; Afe, 2013; Idumwonyi and Ikhidero, 2013; Ojo, 2014; Bamgbose, 2017; and Soetan, 2017). Nonetheless, Baarda (2016), Ikeora (2016) and Moller (2017) have, through their studies, established the role of traditional religious belief systems, with particular reference to Ayélála ritual worship, in the perpetration of human trafficking and sexual exploitation. However, not many of these studies gave specific focus to broadening the understanding of gender space and power relations in Ayélála ritual worship. The present study intends to fill this gap, considering the fact that the myth of Ayélála is steeped in gender politics enacted through the sacrificial death of a woman who lost her life in a rigidly patriarchal African traditional setting.

In examining female marginalisation in Ayélála myth, the study employs insights from feminist hermeneutics of ritual. The ritual textuality of Ayélála worship is analysed in consonance with the theoretical postulations of feminist theorists such as Dube (2012), Frankenberry (2005), Tamale (2014), Masenya (1995), and Schaab (2001). Basically, feminist hermeneutics of ritual is a model of feminism. It enables the interrogation of the vital creation of religious meaning in avenues that represent the complexities which people the experiences of the female gender in her struggle against patriarchy. Ayélála ritual worship, within its praxis, arrogates all the trappings of a religious leaning which seeks an interface with the supernatural. Like all other religions which man subscribes to, Ayélála ritual worship, though a product of an oral tradition and a completed past, finds efficacy and potency from the domain of its adherents. Therefore, feminist hermeneutics of ritual, within the confines of the present study, suggests ways, in which gender as an analytic category can challenge, enrich and inform “the methodological and substantive assumptions of philosophy of religion” (Frakenberry, 2005: p.5).

8. AYÉLÁLA ORAL NARRATIVE AS GENDERED SOCIAL MEMORY

Mythic narratives often serve as vigorous tools for collective recall and social memory. Encapsulated within such narratives are the socio-historical processes of the people from which they emanate. These narratives celebrate individual chivalry, tell the vagaries of warfare, plot the vicissitudes of the people’s migration, eulogise communal personages, demonise infractions, commemorate victories and triumphs, and (re)inscribe acceptable norms and expectations of which gender, class and sex are crucial. Ong (1982) declares that narratives in oral cultures assume a pivotal role of functionality and “because of their size and complexity of scenes and actions, narratives of this sort are often the roomiest repositories of an oral culture’s lore” (p.140). Yet, White (1978: p. 91) warns that histories ought never to be read as unambiguous signs of the events they report, but rather as symbolic structures and extended metaphors. Therefore, implicitly woven around Ayélála itself is a system of historicising the people’s past, settlement and nationhood, apparently in the absence of a formal system of chirography/writing, typical of an oral or preliterate culture.

In its various renditions, the Ayélála narrative, while serving the function of the *Ìkálẹ̀* and *Ìlájẹ̀* collective memories of a completed past, observably undermines the place of women in the historical trajectory of the people. In an interview conducted by this researcher, the Alaboto of Aboto, Mahin Kingdom, Ese Odo Local Government Area of Ondo State, Oba Beniah Adeola *Ìdogbẹ̀*, in his *Ìlájẹ̀* rendition of the Ayélála narrative, makes no mention of any role played by women in the victory recorded by the *Ìlájẹ̀* against the *Ijaw-Apoi*. Rather, the narrative only celebrates the doggedness, wisdom and chivalry of the male protagonists in the story. Two male personages feature prominently: *Ìdogbẹ̀*, the leader and war hero of the *Ìlájẹ̀* people and *Agbeleki*, the leader of the *Ijaw-Apoi*. According to the narrative, *Ìdogbẹ̀* is lionised. There is a deliberate use of anastrophe by the narrator. Anastrophe, as a literary device, engages the re-ordering of the subject, verb and the object. In the third line, the subject, *Ìdogbẹ̀*, is preceded by descriptions/adjectives: ‘strong,’ ‘wise,’ and ‘exemplary’ which show strength and emotional resilience.

Ó lágbara, ó lógbón lóri dáadáa, bẹ̀ẹ̀ ló	Strong, wise and having all
sì tún ní gbogbo àmúyẹ̀ tí aṣiwájú rere	the qualities of an
yẹ̀ kí ó ní , gbogbo ènìyàn ló fẹ̀ràn	exemplary leader, <i>Ìdogbẹ̀</i>
<i>Ìdogbẹ̀</i> , tí wón sì tún ní àgbẹ̀kẹ̀lẹ̀ nínú	was loved and trusted by
rẹ̀.	all.

The syntactic reversal wherein the adjectives play anticipatory role for the subject is done to achieve dramatic impact. It further lends weight to the depiction furnished by the adjectives. The Ayélála narrative as a social memory of the people’s past also foregrounds the role of men in the preservation of communal dignity, honour and territorial integrity.

It also announces the critical gender space accorded women within the social memory of the people. Quickly following the impressive and dominant descriptions accorded the male protagonist, *Ìdogbẹ̀*, within the historical trajectory of the *Ìlájẹ̀* people, the narrator announces the unrecognised place of women within such history. It (re)inscribes such enfeebling labeling on women. The narrator recollects:

Wọn kó fààyè gba àwọn obinrin ní irú àwọn ibí yí. Ogun jíjà kò wà fún obinrin. Ilé ni obinrin máa n jókòó . Bí ó ti wù kí irú obinrin bẹ̀ẹ̀ ó lágbara tó , ohun tí ó jẹ̀ ojúse rẹ̀ jùlò ni kí o ti bojú tó itojú ọkọ àti àwọn ọmọ rẹ̀.

Women were not allowed in such places. War was not a place for women. A woman's place is at home. No matter the strength a woman possesses, it must be used in furthering the welfare of her husband and children.

In preliterate, oral cultures, conflicts and wars were fought and won to, among many other motives, sustain and enlarge territories, increase personal and communal wealth, and immortalise one's lineage. Within the narrative, women hold no place in the social memory of the people; they are regarded and retained solely for their reproductive roles in childbearing, as caregivers and minders of their husbands' estates. Tiffany Myrdahl (2019) opines that gendered space refers to the myriad ways in which space in all its forms—material, discursive, metaphorical, emotional, and the like—is produced by and productive of gender norms and relations. The female, within the narrative, only occupies the slot that such societies prescribe, even in the psychosocial space of communal history.

Even among the Ìkálẹ̀, the Ayélála myth, while saluting the vicarious sacrifice of the female protagonist (later known to be Ayélála), pitches the female protagonist against her gender kind. Fifty-five year-old Chief Ugbehinayeejumo who is a foremost Ayélála chief priest in Igbotako, an Ìkálẹ̀ community in Okitipupa Local Government Area, in an interview by this researcher, on June 28, 2020, provided the Ìkálẹ̀ version of the myth. While historicising that past, the narrative vilifies the role that women played in the emergence of the Ayélála deity. Chief Ugbehinayeejumo informs:

Obinrin ló ọ̀kúnfà ikú Ayélála . Ìwà ọ̀dàlẹ̀ àti ètàn tí ó fa ibínú àti ikú rẹ̀, ló fi di òrìṣà àkúnlẹ̀bọ . Wọn kò fààyè gba obinrin láti jẹ̀ olùbọ Ayélála . Àwọn obinrin burú gan-an nípa isẹ̀ ibi ọ̀wọ̀ wọn, èrò ọ̀kàn wọn lópò igbà kí dára . A gbódò máa bèrù àwọn obinrin nítorí wọn burú jái.

Women were responsible for the treachery that led to Ayélála's death. That painful instance of female betrayal and deceit which led to her anger and death, eventually culminated in her deification. Women are sinister; their intentions are not usually noble. Women should be feared because they are vile.

Deflating invectives like 'sinister' and 'vile' confer on women an ignoble presence in the socio-religious history of the Ìkálẹ̀ people. The narrative takes the female disparagement further when it foregrounds the stereotypic coloration of women as only being capable of playing the role of wives and mothers with their evil machinations against the male folk.

Obinrin kòòkan ló ní agbára búburú . Wọn sì máa n lo agbára yí lórí ẹ̀nikẹ̀ni tí wọn bá gbà gégé bíi ọ̀tá. Olódumarè ló fún àwọn obinrin ní agbára òkúnkùn yí , ní pàtàkì jùlò agbára orí ahán wọn . Obinrin lè sọ ọ̀kọ̀ rẹ̀ di olówó nípasẹ̀ agbára inú afẹ́fẹ́ tí ó ní, tí obinrin m̀ìràn sì tún lè lo agbára tí ó ní láti sọ ọ̀kọ̀ rẹ̀ di onígbesè. Ọ̀pọ̀ ọ̀kúnrin ló ti di akúretẹ̀ látàrí agbára òkúnkùn tó ti sodo sára àwọn iyàwó wọn. Orí wa kò ní jẹ́ á ní àwọn obinrin búburú gégé bí iyàwó . Irú àwọn obinrin báwònyí wà káàkiri.

Every woman is maliciously powerful. They possess such malevolent disposition to those they consider enemy. The Supreme Deity gave women spiritual powers particularly on their tongue. A woman can, through her cosmic powers, enrich her husband while another woman can be the spiritual source of indebtedness for her husband. Many men have been ruined by the malevolent spirit resident in their wives. May we not be unfortunate to have evil women as wives. This kind of women can be found all over the place.

Such depleting imagery of women in the Ayélála narratives has been known to be shattered even within oral histories and cultures. Women, like their male counterparts, have played corresponding roles of bravery and courage in the development and emancipation of their immediate environments. Such realities are adequately represented in the literary renditions of historic Yorùbá women.

In *Madam Tinubu: The Terror in Lagos* (1998), the dramatist, Akinwumi Isola reawakens the historical Madam Tinubu who not only confronts the colonial stranglehold but challenges the permissive African elite and an irritatingly submissive traditional institution. Also in *Efunsetan Aniwura: Iyalode Ibadan* (2005), Akinwumi Isola re-enacts the courageous life of the eponymous Yorùbá heroine who was audacious and whose reach encapsulated Ibadan's economic, political, military and religious spheres. Femi Osofisan (1982) and Segun Ajayi (2007) in their artistic recreation of the Mòremí myth celebrate the life of the Ife queen who put her life on the line to secure the freedom of her subjects.

In essence, while the Ayélála myth among the Ìkálẹ̀ and Ìlàjẹ̀ people records a disenchanting, uninspiring place for women in the social, collective memory, available historical accounts indicate the significant roles women played in the historical evolution of their domains.

9. AYÉLÁLA MYTHS AND POLITICS OF NARRATOLOGY

In the two communities purposively visited (Igbotako and Igbokoda), both chief priests of the Ayélála deity and traditional ruler informed the researcher of the masculine sole ownership of the repertoires of the Ayélála myth. In essence, women are not only dissuaded from narrating the myths, they are regarded as lacking the adequate historical knowledge of the evolution, emergence and operations of the deity and therefore could not be consulted whenever the need arises. Therefore, only the male folks represented by the chief priest (male) and the traditional ruler (male) have communal permission and authorial exclusivity to relate the myth. In essence whoever controls the people's history and its language also controls the overarching cultural modes.

History and its vehicle of expression, language, become veritable instruments for dominance and repression, as Spender (1982: p.52) contends: "historically, women have been excluded from the production of cultural forms, and language is, after all, a cultural form—and a most important one. In fairly crude terms, this means that language has been made by men and that they have used it for their purposes. Such male hegemony already announces the obliteration of women in the ownership of the Ayélála oral narrative. Culler (1997: p.89) puts this succinctly when he asserts "to tell a story is to claim a certain authority, which listeners grant." Narratives imbue the narrator with some form of power.

Within the Ayélála myth reside three major building blocks with their subcomponents upon which the narrative is constructed and it is equally important to discuss how these components relate one with another in foregrounding gender space, power relation and the displacement of women. The cadence of the Ayélála narration encapsulates character variation, point of view, plot (linearity, suspense and conflict) and the eventual precipitation into an ideological resolution.

10. CONFLICT

One of the crucial elements which drive and sustain the rise and fall of the audience's interest is the ability of the narrator-performer to weave ideology around conflicts and the creation of suspense within the plot structure. Conflict is an essential component of plot.

The Ayélála oral narrative is propelled by conflict. An almost intractable crisis breaks out between the Ijaw-Apoi and the Ìlàjẹ̀. Importantly, the narrator begins his story by announcing that this crisis is responsible for the emergence of the goddess. It is within this conflict that the audience encounters the personalities of the various characters. While conflicts drown static or flat characters, they bring out the desirable human qualities in the protagonist. The protagonist/hero/heroine is not driven by the tumultuous wind of the conflict but rather benefits from it.

However, the prominent characters who people the conflict which propels the Ayélála oral narrative are men. One of them, Ìdogbè, is draped in masculine magnificence. More so, the Ayélála oral narrator not only celebrates the male protagonists, he announces that war (conflict) is no place for women. Women are sidelined in the narrative. The story reeks of feminine ineptitude and conditioning. The female gender is tamed. The home is her world; her husband is her master; her skills, irrespective of its larger, communal relevance, must only serve the preferences of her husband. She is commodified; though owned by her husband, she owns nothing. She draws her existence from the predisposition of a male-guided society. She lives to please her husband, mind his estate, warm his

bed, and bear him children. She is compelled to learn these communally-induced realities and by extension, ensure the performance of her roles. Her identity is reflected in the gender space that she is allotted. Within such allocation, she daily re-enacts her socially prescribed duties and responsibilities. Her individuality derives from a phallogocentric order. Since her abilities are limited, she is therefore regarded as the lesser of the two genders.

With such ideological stance, the woman is deliberately disallowed from exploring opportunities and acquiring skills other than those that the patriarchal society imposes on her. War is the domain of politics, and by this narrative, no woman is expected to venture into it. War brings glory, economic power and prestige. Since it is believed to be the domain of men, it therefore excludes women.

The thread of gender prejudice against women is also largely reflected in the Ìkálẹ̀ variant of the Ayélála oral narrative. Even when the protagonist is a female character, the participating audience is also confronted with a barrage of skewed images of women. Unlike the Ìlàjẹ variant of the Ayélála narrative, women people the character landscape of the Ìkálẹ̀ variant. While the conflict between the central male characters in the Ìlàjẹ variant of the narrative is resolved emanating from the vicarious death of the female slave (eventually named Ayélála), this is not the case in the Ìkálẹ̀ variant of the narrative. The Ayélála chief priest, Ugbehinayeejumo, while rendering the Ìkálẹ̀ oral history of the emergence of the deity, only informs of the bitter death of a betrayed woman who later interred herself, and eventually deified.

Obinrin yìi kò mọ ohunkóhun nínú isẹ̀lẹ̀ tó dí ogun náà. Ó bínú gidigidi, wón fí agbára mú un láti jẹ́wọ̀ èşẹ̀ tí kò mọ́wọ̀ -mẹşẹ̀. Ìbínú àì mọ́wọ̀-mẹşẹ̀ èşùn tí wón fí kàn án yìi ló mú kí ó kúrò ní iletò tí wón gbé bí i. Ó rìn síwájú díẹ̀, bí ó şe rìn síwájú yìi ló bá wọ̀lẹ̀.	She was forced to atone for what she knew absolutely nothing about. This feeling of grievance and a deep sense of injustice drove her out of her immediate community. She walked away and interred herself.
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With just a female character as the central protagonist in the above rendition, there is a clear indication of producing a visual representation of the female character as the object/victim of the ruinous wind of the narrative conflict, whereas in the Ìlàjẹ variant of the narrative, the male protagonists, Ìdogbẹ̀ and Agbeleki, climb the zenith of victory in resolving their conflict.

Also, the negative and negating motif of female treachery against her gender kind is brought to the fore in the narrative as a sub-conflict. In this instance, the narrator quickly informs that women are responsible for the betrayal which leads the female protagonist into a long, tortuous journey to death and her eventual deification. In punishing such betrayal, the lingering penalty which Ayélála recommends is that no woman will be allowed to superintend over the activities of the deity's ritual worship. A male intermediary between the deity and any female supplicant therefore becomes perpetually required.

11. CHARACTERISATION

Quite crucial to the Ayélála oral narrative is the character mould of the fictional personages. Characterisation, as a literary device, implies the narrator/author's depiction of characters in any literary engagement. It encapsulates the representation of persons within the text under focus. Nwabueze (2011: p.155) argues that characters in fiction are revealed by action, exposition and dialogue. Like other literary devices, character typologies can be deployed in foregrounding hegemony, ideological persuasion and the legitimisation of gender stereotypes. This is given primacy in the Ayélála oral narrative as clearly evinced by the character typology of Ìdogbẹ̀ (leader of the Ìlàjẹs) and Agbeleki (representative of the Ijaw-Apois). These male characters are depicted by the narrator as round given the largely male-controlled fabric of the society. As male characters, Ìdogbẹ̀ and Agbeleki develop with the narrative, dictating the pace of action and also shaping the plot. Even though the narrative has the emergence of Ayélála as its goal, the constant valorisation of the actions of the named male characters further concretises the patriarchal stranglehold in which the society exists. The narrator explains:

Lóní, aà lè sọ nípa Ayélála láì sọ nípa babańlá mi, Ìdogbè, ẹni tí mò ń jẹ orúkọ rẹ... Nígbà tí ogun bèrè láàárín àwọn èyà wònyì , Ìdogbè tí ẹ babańlá mi ló ńáájú àwọn ènìyàn Ìlájẹ . Ó lágbara, ó lógbón lóri dáadáa, bèẹ ló sì tún ní gbogbo àmúyẹ tí ańwájú rere yẹ kí ó ní , gbogbo ènìyàn ló fẹràn Ìdogbè , tí wón sì tún ní àgbékẹlẹ nínú rẹ . Agbeleki, ẹni tí ó jẹ ọmọ bíbí Ijaw-Apoi, ló ńáájú àwọn ènìyàn Ijaw-Apoi lásìkò ogun náà.

Today, you cannot mention Ayélála without mentioning my forefather, Ìdogbè, whose name I bear... When the war started between these tribes, Ìdogbè, who was my forefather, led the Ìlájẹ people. Strong, wise and having all the qualities of an exemplary leader, Ìdogbè was loved and trusted by all. Agbeleki, who was Ijaw-Apoi, led the Ijaw-Apoi people in that war.

On the one hand, the central characters, Ìdogbè and Agbeleki, are male representatives of their individual patriarchal communities. The narrator ascribes such enthralling embellishments to the characterisation of the two male personages. Such captivating descriptives: strong, wise and exemplary, highlight the male preserve and claim to chivalry, bravery, and wisdom. As both round characters, Ìdogbè and Agbeleki are leaders. By extension, the narrator affirms the critical role the two characters play in the emergence of Ayélála. By playing such role, these male characters drive the conflict in the narrative.

On the other hand, no female character is named in the narrative. The appellation ‘Ayélála’ is not the original name of the only female character so mentioned in the narrative. While Ìdogbè and Agbeleki are illustrated as war-heroes, the only female character who later becomes known as Ayélála in the narrative process is first introduced to the listener as a slave.

At the peak of the war between the Ìlájẹs and the Ijaw-Apois, and the recognition of a possible annihilation of his people, Agbeleki, representing the Ijaw-Apois, decided to go into a covenant relation with the Ìlájẹ. This, Ìdogbè and his people, the Ìlájẹs, consent to. Instruments for the covenant process are needed. A female slave is brought to the fore. She is brought at the height of the conflict to pay the vicarious price needed to bring peace. Despite playing the all-important role of bridging the gap of hostilities between the two communities and being the vital instrument in the reparative ritual of reintegration, this female character is unnamed.

In the Ìkálẹ variant of the Ayélála myth, the narrator is unyielding in his cruel characterisation of women in the narrative. They are static, cold, unimaginative and passive. They exist on the margin. Such patriarchal supremacy renders them incapacitated, lacking a voice of their own. The narrator declares:

Àwọn obìnrin burú gan -an nípa işé ìbì ọwọ wọn , èrò ọkàn wọn lópò ìgbà kíí dára . A gbódò máa bèrù àwọn obìnrin nítorí wọn burú jáí . Bákan náà ní wọn tún ní ẹmí ìgbèsan.	Women are sinister; their intentions are not usually noble. Women should be feared because they are vile. They are equally very vengeful.
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Such flat, static and stock roles are deliberately allocated to women within the narrative with the calculated intention of making them fit into repressive masculine ideologies. The tyranny of a male-centred dogma derives its oppressive relevance from its sole-ownership of a communal, cultural narrative. The male characters as archetypes are forcefully projected thereby lingering longer and fossilising in the subconscious of the listener during the narrative rendition.

Through characterisation and character typologies, the Ayélála narrative becomes a potent site for the (re)production of ideological structures. Beyond the temporal setting of the narrative, the characters, irrespective of sex, are imbued with male-centric values and beliefs, demeaning female stereotypes and the perpetuation of a masculine hegemony.

12. CONCLUSION

The foregoing examination of female marginalisation in Ayélála myth has established the negating lenses through which women are viewed among the Ìlàḗ and Ìkálè communities of Ondo State. The Ayélála myth, not only prioritise male dominance, it portrays the marginality, otherness and stereotypic cocoons in which womanhood subsists.

The task of deconstructing the invalidating place of women in Ayélála myth must be carried out with the aim of reconstructing and redefining the role and image of women. Considering the gender of the deity, space must significantly be created to accommodate women in the hermeneutics and meaning production of the ritual process. A woman was sacrificed to regain cosmic balance. It is therefore fitting to demand the dismantling of gender structures which only privilege men at the costly expense of women. Women must have and own their voice if accelerated societal development must be achieved.

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Citation: Kehinde Olawale Oyetimi, Phd.. "Oral Narrative and Cultural Memory: A Critical Perspective on the Male *Self* and Female *Other* in Ayélála Myth" "International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL), vol 10, no. 7, 2022, pp. 9-19. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20431/2347-3134.1007002>.

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