

DE/CONSTRUCTING GENDER: THE LEGEND OF WEYZA-GOUNGOU, THE PRINCE/SS. A WOMANIST ANALYSIS OF BOUBOU HAMA' S LA PRINCESSE ET LA JUMENT - L'AVENTURE DE WEYZA- GOUNGOU - (THE PRINCESS AND THE MARE - THE ADVENTURE OF WEYZA GOUNGOU)

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ABSTRACT

In many parts of the African continent, oral art is still highly valued for various reasons. Among such reasons, there is the fact that it plays a significant role in the lives of people, historically, culturally, and socially. This verbal art interestingly embodies the values which still make the identities of African people. For any given community, the different genres of the art convey the values assigned to men and women. In other words, they inform people about the construction of masculinity and femininity.

In the present article, we shall use one legend, La Princesse et la Jument - L'aventure de Weyza-Goungou, to analyze gender issues in the Songhay-Zarma community of Niger. The article, entitled, De/constructing Gender: The Legend of Weyza-Goungou, the Prince/ss. A Womanist Analysis of Boubou Hama' s La Princesse et la Jument - L'aventure de Weyza- Goungou, aims at showing how the apparently overt patriarchal Songhay-Zarma culture, has a womanist dimension. The analysis of the story also demonstrates the dual task of revealing the construction of gender in the culture and how gender can be deconstructed through a womanist reading of the legend.

Keywords: gender de/construction, feminist critique, womanism, Songhay-Zarma culture

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary African authors must write with the performativity of the oral text in mind and with the purpose, not only of archiving, but also of expanding, and rewriting these texts. This makes the written text, not only a medium of culture, but an aesthetic conveyor of the past into the present. (Opondo, 130).

The role and mission of the African author stated above by the critic Rose A. Opondo is what Boubou Hama undertakes in writing his books on Zarma-Songhay oral tales. The author published a series of books on tales told to children in the oral tradition in French, the administrative language of his country, Niger. The books helped him accomplish the mission of keeping the traditions of orality alive, but also archiving, expanding and sharing the oral tales. The tales which need to be preserved and revalued, should be the core of African literature.

Fortunately, as stated earlier, in many parts of the African continent, oral art is still highly valued for various reasons. For example, this art helps form and preserve the collective memory. In some parts of the continent, griots (traditional bards) continue to be the reservoirs of history in spite of the dynamic aspect of their art. Oral art also plays a significant social role. Various genres are used to teach people, to perform religious rites, and to entertain. African verbal art is tremendously rich, when one considers the variety of the different oral genres. For the types of pieces, one can list

myths, legends, folktales, poems, songs, riddles, chants pertaining to certain activities such as hunting or farming, religious and cult chants, performances based on age or gender etc.

The oral art is historically, culturally, and socially interesting because it embodies many different values which make the identities and humanity of African people. Thus, any attempt at understanding a given African community, must have at its base the oral art of the community. But unfortunately, as Sone Enongene rightly argues in his article “African Oral Literature and the Humanities: Challenges and Prospects”, this oral art “has been deprioritized and relegated by policy makers, university officials and even humanities scholars themselves to the bottom of any curriculum.” (1). Sone further calls for a remediation of this marginalization, because, as he opines, any knowledge-led development strategy for a given community, must have a solid understanding of the oral art of its people. It is also because this art embodies the community’s humane values and its cultural identity.

One genre, which reflects identity and cultural values, is the oral narrative that the critic Okpewho names historic legends. He rightly argues that this genre sticks as closely as possible to details of real life and socio-cultural values (183). The narratives are simultaneously “cultural lenses and cultural blinders” that teach the community to see or not to see the world in certain ways (Tower, 277). Furthermore, oral narratives are still the best locus of the values of the people. Sone opines that “African cultures, for the most part, still exist in the oral tradition and Africans continue to transmit their cultures through oral expression.” (15)

The present study focuses on one legend, Boubou Hama’s *La Princesse et la Jument - L’aventure de Weyza- Goungou*. It analyses how gender is simultaneously constructed by the people and deconstructed by the author. The objective is, to shed light on the patriarchal aspect of the culture through gender construction. The study also aims at bringing out the womanist dimension of the legend through gender deconstruction. In this endeavor, it shows that because gender is constructed, it can also be deconstructed when needed; hence, it can foster change.

But before engaging in the analysis, it is important to present the Zarma-Songhay people. Today the latter are found in various West African countries, especially in present day Niger, Benin, Nigeria and Burkina Faso. (Hama 9). As the author, oral historian, anthropologist, and critic Boubou Hama states,

Ainsi, quand, attentivement, l'on se penche sur la vie actuelle des Sonraï et des Zarma, on distingue des spiritualités, des croyances qui se sont submergées par couches successives. Le plus vieux de ces systèmes me paraît être, au départ, sur la base d'une race homogène, un matriarcat très ancien.

Thus, when we examine attentively the current life of the Zarma and Sonrai, we will see spiritualities and beliefs that have merged as successive layers. The oldest of these systems of thought appears to come from an ancient homogeneous matriarchal system. (10) (Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine)

The author affirms that among this community there is a group called the Tierko among whom power is still handled through the milk of the mother, i.e. from mother to child, and not necessarily male child. This group is part of the two major groups of the Zarma-Songhay community. The other group, named the Sonianke, is a patrilineal group. But both groups are practitioners of sorcery and traditional syncretism (mixing of pre-islamic rituals and islamic practices) in which women are not powerless or left-behinds.

The changing and dynamic nature of culture and history allows us to see that gender roles have not always been static for this community. The legend under analysis comes, from a transition from a matriarchal society to a patrilineal one. Just like the overall culture, gender roles are also subject to change with time. As Kobia rightly argues, « Every known society in the world has its own set gender roles and they vary from society to society. Cultures and societies are dynamic and so are the gender roles» (Kobia, 128).

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is conducted from two theoretical feminist approaches: Elaine Showalter's feminist critique and Alice Walker's Womanism. The first approach, Showalter's feminist critique, is suitable for this study because it helps to reveal the sexist construction of gender through the socialization of men and women. In the book, *The New Feminist Criticism*, Showalter argues that feminist critique is a "historically grounded inquiry which probes the ideological assumptions of literary phenomena" (128). The present article examines the ideological assumptions of Boubou Hama's retelling of Weyza Gougou's legend. The second approach is evenly appropriate because it will reveal the Songhay-Zarma cultural values that need to be celebrated, according to the feminist agenda, because they valorize women. In her book, *In Search of our Mothers' Garden*, Alice Walker argues that, womanism comes from the black folk expression of mothers to their female children, 'You acting womanish' which implies being outrageous, courageous, willful, responsible and traditionally capable (xi). It is this particular emphasis on folk culture that conveys courage, pride and responsibility in women, that is particularly going to be used in this analysis.

3. ORIGIN AND SYNOPSIS OF THE LEGEND

According to the Songhay-Zarma oral tradition, Weyza-Gougou (the island of the woman) was an island ruled by a Kebbi queen, ancestor of the Songhay people. Boubou Hama states that: "Weyza-Gougou remonte à l'époque du matriarcat songhay ou les femmes avaient le rôle dirigeant." (Hama 1972, 9). Weyza-Gougou goes back to the matriarchal Songhay period when women were leaders of the community. The name of the island used to be l'île des fils de la femme which means the island of the children of the woman (Weyza-Gougou in Zarma language). But after the matriarchal period, the power turned in the hands of men; and from that moment, the land became Argougoun, l'île des fils de l'homme, that is, the island of the children of the man. Aru means man in Zarma language and gougou means island. This legend which tells us about the primacy of feminine power in the past, echoes a similar story from an Ethiopian community discussed by Alemu Abraham in the article, « Oral Narratives as an Ideological Weapon for Subordinating Women: the Case of Jimma Oromo ». According to certain seenaa (historical narratives highly believed by people),

...women initially ruled the Jimma Oromo. In the widespread version of Seenaa mentioned above, for instance, the first ruler of the Jimmas was said to have been a woman called Makka Ware. Makka ruled the five Oromo groupings during and subsequent to the time of their migration to and settlement in the area, which thenceforward was to be known as Jimma. (Alemu 100)

But later on, the community representatives plotted against the queen and overthrew her. The plotters made rules that declared women as incomplete and therefore disenfranchised them from power.

Just as in Songhay land, in Jimma Oromo land also, women used to be in power. At that time power was probably not the prerogative of men only. It has become constructed like many ideologies. In recent African history some women did have power as queens and warriors. Thus, power has not

always been the prerogative of men only. One can list 16th century Queen Amina from Nigeria, 18 th century Queen Nandi from South Africa, 19 th century Ya Asantewa from Ghana and Saraunia Mangou from Niger to name only a few. (www.iamhistory.co.uk accessed March 16, 2025).

In terms of summary, the legend under study is about two princes (future kings) who are also very good friends. One is from the region of Zangara and the other from Kebbi. The two princes are like identical twins because they look so much alike that people cannot tell them apart. When they reach the age of marriage, the prince of Zangara gets married first. Because the princes look alike so much, the wife could not tell her husband apart from the other prince. One day, the spirit of the well, helps her to identify who among the princes, is her husband.

Due to their duties, it has become difficult for the princes to see each other as they used to. In order to preserve and perpetuate their friendship, they decide to exchange their rings. The rings are magical. Each ring embeds the reflection and soul of its owner. The kings decide that the first son each king would have from his wife, should collect his father's ring from the father's friend. This is a way for them to be in touch with each other, but also to extend their friendship to their sons.

The king of Zangara gets a son who manages to collect his father's ring. Unfortunately, the king of Kebbi gets a baby girl as his first born. But he announces to his community that his baby is a boy and decides to raise her as such. As days pass by, the king of Kebbi becomes sadder and sadder because his daughter, as a girl, cannot go to Zangara to collect his ring. His grief becomes so unbearable that he cannot even sleep. The daughter, Weyza-Goungou, who suffers seriously from the deteriorating health of her father, decides to undertake the adventure of travelling to Zangara to collect her father's ring. Even though she is a girl, she goes through all the dangers and brings back her father's ring.

4. THE PATRIARCHAL DIMENSION OF THE LEGEND

The story comes from an overt patriarchal culture, although according to the legend, there was a time when women used to have power in Songhay land. Right from the beginning, the reader learns that it is a story about man and manhood: two kings have each a son. The kings become old and die. Then, their children take the throne and become king in their turn. The legend comes from a world where women are in the shadow.

Despite its powerful womanist title, i.e., the story of a princess, from the start, the reader learns that boys are preferable to girls. The story is a tale about princes. That is why both kings wish to have boys as first born, just like their deceased fathers. It is even stronger than wishes to have boys: the two men have taken the prerogative of God, as they have decided to have each one a baby boy: "Après cet échange amical, les deux rois décidèrent que le premier garçon qu'ils auraient maintenant de leur femme reviendrait auprès de chacun d'eux reprendre la bague de son père." - After this friendly exchange (of rings), the two kings decided that the first boy each one would have from his wife, would go to the other king, to collect his father's ring. In the culture, boys are meant for success and courage. Each is thinking only of having a boy as if they could give themselves boys. Although the option of not having a male child at all might happen, they could not think of that. But God has given the prince of Zangara, a girl !

The king has to hide her identity, because the culture assumes that she cannot play the role of getting back her father's ring. The reason for her assumed incapacity is related to her gender. Her people commonly believe that a woman cannot have the courage to face the dangers of such a journey. The dangers come in the form of wild animals and dangerous thieves. In such a culture, strength, courage, success and intelligence are expected from the masculine gender, not from women. The

issue at stake is not only to be a man physically, but it is more an issue of being so culturally and socially.

As many theorists on gender issues have demonstrated, it is the society that transforms people into being culturally a man or a woman. Among such theorists, one can list Simone de Beauvoir (1952), Judith M. Bardick (1972) and Weissen Naomi (1972). Discussing the socialization of boys and girls in the American society, Bardick argues that values such as independence, aggression, competitiveness, leadership, stoicism, courage, rationality are expected from boys while dependence, passivity, fragility, inability to risk are expected from girls (Bardick 225).

The above values of masculinity and femininity are pervasive in many oral literature genres, and legends are the good locus of these values. As the critic Olesegun rightly points out,

The human origins, histories, legends, ancestors, and heroes become stories that shape a people's perspective and perception to their reality. Myths of origin stories reinforce how particular social orders are derived and propagated. Through these stories, there are justifications for certain patterns of behavior, gender role, and male-female relationships in the society (Olesegun 104).

Furthermore, Osei-Tutu argues that the story and its telling are "are a powerful tool for shedding light on the experiences of people and have the ability to influence" (1501). In re-telling the story of Weyza Goungou, Boubou Hama sheds light on the matriarcal experience of Zarma-Songhay community that is forgotten or not recognized.

At the beginning of the story, the wife of the Zanfara king torments herself about identifying who among the two princes is her husband. Boubou Hama conveys to us that in his culture, a woman is supposed to be highly emotional while the man can control himself. In fact, the spirit of the well advises the woman to express a strong and violent emotional happiness on coming from the well. Among the princes, the one who scolds her and tells her to control herself, is her husband. And if she scrutinizes that king, she will see on his face a sign that the other prince does not have. The advice of the spirit of the well has worked. The bride manages to know who among the two princes her husband is. The spirit of the well conveys that women are expected to show strong emotions while men are expected to control themselves.

This type of socialization is common to patriarchal societies, and the Songhay-Zarma one is not an exception. One can easily understand why the king of Kebbi is psychologically deranged about having a daughter. Although he has raised Weyza-Goungou as a boy, he is not convinced that she can collect back his ring. Logically, she would lack the courage, the competitiveness and the stoicism needed to undertake the dangerous journey to Zanfara. One wonders then why such a king should hide the gender of his daughter and raise her as a boy. This contradictory behavior, conveys that the king inwardly thinks that once his daughter is socialized as a boy, she might undertake a male journey. Boubou Hama unveils the fact that being a man or a woman is a constructed issue that might be deconstructed. Thus, here the father has engaged himself in a successful deconstruction of masculinity and femininity. It is an expression of the author's womanism in showing that his culture has a subtle womanist dimension as we shall show.

5. THE WOMANIST DIMENSION OF SONGHAY-ZARMA CULTURE

Despite the apparently overt patriarchal aspect of Songhay-Zarma culture, it has a womanist dimension. After evoking traces of the story of Adam, Eve and the prohibited fruit in Songhay-Zarma culture, the critic Issa Daouda, warns us about hasty conclusions on seeing the woman as evil in the following quotation:

... qu'on ne s'y méprenne pas, car si l'écriture de Boubou Hama traduit une vision Songhay quelquefois sexiste, elle sait aussi chanter la femme. Autant on y trouve des tendances machistes à travers lesquelles la femme est constamment associée à un rôle dévalorisant, autant certaines œuvres réservent à la femme des développements poétiques qui célèbrent sa beauté, sa bonté et sa bravoure (Issa Daouda 2, my underlining).

One should not be mistaken because even though Boubou Hama's works convey sometimes a sexist Sonhay vision, it also celebrates the woman. The works dually portray sexist leanings through which the woman has a demeaning role but also poetic portrayals that celebrate the woman's beauty, goodness and her courage.

What the critic is inviting us to consider, is the strong womanist dimension of some works by Boubou Hama. *La Princesse et la Jument* is a good illustration of such womanist writings. By undertaking the journey, the princess has demonstrated that the assumption that only a prince can undertake a dangerous trip does not hold tight. It is significant to notice that the princess uses an old mare instead of a strong male horse for her trip. Here again, we read a triumph of the female over the male. The fact that the female horse has magical powers is the recognition of female knowledge of both the African natural and the supernatural worlds, through which the princess will travel to reach Zanfara. In Zarma-Songhay spirits cult and world of the supernatural, women can excel in their knowledge of this spiritual world.

First, the princess decides to use a strong male horse as a ride for her journey. But while she is preparing the horse, an old female seer-horse advises Weyza-Goungou to use her in spite of her old age and slow speed. She convinces the princess with the following proverb: "un vieux bout de corde a son jour" (Hama, 1972, 31) - a short rod might also be useful someday. Also, remembering an old saying of her mother, about the old pot that always makes good food, Weyza-Goungou accepts to use the old mare instead of the young strong male horse.

The mare uses a proverb to convince Weyza Goungou to travel with her (the horse): through the proverb and the metaphor of the short rod, the female horse conveys the dual dimension of the Songhay-Zarma culture. That is what the critic Issa Daouda warns us about. Through the metaphor, the horse teaches Weyza-Goungou that although she is an old female, she might turn up to be stronger than male horses. The princess relies on the wisdom of two females: the old mare and her own mother. Here the author celebrates women's wisdom.

In fact, despite the patriarchal dimension of the culture, we still find aspects that reflect many cultural aspects that value feminine wisdom and symbols.

Moreover, Boubou Hama portrays a very intelligent female who is aware of gender construction in her society. The author has created a woman character who seems to have grasped very well how the construction of binary oppositions is one of the powerful devices to organize and maintain power (Vázquez 265). This awareness helps her to challenge the established order and mentality of her people. In fact, the princess knows exactly both what is expected from a boy and how a girl should behave. She plays the role of a boy so well that no one in the community has ever had the slightest doubt about her gender. In this portrayal of the protagonist, the author shows how constructed gender can be deconstructed when needed. Weyza-Goungou knows when to use effectively feminine values and when to use masculine ones.

The characterization of the heroine of the legend reflects exactly the kind of person Walker refers to as the girl who acts womanish in the phrase 'You acting womanish' which implies being

outrageous, courageous, willful, responsible and traditionally capable (xi). All these qualifiers are applicable to the heroine Weyza, symbol of the responsible female. She has taken the responsibility not only of saving her people, but of showing that her culture is flexible. This flexibility has allowed her, a woman, to be at the origin of creating her own island in an environment that is patrilineal. When Weyza's father passes away, she replaces him on the throne. She becomes a powerful queen and her fame has gone beyond her community. According to the legend, a foreigner from the East of the region, marries her and they get children who are at the origin of the Zarma-Songhay people.

The way the story ends reflects the flexibility of a culture in which women used to inherit power, used to be queens. This flexibility inherent in many African cultures is a womanist dimension that should be recognized and celebrated. It is such a flexibility that Chinua Achebe's famous hero of the novel *Things Fall Apart* fails to see. And this is greatly what has brought his failure and downfall.

As far as femininity is concerned, the protagonist is portrayed as a good girl. She knows when the behaviour of the good girl is in her favour. As the good girl who is submissive to her parents, she has accepted to play the role of the boy as her father has asked her to do: "Weyza Goungou se savait fille. Respectueuse de ses parents, elle accepta avec gaieté et gentillesse la condition qui lui avait été imposée." (Hama 18) – Weyza Goungou knew she was a girl. Respecting her parents, she accepted the imposed role joyfully and kindly.

Another illustrative example of her awareness of values assigned to women, is her feminine persuasive skills of tenderness and kindness. Through her interaction with male characters, it is always with that skill of tenderness that she acts, as we see in her kind refusal of the service of her male friends, and that of her young slave. She uses her feminine appeal to convince them about her need to be masculine. She convinces them that she must undertake the masculine adventure alone. She argues that she needs to express her self-centeredness and enjoy the discreet masculine passion of encountering danger alone. She also appeals to her feminine power of persuasion to convince her father to allow her to undertake the trip. Thus, we see that when she is with young men, she knows what masculine qualities she should display. Portraying such a shrewd, wise and intelligent woman, is a strong womanist dimension of the legend.

Another womanist dimension of the legend is shown through the author's usage of powerful feminine symbols in the fight of the protagonist. For example, it is at the well, a place of gathering of women that the wife of the Zanfara prince finds a solution to her problem of identifying her husband. A magic mare is the chosen horse that helps her princess in winning the fight against Moibiri, the symbol of masculine power and conservatism.

6. CONCLUSION

By making the symbol of masculine power lose the struggle, Boubou Hama celebrates feminine power and victory. It is the manifestation of his womanism in an overall patriarchal culture. Through the protagonist, the author has deconstructed the constructed gender ideology. Weyza-Goungou is the epitome of both masculinity and femininity, because throughout the legend, she has been a man and a woman. The strongest message conveyed is the dual construction and deconstruction of gender. The author has demonstrated that if gender is constructed, it can also be deconstructed when needed. Hence it can foster change. This is what makes the legend a powerful womanist piece of writing that highlights the patriarchal aspects of the culture but also unveils the strong positive values related to women. These values should be celebrated according to the womanist agenda of empowering women through cultural aspects that are favorable to them.

Despite the current patriarchal aspects of African values reflected in oral art, there is a lot to be discovered in terms of feminine sub-cultures embedded in the overall cultures. Critics and oral historians should dip up these values for an objective analysis of African verbal art, whether in writing or in the oral form.

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