

## Didacticism And Yoruba Cultural Ethos In Èkun Ìyáwò

BY

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### **Abstract**

*Gender criticism is not a novel concept in African oral literature. In fact, it is as old as any aspect of our oral tradition. With particular reference to the Yoruba socio-cultural milieu, Èkun Ìyáwò (Bridal or Nuptial chants/weep/song/poetry) significantly features as an indispensable corpus of our oral tradition at traditional marriage ceremonies. It was usually conducted by young ladies within the age group of the bride. Their role is to accompany the bride to move around the nooks and crannies of the community to bid farewell to all her immediate and extended family before her departure to her husband's house. The essence is for them to pray for her since we strongly believe in the efficacy of prayers. An indigenous theoretical framework, the concept of *Ọmọ́lúwàbí* is deployed in the discourse to closely examine the significant import of this traditional cultural practice. This is against the backdrop of post-colonial debasement of the value of the girl child as noticed in *Faceless* by Amma Darko published 2013. The paper concludes on the exultation of the virtues of African oral tradition and the sanity it brings to the society.*

**Keywords:** Èkun Ìyáwò; Ọmọ́lúwàbí; Yoruba; Cultural; Ethos; Gender.

### **Introduction**

Èkun Ìyáwò (bridal/nuptial chants) is a corpus couch along song motif in the oral tradition of the Yoruba socio-cultural community in South West Nigeria. This practice is basically associated with the womenfolk and therefore underscores the concept of gender criticism. As a performative art, Èkun Ìyáwò is a symbolic representation of the utilitarian nexus of African oral tradition.

This is because, the songs have to be presented or performed to listening audience to enable the audience judge the intellectual ability of the bride to be as she switches from one category of audience to another. For instance, the songs / chants ranges from adoration or panegyric poetry of her parents thanking them for proper grooming to satirizing her mother's enemies. At other times it could be prayer that she should not encounter jealous co-wives in her husband's house etc.

Months before the marriage ceremony takes place, parents usually send their daughters (intending brides) to homes of accomplished chanters. These are elderly women who act as trainers to young eligible ladies preparing to go into marriage. This aspect of the ceremony is high significance because of the importance the Yoruba worldview attaches to moral upbringing of the child. Especially for the girl child, such issues are never compromised. All these and many more form part of the tutelage they i.e. (bride to be) must be sensitized on. These of course must reflect in their chants when the real ceremony begins.

Just like as rituals and songs are indispensable aspect of traditional marriages in typical India culture, so is Èkun Iyawo to the Yoruba cultural setting. As it allows the family of the groom to value and appreciate the jewel in the damsel given to them as wife. Thus, the family of the bride hands over their daughter not to the groom, but to the head of the family of the groom or the most reputable member of the family that can be held accountable if anything goes wrong. Hence, the metaphorical response to the bride as our wife. As it is collective responsibility of all the family or community to look after her. This is not the case today as most couples barely know their in-laws. This perhaps explains why many failed marriages are rampant nowadays.

Although many researchers have carried out extensive works on Ekun Iyawo such as Faniyi and Ladele (1982), Olupona and Ajibade (2005), Raji and Ajadi (2013), and Fatuase (2015) etc. Majorly they have examined this concept from the angle of language. The current research intends to interrogate Ekun Iyawo from the literary perspective. The didactic function of African oral tradition is what we want to use to foreground the moral decadence that permeates the marriage institution today and the abuse of the girl child as exemplified in *Faceless* by Amma Darko (2013). This intellectual exercise is therefore intended to cover this lacuna created by previous scholars in the field.

### **Theoretical framework**

Àjàdí (2012), describes the concept of Ọmọ́lúwàbí as an indigenous literary theory extensively in the following ways — Ọmọ́lúwàbí has not been a simple body of rules, nor survived as a body of

oral or written instructions, but is rather a way of thinking and virtue. It is more precisely a philosophy that can be said to provide a loose framework within which people interact. The saying still survive till date, especially ‘Ààbọṣọ ni ń sọ fún ọmọlúwàbí tí ó bá dé inú rẹ́ à di odidi’, the literal interpretation of which is that you should only present half of an issue to an omoluwabi because its fullness is formed in their mind. It is the essence of the basic meaning and philosophy of ọmọlúwàbí, i.e. omotiolúwà bi or the child of the Lord of Character. The Olu Íwà, which is now known as Oluwa, is another name for God. In essence, to be known as omoluwabi is be of the most evolved character in all the concurrent domains of Yoruba meaning making, which Andrew Apter captures succinctly as :

- ❖ **Àsà** which refers to the traditional, popular, everyday use or meaning of something. The more apt description is ‘contemporary use’, for example, the principles of omoluwabi were at work in the *àjọ* (credit union) and *egbẹ́lẹ́sowápo* (cooperative societies) that inspired the world-beating cocoa farms of former Western Region of Nigeria. The critical aspect of achieving top cocoa production in the world was the capacity of small hold farmers to cooperate and deliver quality products without plantations or mechanized farming. These networks of trust relationships fed effectively into the formalized marketing boards, exporters and commodities market to deliver the kind of socio-economic transformation that is still celebrated today.
- ❖ **Ìmòìjìnlẹ̀** refers to deep knowledge or, more accurately, intellectual depth. This is captured in the earlier proverb ‘Ààbọṣọ ni ń sọ fún ọmọlúwàbí tí ó bá dé inú rẹ́ à di odidi’. An omoluwabi is a co-creator of their choice of meaning, therefore in communicating with such a person you should give them just about enough information for them to be able to process it and draw their own conclusions. In fact, it is a sign of disrespect to lay out a matter so completely that the listener has no need to exercise their own thoughts on the matter. This is probably the reason the Yoruba use and rely on proverbs so much and see those who can decipher them as truly wise. It is also true that the *Ifá* Corpus, the vehicle of Yoruba divinities, is captured in an extensive body of poems capable of many interpretations and configurations. It is part of the same tradition that works to create dialogue and discourse through proverbs. It is the proverb that is used to guide the philosophical and intellectual exploration of issues and ideas. It creates shared meaning whilst leaving room for new revelation and expositions.
- ❖ **Awo** refers to mystical or exclusive spiritual insight. The concept of ọmọlúwàbí itself refers to the relationship to Olúwa, i.e. God, who is literarily above the divinities of the left and right that underpin Yoruba spirituality. In practice, there are no rituals or offerings to *Olúwa* or *Elédumarè*. God stands above all, detached from the drama of



human aspiration and journey. It could be argued that *anomoluwàbí* is a journey towards the equilibrium that is God. The agency of the *òrìsà*, i.e. saints and divinities, is perceived as the bridge between us and the ultimate divine.

Everything is capable of all three dimensions, and this non-linear culture is also full of both nuances and contradictions that are deciphered through the divinity, wisdom and comfort. *Omoluwàbí* is not, as many might think, similar to the concept of a 'gentleman', nor is it gender specific. Although not written, an *omoluwabi* is a reflection of an evolution of character that takes natural or innate dispositions and combines them with aspirations discharged with integrity, empathy and commitment in the service of both the self and the collective good. *Omoluwàbí* is the foundation or building blocks of all the socio-economic institutions of the Yoruba. The importance of *íwà* as behaviour, as character and as embodied in the most widely used description for God totally defines it. It is also the source of the saying '*Èéfìn ni íwà*': 'Character is like smoke; it simply cannot be hidden'.

### Methodology

The data for this work was gathered over a period of five years. It involved interacting with people at rural, semi-rural and urban societies like Akinmorin, Jobele, Oyo town, Saki, Ibadan all in Oyo State and Ilorin in Kwara State of Nigeria. Three instruments were used to collect the data. They are:

- Observation method
- Structured interview method
- Textual analysis method

Since Nigeria even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century still maintains a strong communal existence that was associated with us since pre-colonial era, the instruments have to be tailored to meet our needs. Hence, for rural settings like Akinmorin and Jobele the researcher adopted direct observation. Here, the family as a unit of socialization was carefully examined. This becomes necessary because *Èkunlàyawo* prepares the young ladies for the institution of marriage. A purposive sample of sixty adults, twenty each from rural, semi-rural (Oyo and Saki) and urban cities (Ilorin and Ibadan) were sampled. The data collection method used is structured interviews, for the same set of questions was posed to the participants. The researcher wanted to find out causes of debasement of the girl child, broken homes and loss of value system.

The data item includes textual analysis of literary text like Àjàdí (2012) *Omoluwàbí 2.0* that explicitly promotes Yoruba socio-cultural value and ethos as well as Ladele and Faniyi (1982)



documentation of Èkunl̩yawofrom Oyo town. This is to show how Èkunl̩yawo could be reinvented to serve as moral armament for the modern bride.

### Data and analysis

Ayeleru (2019) evinces that cultured is an attribute of man and it is numerous and diverse. This explains why it is often said that no culture is superior to the other. This line of thought is further extended by Layiwola (2013), who defines culture and draws a distinction between culture and civilization. He argues that:

When we talk of people's culture or their civilization (as both are terms synonymous, one being an index of the other), we always imply two facets of the same thing— their material, visible culture and the immaterial or intangible heritage. When I relate that culture and civilization are mutually referential, I mean that there can be no civilization without a culture and that the fact that people have a culture is an indication of the fact that they possess a civilization that would have grown from the culture... one material aspect of culture is the language (p.148).

It becomes pertinent to emphasize here that this Afrocentric viewpoint negates prior opinion of scholars who are unfamiliar with the sociocultural milieu of the African worldview. Hence, their jaundiced and negative representation of the cultures and traditions they came in contact with in the continent. For instance, the particular culture in contention in this paper is the Yoruba culture basically situated at the south western part of Nigeria. Though, the language spreads across many of the West African countries such as Togo, Benin Republic, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Senegal, Gambia, Sierra Leone etc. one of the values the Yorubas cherish in an individual is humane disposition. A person of questionable character is worthless to them. It is for this reason that Ajadi (2012) espouses that;

Character is our driving core; it is formed at, the intersection of personality, disposition, orientation and identity. It is the vehicle for our conscious and unconscious journey through life, and the framework of our possibilities as individuals, institutions and societies. It is never static, but is constantly nourished by the choices we make in the dynamic equilibrium between cooperation and competition. It mediates the evolutionary pressures of survival and the production of legacies. A truly evolved character or an *omoluwabi* is the authentic expression of meaningful humanity (p.71).

Èkunl̩yawo which is an aspect of the oral tradition of the people, couch along song/chant motif is an exclusive reserve of the womenfolk thereby underscoring the concept of gender criticism even in a particular society. The songs/chants are multi-dimensional in nature as they range from praise or panegyric poetry to satirical poetry and sometimes as indictment. It could even take the form of a plea or prayer depending on the situation. However, our attention will be on the didactic function of the songs/chants as a social device that checks the character formation of the girl child as she prepares for the institution of marriage i.e. adulthood. This is exemplified in Ladele and Faniyi (1982) where the singer shows appreciation to her parents for good upbringing

È kúu kíkẹ tíẹ kẹ mí

Èkúu gígẹ tíẹ gẹ mi

È kúogbọn-on nùtẹẹ mú ọmitójàşọlọ (p.3)

Thank you for your care for me

Thank you for your fondness for me

Thank you for the inestimable wisdom (with which) you fortified me (with)

Similarly, the singer/chanter eulogizes her father in form of panegyric/praise poetry

Baba tí mo ní, Amàó Síjúwọlá

È kọ mi láré, mo m'aré.

Èkọ mi lówò, mo m'ówò

Èkọ mi ní şámùşàmù, mo menù ú jẹ (p.4)

My dear father, AmàóSíjúwọlá

You taught me how to run, I do know how to run

You taught me business, I do know business.

You taught me how to chew, I do know how to chew.

Good conduct as evidence of proper upbringing as norm in Yoruba sociocultural milieu is aptly captured on (p.17) thus;

Báa bá wonú u lé  
Baálé' lé l' àá kọọ kí,  
Elégbèje Omokúnrin  
B' áa ba wonúu' le  
Ìyálé' le l' ààkọkí

On entering the house,  
The head of the house deserves to be greeted.  
A man equivalent of a thousand men.  
On entering the house,  
The mother of the house deserves to be greeted.

Native intelligence with particular reference to the concept of conflict resolution is vividly reflected in this manner

Wón bú mi, lo ní nko b' éńkan  
Wónsè mí ní já nko já  
Mo tètè rẹrín kónjà lójú  
(p.17).

I was insulted today, but I kept mute  
I was pushed to fight, but I refused to

Instead, I decided to make peace.

The issue of chastity got the attention of the bard as that is one of the most cherished aspect from the bride as custom demands as refracted on (p.54)

Be le yíowí, wón a ni pánsaga n rode.  
Ori iyá to gbe mi l' esẹ, to wẹ mi ró gá,  
Ìyát' of' olomosesí mi lara,  
Ìyátimoni, Abèbí, omo ońilé-owó  
Konijẹkípánsàgà o jẹ t' emi.

Comments are made— here comes the adulteress going out





On my mother's honour, who laps me to wash me clean,  
Dear mother who bathes me thoroughly with native soap,  
My dear mother, Abebi, daughter of Onile-owo (the rich)  
May I never become adulteress.

Divergently, the second text used for our data collection is Amma Darko's *Faceless* published (2013). The worldview of the text reflects a postmodernist perception of an African society with its entire social malady with particular reference to the phenomenon of street children. The work showcases issues of parental neglects and the agony of the girl child. Perhaps, this explains why Kofi Anyidoho one of the celebrated African literary scholars and critic wrote in the introduction to Darko (2013) *Faceless* thus:

... Amma Darko tells one long and disturbing tale. Sadly, it is a tale of a diseased society that seems to have lost its hold on the lives of its children. It is a provocative tale of a society that has developed a tragic ability of guiding its young ones, especially the girl child, into a life dedicated to prostituting every conceivable virtue for the sake of flimsy material possessions (p. VI).

It is on the basis of this, that evidence of parental neglect and maltreatment are drawn from the text. For example, a reporter once asked a street boy about his dream and she was shocked at the infants' response

My dream... is to be able to go home one day to visit my mother and see a look of joy on her face at the sight of me. I want to be able to sleep beside her. I wish her to tell me she was happy I came to visit her. Whenever i visit her, she doesn't let me stay long before she asks me politely to leave. She never has a smile for me  
(p.3).

So the desire to live a normal life like is expected in a family is the dream of this street kid. Also, Fofo, a fourteen year old street girl was quick to remind her mother that

And had I not gotten the good sense to leave home, who knows, he probably would have made you send me away too to work for some woman to make money for you four to live on (p.37).

The observation of Fofo, one of the major characters in the text shows to what extent the child has been commodified by the parents (adult world) in the text in question. By allowing the kids





to fend for themselves and sometimes for their family from a very tender age, they become prone to sexual assault by irresponsible men as symbolized by characters like 'Poison', 'Kpakpo', 'Onko' etc. for example;

He savored Baby T's maturing body hungrily with his eyes. Then he brushed the back of one hand over Baby T's breast and drew down her pants (pp.215-216).

Fofo watch with disbelief how her sister, Baby T was being sexually abused by their step father, Kpakpo. It happened at a time their mother was supposed to be in labour-room expecting another child for their step-father. Fofo too had her share of this dastard act. In her own case 'Poison', one of the notorious hoodlums (criminals) in the neighbourhood found his way into the shanty the kids were sleeping at night 'Poison pushed up her dress and scowled at the sight of her underpants. He muttered an obscenity and yanked it off' (p.7).

### Discussion

From the data collected, it is obvious that Africa's sociocultural worldview is no doubt a patriarchal society. But beyond that the custom arrogates certain rights and privileges to the womenfolk such as 'Iyalode' as in Efunsetan Aniwura Iyalode Ibadan. We also have Iyaloja as witnessed in Soyinka (2002) *Death and the King's Horseman*. Also, are the Oloris (wives) of the monarch in the palace. Of particular importance is the contribution of female professional bards as projected by Karin Barber (1991) in *I Could Speak Until Tomorrow*. It is the likes of such that Ladele and Faniyi (1982) have carefully documented their artistry for posterity in Ekun Iyawo. The same can be said of those women who serve as trainers of the would be bride. They have helped in the storage and preservation of this all important cultural values and norms.

Without any ambiguity, it is apparent that African society in her pristine nature before colonialism or modernism from the western perspective witness peace, love and above all harmonious existence. This cannot be compared with post-modernist or post-colonial existence where African culture, tradition, norms and value system has been debased as notice in *Faceless* by Amma Darko (2013). Moral upbringing of the child especially girl child which the bride eloquently sings about in Ekun Iyawo is out of tune with the society today. What is most disheartening is that the adult class that ought to serve as role model, teach morals as expected in African society have lost their position. Parents no longer carry out their responsibility to their children as noticed in the conversation between Fofo and her mother where the mother was pleading with her daughter that she has no strength to argue with Fofo.

The postcolonial/postmodernist situation created by Amma Darko in *Faceless*, just like in her previous novels *Beyond the Horizon* (1991) and *The Housemaid* (1998) like the theatre of the absurd reflects a failed society. It is definitely unAfrican for a given society to allow such moral decadence to go unchecked. For instance, it is contradictory to African customs and tradition for infants to go to the street and fend for the family. Also, children are treasure of inestimable value. Hence, they are well taken care of. But to throw them to the street without concern of whatever may happen to them is alien to our culture. Similarly, children look to their parents as pillar of support, role model and guide as projected in *ekun Iyawo*. Here, parents are eulogized through panegyric/praise poetry. However, parents of postcolonial era have not met the expectation of their children. They therefore deserve no praise. In fact, the situation has become alarming that during period of need, the child(ren) look(s) beyond parental care. A typical example is when Fofu discovered that her sister Baby T has been murdered. She demanded to speak with the government. To her that is the source of the problem. What can be deduced from all of this is that every strata of the society (where adults) were expected to show case purposeful leadership, guidance, control etc. have failed. This ranges from: the government, the social media (radio, television, newspaper and magazines), the religious organization, schools (institutions of learning), the family etc.

## Conclusion

The study has tried to show that African oral tradition as reflected in *ekun iyawo* vividly refracts African identity. It exemplifies the sociocultural milieu of Africa. Whereas, Amma Darko's African worldview is a jaundiced projection of the continent which is as a result of the infiltration of alien culture into Africa. This study therefore calls for the resuscitation of the African oral tradition with particular reference to *Ekunlyawo* as it serves as moral armament for the modern bride. It is hoped that this may perhaps help curb the moral decadence in postcolonial/ postmodernist African society. As each of the agencies of socialization will endeavour to do the needful to avoid being satirized by the bard during the period of *Ekun Iyawo*.

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