

'Old Wine in the New Wineskin': A Womanist Interrogation of *Èkún Ìyàwó* Yorùbá Bridal Chant

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Abstract

This study examines the convergence of historical, cultural and literary praxes that are built around the Yorùbá Èkún Ìyàwó (bridal/nuptial chants), in the light of contemporary postmodern socio-cultural knowledge society. Womanist and postmodern theoretical parameters are used as the analytical imports of the study. This is done with a view to situating and interrogating the utility of the cultural artifact and the oral artistic category of Èkún Ìyàwó bridal chant. The work is analysed within the framework of postmodern and womanist critical lenses. The study relies on the data sourced from traditional cultural artifacts and nuances of the old and contemporary cultural orientations against the backlashes of postmodern world order. A scene mapping of Èkún Ìyàwó (bridal/nuptial chants) was carried out to firm up the analytical thrust of the paper. The study reveals that the rich coded African cultural heritages and values are embedded in the values and utilities of communalism, nurturing, gender complementarities and promotion of life-enhancing ethos of mothering useful in the traditional universe and valuable in the modern world. The paper concludes that the propagation, affirmation and preservation of communal identity, family consciousness, gender complementarities and enunciation of personal self-worth, which constituted the core of African cultural universe, should be the fulcrum upon which society is framed for the sustenance of the goals of progressive values in the midst of the pervasive virus of cultural corruption inherent in postmodernist value system.

Key words: Womanist ideology, cultural artifacts, Yorùbá *Èkún Ìyàwó* [bridal chants], postmodernist society.

Introduction:

The Èkún Ìyàwó oral performance remains one of the enduring and adored African cultural practices, now drawn up, transformed and recalibrated from the pre-colonial cultural epistemic viewpoint based on the dictates, values and influences of postmodernity. *Èkún ìyàwó* is in a nutshell, a bridal chant, a chant of separation of the maiden or a young bride from her natal family to her new home which is the marital family. It is an occasion that is done with great conviviality, dancing, praise-singing, poetic recitation that adore the beauty and good values of the bride and prayer for fruitful, prosperous family life in the new home. The chanter of Èkún Ìyàwó in the spectacle of its cultural display, costuming and linguistic appurtenances reverberate the legacies, exigency and the cultural paraphernalia that translate into the core values of positive traditional worldviews, the gracefulness of womanhood, gender compliments, industry, the beauty of good mothering and communal goodwill. In trying to situate the Èkún ìyàwó cultural performance in the thrust of postmodernist critical lenses, it could be reasoned that it interweaves the linkages of the inter-generational gamut which places the African womanhood at the high pedestal of social role as progenitor, procreator and co-creator of the universe of man, as opposed to the traditional stereotypes of tag on the woman as 'the weaker sex' who only plays passive roles as dictated by the man-centered universe. It is out of this type of epistemic negotiation that engenders the texture of *womanist* theorization of which Mary Kolawole in *Womanism and African Consciousness* aptly redefines in her critical offering as *womanism* in the black African feminist context. To expatiate on this, Kolawole (1997) thus asks: "What then is womanism?" and proffers the answer by stating thus: "To Africans, womanism is the totality of feminine self-expression, self-retrieval and self-assertion to positive cultural ways" (24). This assertion gives the critical backdrop to the context in which Èkún ìyàwó chant performance, as a variant of a widely held nuptial practice in Africa, is enacted in the Yorùbá socio-cultural space and informs the concern of this paper.

The foregoing critical purview accords with what Ali Mazrui's thesis on rebirthing African cultural renaissance as, "the triple legacies of skills, values and gender" (6) that should be promoted by scholars and the academy. Such African ceremonial art form, as a traditional literary generic resource, is culturally informing and is one of the enduring traditional Yorùbá heritages that serve to remind of the past, perpetuate cultural memory and promote values of communality, profitable ingredients of human relations and

collective identities of the Yorùbá societies in relationship with the rest of the interrelated and pluralistic African socio-cultural ferment like Nigeria and the rest of African societies. This art form reflects the timelessness of oral literature and its resilience in the face of modernity and reifies what Tunde Babawale refers to as “the need to revive those aspects of our culture that promote self-reliance, brotherhood and development” (8). Èkún ìyàwó as a valuable genre of African oral cultural heritage reminds of the need to preserve the glowing literary heritage of traditional world and save such cultural infrastructure from the predatory presence of globalization modernity. Matlotleng Matlou echoes this thought by stating that “if there are any clearly defined African values, ethics and norms... If values are what we do, how and when (the psychological software on which individuals, communities, countries and organizations operate and do get corrupted with viruses), it means they must be reviewed, protected and serviced regularly” (7).

Generally stated, oral literature remains as old as humanity and time, and language and linguistic elements serve as veritable tools of transmission from one generation to the other. This is so because the society's history is enmeshed in its literature and valuable cultural legacies, and this is realizable through its language and other varied cultural symbols and performances that hinge at the roots of human progeny and ingenuity that sustained cultural memory and identities from oral epistemology to the era of writing culture of literate society. Language, therefore, serves as the codification system for a society's culture, the culture being represented and realized largely through its literature. These put together shape the literature of a society and provide its orality. Mabawonku (2011) posits that language is one of the major channels through which culture is learnt, and this accords with Irele (2001) postulation that “the spoken words of a language also form part of the oral elements in the culture” (30). Oral genre therefore serves as channel for social communication as it mirrors the rich African cultural value system which is geared towards accentuating communalism, common humanity and for deepening of historical identity. Oral genre therefore remains as Kolawole says “the strong weapons of self-assertion and keys to the assertion of cultural independence” (76). In view of the above assertions, it becomes clear that such performance as Èkún ìyàwó nuptial chant serves as channel for cultivating tribal knowledge and histories the ideologies, and the aesthetic “relevance” (Mabawonku, 4) of the tribal lore and legacies. Mabawonku thus describes the imperatives of oral elements in this art form as follows:

As a weapon of self assertion and cultural independence, oral genre serves as a link between modernity and cultural studies in the society. Through the oral art like *ẹkún iyàwó* (bridal/nuptial chants), life-enhancing and promoting virtues which are salient in the culture but are partly in extinction in the contemporary society as its essence, meaning and relevance in the latter are aptly displayed. These virtues which are prescriptive in nature in having an idealized society are extolled culturally and serves as the principal tenets for modern day ideology which Womanism represents. The ideology is simply a western expression that draws very much on traditional African materials. In other words, it is a rebranded product wherein old wine is put in new wine skin. This is so because the ideology is an embodiment of the rich cultural tradition of the African people. Aside this, the four modules of the ideology is a reflection of African cultural values and this is succinctly captured in the verses of the bridal/nuptial chants... (Mabawonku, 4).

The literariness of a work depends to a large extent on its ideological framework without necessarily being subject of satirical colouration of oral performance. Yet such performance as this is a potent tool of literary appreciation, just as it is a means by which the society could be x-rayed and deconstructed. The ideological stance expressed in a work of art goes a long way in determining its literariness despite the argument of the Russian Formalists who argue that ideology is just motivation for a literary artist and that the literariness of art is the sum total of its devices. Ngara (1987) however opines in the contrary to the formalist schools by stating that the ideological framework provides the aesthetic and the contextual analysis of a literary work.

Existing studies on *ẹkún iyàwó*, the Yorùbá oral art genre have been on its contextual analysis as well as its semiotic interpretation. This paper however focuses on the ideology expressed in the bridal/nuptial chants which bear cultural affinity to the views and comments on the genders' position in the society. This paper therefore, is an attempt to explore the aesthetics of the oral art in understanding the underlying ideology through which the chants would be explained. This means that effort is directed at dissecting the cultural relevance and significance of the bridal/nuptial chants in an ever changing society. It is not just enough to see the art as a piece of oral literature but further step is taken to understand its cultural relevance in contemporary society where it serves as an icon and anchor of its mainstream cultural

mores. Furthermore, the paper focuses on how the oral art make both visual and aural appeal to the reader's mind over what the womanist ideology contests through the lines of the bridal/nuptial chants. Both the visual and aural appeal help in analyzing some aspects of African culture which have been eroded by modernity and deeply watered down.

The challenge before literary scholarship in this research work is to see how èkún iyàwó (bridal/nuptial chants), is used to explain the ideological structure as it relates to African cultural and literary expressions. This work is therefore based on content and language related elements. As there is a shift of emphasis on the need to go back to the basis in a bid to understand the past in explaining the present by knowing the very essence of being, more attention is given to the usefulness, importance, place and uniqueness of culture, gender and family in the society. The African woman constructs her own reality through the development of self-determination, self-definitions and personal evaluations, which redefine and rebuke negative mainstream images of womanhood and as coded in African patriarchal culture. Aside this, this work further deepens the understanding of the concept of womanism that has gained much global attention in contemporary literary and cultural studies. In a way, the taking of positive aspects from both cultures; traditional and modernism is what womanism represents as it is not against gender emancipation or patriarchal participation in social relationships. Rather, it advocates the place of men in the family, the status and roles of women and the children respectively. Womanism believes that the sexes have a complementary role to play as Sofola (1991) argues. The strength thus provided ultimately empowers the individual, men and women, in attaining meaning and purpose in life without prejudice of any form.

In all, the analytical framework used for this work explicates how womanism could help theorists tone cultural discourse towards gender balance and pursue options that are African-oriented and which is named by Africans towards addressing African problems, based on African experience. The gender theory sues for the need to understand and embrace the distinct African cultural inheritance that spawns both an exhaustive energy and mastery of skill to combat and reform daily encounters with all kinds of discrimination, oppression and vices inherent in the patriarchal society. To achieve this, a fusion of the intellectual thought which is wrapped up in culturalism and political activism which modernism denotes, becomes a necessary issue for the general good of the society. The above assertion

comes alive when likened to the postcolonial theorization view which centralizes that the “recourse to the past in explaining the changes and differences in the present is a rewriting of literature back to its origin” (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 44) in solving all maladroitness that have bedecked colonial histories of domination, prejudices and exploitation.

Èkún Ìyàwó: An Old Song with New Tune

Oral literature/oral art is an important repository of cultural identity. It is the portrayal of the way of life of the people which comes alive through indigenous language, art, religion, philosophy, values and pattern of behaviour. The orality of cultural life of the people is a major source of education for the society in that through the diverse myths and legends; epic, songs and chants told by the older folks to the young ones, the tradition and cultural life of the people are preserved in order to enhance its continuity and authenticity. Oral literature/oral art comes alive when given a verbal action. Oral art is regarded as a verbal act that depends largely on performance and good performance as Barber (1989) expatiates. For example, in traditional Yorùbá society, a riddle session precedes the act of storytelling. In such folk narratives, the self is discovered and asserted yet without disrupting the ethos of the culture that produces it. This position, accordingly results in “self recreation” that is predicated on “self identity” which starts with “self naming” (Kolawole, 1998, 5). Hence, oral arts serve as a site for self-expression or cultural self-identity.

Èkún Ìyàwó, a genre that forms part of Yorùbá traditional oral fabrics and literature is a chanted poetry rendered in a sing-song manner, principally dominated by women, especially the young ones, to announce their transformation from girlhood to womanhood. Barber (1994) describes èkún ìyàwó as “*ràrà ìyàwó* (in standard Yorùbá, èkún ìyàwó) are the valedictory *oríkì* chants a woman performs as she goes round saying farewell to her kindred family and announcing her impending change of state... it is the first type of *oríkì* chant that she learns” (151). This is so because the genre is practiced by the young women who are about to be wedded out hence the name *ìyàwó* (bride). Èkún Ìyàwó, though a general practice in the wider African cultural landscape, is predominant in the Òyó speaking areas of Yorùbá land in Nigeria. The predominance of this oral art in this area is because the art is an off-shoot of *ràrà* (chanted praise poetry). *Ràrà*, a chanted poetry, which utilizes *oríkì* (praise poetry), is rendered principally for entertainment and occasionally, for the purpose of showing appreciation and obtaining remunerations as the case may be, among the kindred

community. Chanting of èkún ìyàwó need no formal training or pupilage, as mastery without stuttering is achieved by continuous practice and repetition of the structure of the art forms.

Èkún Ìyàwó, which also utilizes *oríkì* materials, and eulogized poetry, is a combination of several morphemes. The etymology of the word *ìyàwó* is obscure, but some Yorùbá scholars and thinkers have tried to explain or derive it in several ways. For example, consider these options below:

1. Ìyà- suffering
 wó- collapse/fall
2. Ìyà- suffering
 Ìwó- name of a town
3. Ìyá- mother
 wò- look

None of these is as yet convincing. Furthermore, èkún ìyàwó can be likened to the European dirge which is a song for the departed. In the same way, èkún ìyàwó is a song for the departure of the bride from her parents, loved ones and her lineage. Faseke (1998) explains marriage culture as the basic institutions of any society and family unit. Kolawole (1998) also posits that “in most societies, young men enter into marriage feeling triumphant but the girl expects the worst and this prepares her mind to tolerate abuse and violence in marriage” (22). This position is succinctly stated in the lines of the chants analyzed later in this work.

Èkún ìyàwó is a cultural art form and heritage, handed down from one generation to the next through simple cultural means. Èkún Ìyàwó is a highly distinctive genre which is instantly recognizable. This is in contrast to other forms of Yorùbá oral poetry which are plagued with the problem of classification. For instance, Babalola (1966) argues that the same material (poem) can occur in different chants modes and be called by different names (for example: *ìjálá*, *Èṣà*/hunter's chant, *masquerade dirge*). Akinyemi (1998) further corroborates this by stating that, the same material can occur in one or the other of the mode of vocalization and that it is by the mode rather than by the material that the performances are labeled. Yorùbá traditional poetry in general is best classified not so much by the themes as by stylistic devices employed in recitals. The structure and context of èkún ìyàwó and its performance are different from all other Yorùbá oral arts. This gives it a unique feature above the other arts. Unlike *ìjálá*, *èṣà*, *ẹṣẹ ifá* (hunter's chant, *masquerade dirge*, *divination*

poetry), ẹkún iyàwó (bridal/nuptial chant) has some set phrases that are peculiar to it. Such as:

Ire lóníí orí mi àfire May good luck attend to my inner head today

The art incorporates a large body of material which does not appear in other arts, for example, oríkì orílè (lineage praise poetry), rárà (praise poetry), iwì (masquerade dirge). Secondly, the art has some verses commenting philosophically on the bride's conditions for example, her appreciation to her parents, fear of the unknown, hostilities from co-wives, and supplication for fertility. Although the poem touches on diverse topics, the underlying theme is the bride herself.

Ẹkún Ìyàwó has diverse structures, although the sole focus is placed on the bride. Unlike what obtains in other Yorùbá oral genres, it is in ẹkún iyàwó that one finds a combination of *ìwúre* (prayer), *ìbà/ìkìni* (salutation/homage) and *oríkì orílè* (lineage praise poetry) all encoded in a single performance. In other Yorùbá oral genres, these are not necessarily all present. For example, in iwì egúngún (masquerade chant), the art starts with *ìwúre* (prayers) and dwells minimally on *oríkì orílè* (lineage poetry) while in Ìjálá, *ìbà/ìkìni* (salutation/homage) and minimal *oríkì* (praise poetry) are regular features. The under mentioned lines from ẹkún iyàwó illustrate the structure of the genre.

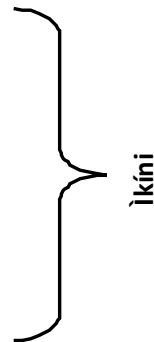
Ko ko ko àgò onílé.

Àgò mi ìí se alágò tíí gb?ré.

Béè làgò mi ìí se alágò tíí gbàtòrì o.

Béwúré bá silé wò yóó gb?ré,

Bágùntàn bá silé wò á gbàtòrì o.



Èèmi ?m? bíbí inú iyá ò,

Mi ò mò ní silé wò ní tẹmi o.

Bàbá mo wá gbare mi.

Ire, àní n má fàbí kú ðwó,

Ire, àní n má yà ní ò ò àgàn o.

Ìwúre

Mo ní n ó ki baba mi o,

Ìkó ni mí olókùn ?là,

Àké-èkún- yá ni mí.

Ìlókó ni yá mi o,

Ìlókó ni mí.omo Àrélù.

Èrúmo^oa ni mí ma j?ba lólele

Oríkì Orílẹ̀

Translation:

Greetings to this household.

My greeting is not to receive whiplashes

My greeting is not to be flogged.

When a goat enters the wrong compound it receives whiplashes,

When a sheep enters the wrong compound it is flogged.

Homage

I, true born of my mother,

May I not marry from the wrong compound,

Father, I have come to receive blessings.

Blessing, that as a first-timer, I will not have a born-to-die child

Blessing, that I should not call at the stall of the barren.

I want to salute my father,

I am from the Ìkó lineage, owners of the string of wealth,

I am of the Àké-èkún- yá household.

The Ìlókó lineage is where my mother comes from,

I am of Ìlókó lineage, offspring of Àrélù.

I, of the Êrúmo^oa stock will be tough when I am madeking

Prayer

Lineage Praise

In the excerpt above, the prayer (*iwúre*) segment shows the Yorùbá deep love for supplication and its importance. The homage (*ikíni*) segment is crucial in the performance of any oral genre. In any Yorùbá oral genre, salutation may either be to the elders in the land, to the performer's superiors or better still, to the gods. The socio-significance of *ibà* to the oral artist is that it is a form of acknowledgement to the superiority of the elders and spiritual forces on whom the success of the oral artist depends. Commenting still on the socio-significance of *ibà* among the Yorùbá of the South-Western Nigeria, Awoniyi (1975) argues that no major function, ceremonies and programmes begin in the Yorùbá culture without the initial acknowledgement of precedent and authority. It is by this means that this way, the link between the past and the present is maintained. The bride making her recital of *ẹkún iyàwó* is no exception. The homage (*ikíni*) segment has an emotive function and after its usage, the 'bride' feels more secure and confident to proceed with her performance. A Yorùbá proverb subsumes this function as follows: 't'ómọdé bá ti júbà àgbà ó dájú kò ní sise (meaning): once a child acknowledges the

supremacy of the elders he will not fail.

Èkún Ìyàwó, like oríkì, is not a private property but a traditional material whose authorship is at the disposal of the society. The performer, as well as the bards, like drummers and raconteurs know this and learn it for their own use. However, the girl is at liberty to substitute her wordings from the stock of epithets she has learnt without necessarily disorganizing the structure of the chant. This brings in the issue of formulaic theory as enunciated by Albert Lord (1970) which centres on substitution effect/theory thereby eliminating the use of memory aiding medicine and this explains the reason for variation in the various èkún ìyàwó chants collected for this research work. In all, the performance of èkún ìyàwó is a rite of passage, a transition rite from girlhood to womanhood, a lament and nostalgic feelings for loved ones. Each structural allusion is to a different narrative hinterland which is sometimes quite extensive and detailed, often times, the structural allusion of the chants is expressed in thanks for parental guidance, fear of the new home, advice for the younger ones and high hope of fruitfulness. Hence, èkún ìyàwó is valued for its ability to capture and compress huge areas of meaning within a small space. In addition, the keynote of èkún ìyàwó is the poignant blend of regret, uncertainty and anticipation of freedom which all points in the girl's direction. This oral art therefore serves as keys to the assertion of cultural independence as it highlights its functional role and effectiveness as an interface between modernity and cultural studies in the society

Èkún Ìyàwó: Negotiating Modernity and Cultural Order

Womanism sees the need to provide an alternate vision of societal organization that is based on autonomy, self determination and self definition. Self definition is described as taking care and charge of one's life circumstances. This alternative vision leads to the fostering of a more liberal and harmonious awareness, and of the need for a contextual, situational, and circumstantial interpretation of the socio-cultural realities in contemporary society. Kọlawọle (1998, 24) therefore, define womanism as the totality of feminine self-expression, self-retrieval, and self-assertion in positive cultural ways. She believes that womanism has very distinct characteristics emerging from African values such as motherhood, childbearing and communalism. These values serve as interface of modernity which erupts from cultural studies. Steady (1981) observes that, the male is not 'the other' but part of the human same. Each gender constitutes the critical half that makes the human whole'. The import of Steady's definition reflects in lines of èkún ìyàwó

(bridal/nuptial chants) as the bride in her chant recognizes not just the mother, but her father as well as her brother and kindred too:

Ìyá tún ɛ ɛ púpò lórò mí o,	<i>Mother really labored for my sake,</i>
Ìyáà mi wa ɛ ɛ púpò lórò mí o,	<i>My mother really labored for my sake,</i>
Ìyáà mi tí mo ní tòótó,	<i>My mother that I have sincerely,</i>
Ìyáà mi wáa ɛ ɛ púpò lórò mí.	<i>My mother really labored for my sake.</i>
Bàbá mo wá gbare mi.	<i>Father, I have come to receive blessings.</i>
Ire, àní n má fàbí kú ɛ ɛ wó,	<i>Blessing, that as a first-timer,</i>
	<i>I will not have a born-to-die,</i>
Bàbá n ó ma fèyí ɛ ɛ lẹ o	<i>Father, I would be leaving</i>
ɛ ɛ yin lẹ ní mo tó yàrá ní o	<i>You said that I am old enough to be on my own</i>
Ẹ má mà jé ó hun mí baba mi o	<i>Do not let it be against me, my father</i>
Ègbón mi, ègbón mi,	<i>My brother, my brother,</i>
Só n bẹ nílẹ àbí ò sí nílẹ?	<i>Is he in or has he gone out?</i>
Bó bá n bẹ nílẹ, ẹ wí fún mi.	<i>If he is in, please tell me.</i>
Bí ò bá sí nílẹ, n b'èṣè ɛ ɛ rò.	<i>And if he has gone out, let me go my way.</i>

The recognition made by the bride aptly describes the ideology as one that sues for unity and cooperation, inclusiveness and complementarities of men and women, rather than exclusiveness, dichotomy and polarization which characterized the modern day society. The recognition made by the bride in the excerpt above demonstrates the art as one that thrives on family centredness and this is further shown in the ideology as it demonstrates the strive towards unity between men and women, lack of fragmentation, and a holistic view of society.

The engaging process of properly naming and defining things leads to the suitability of the ideology in explaining the bridal chant. Womanism believes in self-naming. This position is central in nuptial chant as the bride consciously hopes for fertility in her new family life:

Ọmọ kékeré ilé tí yòò bá wí, *The young ones in the lineage will remark,*
Ire lóniù, wọ́n á ní iyàwó lèmi. *That I am a wife.*
B'ágbà ilé yòò mà ti è ẹ̀ṣ'òrò, *The elderly ones will say,*
Ire lóniù, wọ́n á ní iyàwó lèmi. *That I am a wife.*
Orí ò níí ẹ̀ se mi níyà Ìwó. *May my inner head not make the suffering of Ìwó.*
Ìyá Lúkú, Ìyá Èjìrẹ̀, Ìyá *Lukman's mother, Twins' mother,*
Èdúnjọbí *Edunjobi's mother*
Ire lóniù, wọ́n á ní iyàwó lèmi. *That I am a wife.*

African culture in a way subsumes that the proper naming of a thing or word (i.e. the signifier) calls the thing/word into existence (signified). Thus, African womanism is both about self-namer and self definer. This is expressed in a popular Yorùbá axiom which says: '*orúkọ ńro ni*' (meaning: 'naming affects the individual'), and another one which says, '*àpè mó'ra ẹni ni à ńpe tẹ̀mídire*' (meaning: 'one personalizes the word successful when it is called/pronounced'). The bride is optimistic that she would be fruitful in matrimony; hence, she rejects the tag of being just called a wife but by the name of her children!

The self-naming and self-definer attribute of the womanist ideology dovetail into another module of the ideology which is equally hinged on African worldview. Motherhood, as an institution, is an experience which becomes a joyful creativity. Awoniyi (366) sees it as 'a source of pride and joy in Yorùbá culture'. Omofolabo Ajayi in '*From His Symbol to Her Icon*' states, "...in African societies, motherhood is a prized, respected, and compulsory institution" (39). In the excerpt of the nuptial chant below, the bride is not only hopeful of fruitfulness, but expectantly with joy, she looks forward to it:

Ìpò táa pò ní kàlẹ̀, *As many that are gathered here,*
Ilé ọkọ ló ń gbé wa lọ. *It is leading us to the groom's house.*
Kíí se t'íkú, bèè ni kíí se t'àrùn. *We have not gathered because of
death or diseases.*
Njé tó bá di lósù mèsàn-án òní o, *When it is nine months time,*
A ó jọ padé pèlù ayò láàrín ara wa. *We will meet again with joy among us.*

The bride is not oblivious of traditional epistemic ferment where the belief that some natural and man-made impediments may make someone not to be fruitful in matrimony hence, she retorts:

Bàbá mi ò tọ̀ṣọ̀ òògùn lówó dókítà n'Íbàdàn¹. Father, I have not asked for medicine
from doctors at Ibadan.

Èmi Olúwayémisi ò tọ̀ṣọ̀ ọ̀mọ̀ lówó alábiíkú, I, Olúwayémisi have not begged for
children from the custodian of born-to-
die children,

Kálàbiíkú ó máa gbábiíkú rẹ̀ lọ o. Let the custodian of born-to-die children
go with his children.

Èyí tí ó se mí lánfààní, The ones that would be beneficial to me,
Bí iyá mi sá lorí mi ó b̀n mi o. As it is for my mother will my inner head
bestow on me

¹This denotes the University College Hospital (U.C.H.), Ibadan. As a teaching hospital, it is a referral centre where all medical ailments and abnormalities are given a specialist medical attention. The allusion to the place indicates that any medical problem taken there surely gets a solution.

Womanism reacts to correct the western notion that motherhood as an institution necessarily involves suffering and deprivation. This negative notion is predicated on women being the “man's woman” (Ajayi, 37). Hence, it abhors family centredness. In African cultural mores as enunciated in the womanist ideology, family centredness is given prominence as the family as a unit consists of father, mother and the offspring. The exclusion of a segment from the unit creates imbalance in the contemporary society.

To further establish the respected and prized position that mothering occupies in African cultural mores as a joyful creativity as accented to by the ideology, the bride in her chants alludes:

Balùwè àní tí mo bá wè sí o, *The bathroom in which I take my bath,*
Àní ibè ni n ó sinbi ọ̀mọ̀ mi sí. *I say in that bathroom would I bury my child's
placenta.*

The allusion the bride makes to the wash/bathroom here reinforces another tenet of the ideology which centres on the complementarities of the sexes. Mrs Jinadu, one of Sofola's characters in *The Sweet Trap* describes women as [the completeness of man], “the heart that keeps the blood pumping through the man's vein. Destroy this heart and the man is dead” (Sofola, 70).

Furthermore, Sofola says “the life-giving force [semen] of a man becomes his pride [child] after which the process has been completed [pregnancy] by the woman” (48). The male gender like the semiotic codes in Derridean sense is but a supplementation that needs an interpretant to give it its full actualization and in making the life-giving force potent. This, therefore, brings in the need for the complementarities of the genders, the place of women in the society; the women being the needed and necessary interpretant!

What this therefore means is that the life-giving force of a man is not sufficient enough to give him his pride without the involvement of a woman. Hence, the genders have a complementary/symbiotic role in the society. Consequently, the bride alluding to the wash/bathroom, simply points to the aftermath of copulation when the life-giving force of the man had been dispensed. She is optimistic of completing the process by showcasing the man's pride thereafter, hence:

Àní ibè ni n ó sinbi ọmọ mi sí. *I say in that bathroom would I bury my child's
placenta.*

Nurturing is closely related to mothering, a module of the womanist ideology. Nurturing emphasizes sensitivity to others. It is therefore not surprising to see in nuptial chant the bride's deep concern for others in the community and for perpetuity of her race and that of human race in general. As the bulk of the material for the chant comes from oriki (praise poetry) whose authorship lies within the community, the bride performer through the oral art has already imbibed the act of communal living and sensitivity to others since African culture values communal lives and collective existence. Insularity is abhorred and has no place on the communalistic worldview of this society. The bride performer therefore gives wise counsel and assists others to build confidence and self assurance by asserting that:

Èmi nikan kó ee ọ́rú èyí fún *It is not only me that you will do this for*
È ọ́ ọ̀ ẹ̀ ẹ̀ fẹ̀rò léyìn mi o. *You will do it for many after me.*

The bride's sensitivity to others and her wise counsel is expressed in the above excerpt as she equally wishes that her siblings too would witness and have their day of glory. In African cultural milieu, especially the Yorùbá, the divination oracle is seen and regarded as the 'all knowing god'. The oracle has sixteen major sections which captures major aspects of human life. It should be noted that the sixteen segments of the oracle makes philosophical statements about human lives, endeavours and experiences in the society. These philosophical statements are held in high esteem and as such, the counsel which it proffers occupies a prime place as it dwells on moral, ethical, cultural and social values in the society. The nurturing ability of the divination oracle (Ifá) is aptly explored in nuptial chant. The lines below points in this respect:

Ìlèkè mérindínlógún ni ñ bẹ nídíí mi, I have sixteen strings of beads round
my hip,
Ìlèkè àní tẹ́ bá kàá tí ò bá pé, *If you count the beads and they are
less,*
Mo ní ẹ tú gbogbo ara mi *You may strip me of my dress.*
Şùgbón ẹ má wá tú tòbí mi o, *But, please, do not remove my
underwear,*
Nítorí gbogbo ohun tí mo mú wáyé *Because every virtue that I possess*
Ñbẹ lábé aşo. *Is under my clothing.*

In African cultural society just like what the scriptures prescribes, a woman's beauty is innate and not determined by bodily adornment. While her bodily adornment is for public consumption, the body is not. This is expressed by the bride in the lines:

Nítorí gbogbo ohun tí mo mú wáyé. *Because every virtue that I possess*
Ñbẹ lábé aşo. *Is under my clothing.*

The nurturing tenet of the ideology comes to the fore here as it is encapsulated in the oral art. Unlike what subsists in contemporary society where modernity has eroded on virtues and values, the nuptial chant through its nurturing mode serves as an interface between modernity and cultural studies. It emphasizes values and virtues as it nurtures life into mankind. Therefore, one finds in the African oral art, as far as the nuptial chant is concerned, the tenets of self-definition, self-consciousness, cultural awareness, mothering and nurturing

principles as enunciated in the womanist ideology which is in its historical context, is engendered and coloured by the reality of postmodern socio-cultural situation.

Conclusion

The work was carried out to examine the aesthetic colouration, the socio-cultural and ideological contexts of èkún iyàwó, nuptial chant/bridal chant performance in context of womanist conceptual/theoretical parameters. Womanism was thus adopted as the analytical framework while explaining the cultural context of the chant performance. The paper attempted an illustration of the essential historical and socio-cultural aspects of the traditional Yorùbá nuptial chant towards a better understanding of the embedded gender, moral, socio-cultural and historical values that are intrinsic in èkún iyàwó chant performance. Womanism as the basis of the analysis is found to be a cultural theory that is critically profound for the explication of the place of the institution of motherhood or mothering in African cultural epistemology as articulated in the oral chant. The oral genre of nuptial chant is ascertained as a formalized panegyric lament which eulogizes and expresses optimism of newly formed or constituted marital/family life and living in the society. It is in this context that the paper attempted an exploration of the meeting link between the bridal chant and the womanist ideology, as well as the interface between the old order cultural form and the postmodern recalibrations of this oral chant performance. The analysis also sought to illuminate the basic contextual ingredients that make the performance to remain still relevant in the postmodern socio-cultural context. Though the oral chant performance remains as old as the tribes and remains important in its cultural tunes, its present form tends to interface the old with modernity with its influences. In essence èkún iyàwó in its old form, just as in its modern form, in its aesthetics and social function, maintains its didactic values, serves as educative artifact that teaches society's cultural values across generation, upholding societal ethics, and upbraiding moral decadence among the people. In the tenets of its chants and performance, the analysis reveals that the chant recreates the role of mothering and womanhood as vital institution for historical, socio-cultural and socio-economic development of African society.

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