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Breaking the Buffalo Woman’s Silence
The Rewriting of Ifa Divination Literature in Mobolaji Adenubi’s “The Importance of Being Prudent”

This essay explores the subversive potential of one contemporary Nigerian woman writer’s version of a well-known traditional Yorùbá tale of a hunter’s encounter with a buffalo woman. Mobolaji Adenubi’s “The Importance of Being Prudent,” which is included in her collection of stories based on Ifa divination narratives, Tales From Times Before (1997), had earlier appeared in an anthology called Breaking the Silence: An Anthology of Short Stories by the Women Writers of Nigeria (1996). While several contemporary Nigerian writers have drawn upon and transformed the topos of hunter and buffalo woman in their literary work, both in English and in Yorùbá, Adenubi is, as far as I know, the only woman writer to have done so.

1 I would like to stress the fact that while this tale is well-known within the Yoruba oral tradition, there is, of course, no one authentic or authoritative version of it. Whether performed orally or employed in the work of contemporary writers, it always interacts with the performative or literary context in which it occurs and is, accordingly, transformed in more or less subtly meaningful ways.


As I shall argue, the narrative strategy she employs has a subversive effect on the narrative as a whole, giving rise to contradictions, incoherencies and conflicts between the plot and moral conclusion of her story on the one hand and the way in which the reader is invited to empathize and identify with the buffalo woman. Furthermore, it raises important questions which Adenubi takes up and reconsiders in some of her later works.

The encounter of hunter and Buffalo Woman

In order to appreciate the subversive effect of Adenubi’s narrative strategy in her version of the tale of a hunter’s encounter with a buffalo woman, it will first of all be necessary to provide an outline of the plot. One day, a formidable hunter encounters a buffalo in the forest. The buffalo, unaware of the hunter’s presence, takes off its skin, turns into a beautiful woman and hides the skin in a termitarium, whereupon the hunter proceeds to steal it and goes home. The buffalo woman, desperate when she finds that her skin is no longer there, follows the hunter’s footprints until she gets to his house, where she stays and becomes his second wife. Unlike the hunter’s senior wife, who secretly watched the hunter when he came home after stealing the skin, the buffalo woman does not know that her skin is hidden in the attic of the house. One day, after many years of marriage, the buffalo woman and the senior wife get into a serious argument, and the former is ridiculed for her buffalo identity. In this way, the buffalo woman finally learns where her skin is hidden. She retrieves it and turns back into a buffalo, kills the senior wife and her children, and runs off into the forest in order to kill her husband as well, who, she believes, gave away the secret of her buffalo identity. Her husband sees the angry buffalo approaching and, immediately suspecting that it is his wife, takes to his heels. She pursues him and almost succeeds in killing him. What saves him is his ability to transform himself into a tiny water insect just when she has caught up with him. When her husband thus disappears, the buffalo woman returns home, takes leave of her children, and departs for heaven as Oya, who is well-known as the powerful Yorùbá deity of (thunder)storms.

Fortunately, as the tale has it, the buffalo woman did not know of the hunter’s secret power because his mother had been able to interrupt him just when he was about to reveal the secret in answer to his junior wife’s cunning questions. The cautioning words of the hunter’s mother represent the tale’s moral conclusion – the importance of being prudent. In what follows, I shall examine Adenubi’s narrative strategy and its subversive potential.