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### Through Other Eyes and Voices: Women in *Koteba* and *Mmonwu* Performances

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#### Abstract

In many indigenous African performances while a sizeable number of the characters and the majority of the spectators are female, only men and male actors organise and perform in these theatrical performances. This observation was particularly obvious in the *Koteba* of the Bamana of Mali and *Mmonwu* performances of the Igbo of Nigeria which I studied recently.

This paper's main argument is that theatrical performances are very much part of the cultural and social processes of society and they are therefore implicated in the politics of identity and its representation in society. Thus, the marginalisation of women in most spheres of public life in Bamana and Igbo societies is graphically reflected in the fact that in the two performances, women remain on the sidelines, on the receiving end of male articulations of male and other identities. Women's views, their identities and the power to occupy and thus speak from the public domain and space are denied and usurped by the dominant male 'Other' who uses this power to maintain hold on power. The paper concludes therefore that very often a theatrical performance is a good indicator and a reflection of the culture or society from which it originates, and that perhaps changing the mechanics and dynamics of performance may be the way to change the mechanics and dynamics of society.

#### Introduction

On an evening in late July 2004, a steady stream of people could be seen animatedly making their way towards the centre of Markala, a town a few kilometres away from Segou in Mali; they were all heading towards a walled compound, which was the *ton* compound. The *ton* is the Bambara name for the youth association which exists in every Bamana village or town. The crowd was excited because it was assembling to watch a performance of the popular comic satires being staged by the town's *kotebaton* – the theatre group within the *ton*. What was firstly noticeable about

this stream of potential audience was its composition: it comprised mainly women and children, and just a few young men. But significant by their absence were grown up men, especially the elders, who (we had been told) are the most socially and politically powerful group in Bamana society.

That the elders keep away from the performances is understandable and will be explored later in this paper. The stream of spectators soon fills up the audience space within the walled compound; some sit on few chairs which had been provided by the *ton* members, some had brought their own chairs along with them, while the rest found themselves vantage viewing positions. As soon as the spectators had settled in their respective places, the drummers (five in number) emerged from the changing room located down stage right playing the customary entrance music. Together with the *bamuko* dance, this opening section is called the *kotebadon*; the drummers were followed immediately by a motley group of performers/dancers who wore an assortment of costumes. They danced in a single file once round the slightly elevated stage before turning in the direction of the audience to acknowledge them. The latter responded by clapping and whooping loudly. The dancers engaged the audience in a comic banter before retreating into the dressing room, while the musicians made their way to a bench which had been reserved for them downstage right. After a while, the drummers began a new beat and tune which, since the song was intended to indicate the skit that was to follow, the audience immediately picked up and joined in. As this song and mime were going on, four of the dancers who had retreated to the dressing room after the introduction emerged and their entrance threw the entire audience into hilarious laughter because they had re-emerged as a family of four – Koke (husband), Mariamoufin (first wife), Nyebaje (second wife) and Jeneba (daughter). The family entered the stage and walked across to greet the Dugutigi (village head) who sat upstage centre. The cause of the laughter was the fact that the three women in the family were, in fact, performed by male actors; thus, the incongruity of male bulging and rippling muscles struggling to be contained and showing through female gowns and dresses, and the combined shrilly voices and 'feminine' mannerisms of the actors were too comic for words (Fig 1). The *Kote-tlon* satiric theatre of the Bamana is an all male performance. It was also even more striking that the actors were all men given that the theme to be explored in this skit – two wives in a polygamous marriage competing for the affection of their husband – was one which concerned women more than it did men. It was female behaviour and attitudes more than those of the men which were under scrutiny.



Fig. 1 Nyebaje (Moussa Diakhite) and Mariamoufin

In the first sketch, Koke has two women, Mariamoufin (first wife) and Nyebaje as the second. Mariamoufin is presented as the Bamana male's ideal woman – she is obedient and submissive to her husband even though he treats her very badly when he marries his second wife, Nyebaje. The latter has more modern and radical ideas about womanhood and her role. Nyebaje has strong views about things and insists on being heard; she is interested in her looks and well-being, boldly asserts that she is not the 'cooking or cleaning type of wife', and besides, she manages to get her husband, Koke, to do what she wants. She, as should be expected, is not a favourite of the audiences because she goes against the norm and threatens the *status quo* by what is presented as her outrageous behaviour. Because of this, she is as expected the one to lose out in the polygamous battle of the wives, while her co-wife, Mariamoufin, is praised and eventually reinstated as the favourite wife, having earlier been sent packing to her parents by the besotted Koke. Koke, in spite of his wrong judgements and bumbles, ends up having the best of both worlds - he is the love interest of both women at different times in the play and all through no attempt is made to present him as the fickle-minded fool that he really is. The shows are framed in such a way that it is the women who are on trial, with one being used as a comparative foil for the other, while Koke's behaviour and antics are never scrutinised or judged. The second sketch deals with Koke and Jeneba, his daughter by Mariamoufin. Koke, having been abandoned temporarily by his two wives still has Jeneba to keep house for him. He entrusts her with the care of the home, especially with looking after his flock of beloved chickens. But all that Jeneba desires is to escape from this

dreary village life and the domination of her father with her lover, Wankyu, who had recently returned from Peking (Beijing). Again, because she is seen as not accepting her designated place in the social order by trying to disrupt the father-daughter relationship or bidding to escape her socially ascribed role, Jeneba is presented as a lazy, naïve daydreamer who disobeys her father in order to please her boyfriend who, the spectators are convinced, was going to take her for a ride. Either way, she is only dreaming to escape from her father's exploitative authority into that of her lover. In no way is she conceived or presented as being capable of a life without being under the controlling influence of a man. Even her dream of escaping to China is presented as a threat to the social order and it is made to fail so she remains stuck at home attending to her father's needs and demands. The play's ending is deliberately left ambiguous, with Jeneba still on stage as her father and her lover pummel each other off stage. The spectators do not even remember her as they wildly cheer the two men off.

Similarly, the Enemma festival performances which I watched in Nkpor in Nigeria between 1993 and 1997 began for our team of researchers in the compound which the Ochammili group was using as its base. When we got to the place the musicians were already playing and some dancers were dancing round the place in the traditional *icho mmonwu* routine (this is the preliminary dance in which non-masked members of a performance troupe search for their masquerades) As we waited and watched the dancers, the group's Onuku (the Fool) masquerade emerged from the dressing room and directly proceeded to chase all the young boys around and whoever he caught he humped or simulated copulating with them. After the Onuku, came a beautiful maiden masquerade, later identified as Adamma (Beautiful Daughter), came out from the dressing room escorted by her male non-masked guide. She was dressed as a young girl in very shiny yellow costume, a red hand bag and lots of jewels around her neck and on her hair. She was very shy and would not lift her face to look at people, even when they gave her money to dance, she did so with her eyes turned away, sometimes covering her face with a little fan which she held in her right hand. She was acting the coy young woman. As soon as Onuku saw her dancing, he made for her and began trying to copulate with her, she for her part desperately protecting herself by crossing her legs and covering her genitals with her fan and handbag. The last pair to emerge from the dressing room was Nna Mmuo and Nne Mmuo, Adamma's parents. Like her daughter, Nne Mmuo was very reserved and coy in the way she carried herself, walking very demurely beside her husband, the latter reaching out to put a protective hand around her and fanning her when she danced. Unlike her daughter, Nne Mmuo wore wrapper and a blouse with elaborate head-tie. She had beads around her neck, and bangles made from elephant tusks on her wrists and ankles – the bangles and rich cloth symbolise that she is the wife of a wealthy man. Her movements and gestures, like Adamma's, were very graceful and

feminine. When we eventually got to the village square where the festival was taking place, there were other family groups with similar types of characters, some were already performing when we arrived, while others came after our group. There were other mothers, daughters, flirtatious *agbogho mmuo* characters, female traders, a white European District Officer and his wife. Thus, the Enemma festival performance, like the Igbo masquerade theatre which it is a part of, had female and male characters. But significantly all the actors in the festival performances were men and are usually so in most other instances of Igbo masking theatre. The reason for this is that the *Mmonwu* cult which is responsible for all masking in Nkpor is a males-only society whose members are admitted through an initiation called *ima mmuo*. Only initiated Nkpor males are authorized to take part in the masking theatre as actors, musicians and dancers (although in some Igbo masking traditions women are allowed to participate in the theatre as dancers or in some instances they are permitted to sing).

Although different in many ways, a major feature which *Koteba* and *Mmonwu* theatre forms have in common is the exclusion of women as either performers or active participants in the theatre-making process. One often wonders why this male only participation exists in *Kote-tlon* (the satiric comedies) and *Mmonwu*, given that these two are the dominant indigenous performance forms of the Bamana of Mali and the Igbo of Nigeria, respectively. This exclusion of women and girls from the theatre-making process is even more surprising since women very often make up a sizeable proportion of the spectators for *Mmonwu* and *Koteba* performances. In fact, for the *Koteba* satiric sketches (*kote-tlon*) in particular, women are often in the majority in the audience as was the case at the shows I watched. And in Igbo culture, although they scream and run away when they see or are approached by a masquerade, women still are well represented in the audiences of *Mmonwu* performances in Nkpor, and in deed in all instances of masking theatre all over Igboland, even though they may not sit or stand in the front row.

In this paper, I intend to show that it is not by accident that women are excluded as actors or direct agents in the theatre making process in these two theatre traditions – their participation is peripheral in both. In the *Koteba*, although it can be claimed that women are part of the masked performances, being positioned within the concentric rings made up of lines of performers, and also singing some of the narrative songs for the *Sogo Bo* (the puppets), they still are not allowed to put on a mask and perform any of the characters, just as in the *Mmonwu* theatre. The key argument here is that a theatre form is always interwoven and implicated in the cultural fabric and socio-political structures and processes of the society from which it originates or in which it exists. And to understand this performance-society relationship, it is necessary to consider a host of interrelated factors within Bamana and Igbo societies. Key issues to consider are: the control and use of public and private spaces, the politics

of articulating, negotiating and expressions of individual and shared identities, theatre as social action and part of the social process, the politics of power and social control. Knowledge of how these interrelated issues play out in Bamana and Igbo cultures should throw some light on the fact of women's exclusion in the two theatre traditions.

According to Victor Turner, cultures 'are most fully expressed in and made conscious of themselves in their ritual and theatrical performances' (in Appel and Schechner, 1990: 1). That is to say that each culture generates performance types which are expressive, as well as part of its social processes, and through performance, Turner adds, 'the central meanings, values and goals of a culture are seen "in action", as they shape and explain behavior' (1). Through theatre and performances one is able to glimpse the complex patterns of social intercourse between people within society, and one is also able to have intimations about the social processes and historical movements and cultural shifts that a society has experienced or is going through. Wherever it is made, the theatre or performance, as Maria Shevtsova points out, 'vibrates with the movement of its society' (1993: viii-ix).

Bamana and Igbo societies are patriarchal and so men have overriding cultural, social and political power. And quite often, in most matters relating to public life, men are deferred to by women, irrespective of age, intellectual and material ability - this means that in both cultures a boy ranks above his mother in social standing, and if he has a sister, she is further down in the social hierarchy. But among the men, however, especially in Bamana society, the elderly males are the group highest placed and as such they are the ones who control most social processes. Because of this, they are deferred to in all matters, whether public and private, by the younger men and the women. The implication of this is that women seem to have very little or no direct political or public power in Bamana and Igbo societies as they are often denied visibility and agency in the public domain. This dominance by elderly males in Bamana society and males in general in Igbo culture is reflected in every aspect of life in both contexts, in the privacy of the home, as well as in but more especially in the communal square, the public arena where important political and social decisions are made.

For the Bamana, the dominance of the elderly males has led to the need in the young men to use the *koteba-ton* to develop comic satires which attack and make fun of the elders. Although every young person of both sexes joins the *ton*, membership between males and females differ, for while male members can remain members until well into their forties and early fifties, women cease being members once they are married or once they reach the age of twenty-five. It is very obvious that the theatre, the *kote-tlon* in particular, is the main avenue and instrument through which the anger and dissatisfaction of the youth with the excessive power of the headmen and elders are expressed. According to Brink (1978), the power of

the elders in controlling land and jobs, as well as in determining when the young men got married and became accepted as full men, produced 'latent contradictions' and tensions in the relations between elders and the often sexually and economically frustrated young males. The frustration, Kerr points out, is responsible for 'the prominence of satire on sexual themes, aimed at unfaithful wives, impotent old men and cuckolds' (1995: 5).

There are three types of *Koteba* performances - the masquerade performances which are held at the annual festival in the communal square, the non-masked satiric sketches which can be performed anywhere and at any time of the year, and the *Sogo Bo*, the puppetry performances. A major difference between the three types of performances is that while the masquerade and puppet performances usually take place during the day, the comic satires are performed at night. Another difference is that while the masked performances are concerned with sacred themes in which Bamana ancestral and folk heroes, deities and spirits feature, the satiric sketches deal with human characters and their themes are secular and social. The *kote-tlon*, as already pointed above, is the major means through which Bamana young males are able to challenge the authority and power of their male elders. In fact, the satiric sketches are the only theatre performances in Bamana culture devoted to and often used effectively as instruments and contexts for social criticism. However, while the female members of the *koteba-ton* take part in the masquerade performances which, by their very nature, are strong affirmations of the *status quo*), and while they can sing or dance in the *Sogo Bo*, it is significant that their involvement is peripheral. As dancers or chorus members they usually occupy the outer circles of the concentric rings of the *koteba* spatial structure; but they never wear masks or manipulate the puppets. The satiric comedies are a different matter altogether as they are not even allowed on the stage let alone perform in the sketches. This exclusion is very significant given that a high proportion of the characters are female and the themes explored are those which involve women. Themes and ideas explored range from representations of feminine characteristics, expected roles and responsibilities in society, and those who conform receive approbation while those who deviate or challenge these expected roles are highly disapproved of. Examples of comic/satiric sketches in the *Kote-tlon* repertory include 'The Unfaithful Wife', 'A Polygamous Husband and His Two Wives', 'The Father, the Daughter and Her Lover', 'The Blind Man, His Wife and The Leper' etc.

The other major group who are the butt of the comic sketches are the dominant elderly males and their attempts to keep their firm grip on society; in the plays they are often undermined and upstaged either by devious and scheming women such as the husband who is pulled around and manipulated by his two wives which made him look extremely stupid in the play on polygamy. The same character became the father in the second sketch in which he is pitted against a stubborn and love-struck

daughter and an apparently resourceful, modern and 'progressive' thinking young man, Wank-yu, who returns to the village from Peking and promptly seduces the man's daughter, Jeneba, by promising to take her with him to China. The young girl, to impress her lover, kills and cooks one of her father's precious fowls. As the young man tucks into the meal he is challenged by the enraged father, but the younger man proceeds to teach the latter a lesson in *karate* and *kung-fu*, one of the skills he had learnt while in China. In both sketches, the old men are made to look ridiculous, while the younger men, and only occasionally the women, are triumphant.

The sketches, apart from being a means of publicly taking on the elders and playfully keeping the women in check, are also contexts for general social critique and cultural reappraisal. For the young males who, for an extended period of time in their lives, are under the authority and control of their fathers, the sketches enable them to register their dissatisfaction with the *status quo* and sometimes to seriously challenge the authority and dominance of the elders. But at times, however, it just enables them to let off steam; it gives them a public space from and a voice with which to express their displeasure; unfortunately, this means of speaking out is not also available to their female counterparts who, it seems, are denied this social and cultural right of publicly expressing their dissatisfaction. Experientially, they have their gender roles and identities defined and their lives practically run by their fathers or uncles, and theatrically, their feminine identities and female roles are represented on stage exclusively by their brothers and male cousins. This is partly so because they lose their membership of the *ton* much earlier than their male counterparts, but mainly because the patriarchal social system under which they live ensures that the *kote-tlon* performances are exclusive to the male members of the *koteba-ton* – that is, that while they can take part in the masquerade shows, they are not allowed to act in the satires. Either way, there seems to be a closing of ranks among the men when it comes to who can or can not use this public forum as a weapon to express their dissatisfactions or to challenge the *status quo*. As a result, one major instrument of critical social and self-evaluation in Bamana society, the satiric comedies, is not available to women. It was not surprising that members of the *koteba-ton* in Markala, whose performance I watched, had never given any thought to the exclusion of women and most of them were genuinely taken aback when they were asked about it. Surprisingly, however, the female members of the audience on the night who were asked about the situation, incidentally, had not given it much thought either, with many of them maintaining that it was not an issue for them.

In Nkpor masking area, women are not even allowed to see a mask costume when it is not in use, let alone touch it. Even when they've donated materials for the costumes, these are out of bounds once they are designated masquerade paraphernalia – sometimes, these materials can be reclaimed by the female donors after the performance, but they are not

allowed near such materials while they are still in use. The major means of exclusion in some masquerade zones in Igboland is through initiation (*imammonwu*) which is only open to male children of between the ages of eight and twelve. But even in zones where there are no initiations, taking part in the masquerade theatre as a performer is not open to women and the men do all they can to maintain the mystery, (mystique) while keeping the expressive privileges of masking well out of reach of women. One of the oaths that young boys take at the end of their initiation into the cult enjoins them never to reveal the content of the initiation to their mothers or sisters and any female relatives; they are especially enjoined to keep the myth of the masquerade characters as dead ancestors and spirits returned to the world of the living intact. In fact, men in Igbo society, including young initiated boys, boast about masking as something that makes them greater than their mothers or gives them social advantage and power over them. The expression, *ife nji ka nnem*, encapsulates this sense of superiority and privilege which Igbo men feel and have over women. Thus, when asked Igbo men never acknowledge that the masked figures are disguised male actors pretending to be ancestors or other characters.

Given that the masquerade theatre is the main theatre form of Igbo culture, it is easy to understand the significance of this advantage. So, the question therefore has to be why a sizeable population in Igbo society does not have any access whatsoever to this means of artistic and cultural expression. As in the *Koteba* performances, female characters are as many as male ones in the *Mmonwu* performances, and also, as in the *Koteba*, *Mmonwu* theatre often uses satire to subject aspects of society, human behaviour and relationships to scrutiny, censor or praise. The fact that issues explored in the masquerade theatre divide equally between female and male concerns – the satiric Ayaka and Osonigwe night masquerades in Nkpor sing about men as well as about women - highlights the fact that these issues are only presented from only the male perspective. However, this fact seems to be glossed over by both men and women and, as was the case in Mali, when the male *Mmonwu* performers in Nkpor were asked to explain why women were not allowed to wear masks or perform in central positions in the theatre, they too were surprised that such a question was being raised for it had seemed natural to them and the women did not overly complain either. It was not until it was pointed out to them that it was a denial of the right to speak or respond to criticism as the men are able to do when they are caricatured or attacked in a sketch that some grudgingly acknowledged the implication of the exclusion. But the advocates of tradition among them, however, refused to see it as a problem and gave reasons which ranged from the assumption that women were not interested (a view surprisingly supported by a poll of some of the women themselves), to the view that masking is physically too demanding for the female physique and sometimes too messy for their 'delicate feminine sensibilities'. One of the main reasons why the masquerade theatre

evolved, to serve as an instrument of social control with women being one of the target groups that needed to be controlled, was mentioned by only one Nkpor elder. It was logical, therefore, this elder argued, to deny such a group access to this mechanism of social control and for its secrets to be kept from them.

By making masking a semi-sacred activity, and by presenting the characters as dead ancestors returned to interact with their living descendants or as spirits of things and deities thereby giving these characters/actors attributes of the sacred, the Igbo male cult is able to claim that its activity had been ordained by the gods from the beginning of time. This also gives so much power to the actors to criticize whoever they wish to criticize without any fear of reprimand or challenge, especially from the women or non-initiates who have neither a say nor the power to use this instrument or art of representation. The almost religious and cultural setting in which the masking theatre exists in both Bamana and Igbo societies ensures that once in character, the actor can and does get away with a lot of the things done or said during a performance. But while any male person can answer back directly and in person or in extreme cases he can put on a mask to challenge the actor's viewpoint, a woman can do neither.

### **Politics of Representation in Bamana and Igbo Cultures**

The central issue being explored here is that of representation and self-presentation in Bamana and Igbo societies; but it is also about the structures of power and the kinds of relationships they engender in both societies. As already pointed out at the beginning of this essay, both Bamana and Igbo societies are patriarchal, which means that women are subjected, marginalized and disenfranchised in a lot of ways. It also means that ideas of what is good or bad, right or wrong, beautiful or ugly are very often determined and reinforced by men. This implies that ideas of what constitutes the collective identity of the group, as well the individual identities of constituent members and sections of the society are also set, monitored and controlled by men. It is obvious then that the question of female subjection, representation and mis-representation characteristic of patriarchal systems applies in these two cultures.

The concern of this paper is the fact of the theatrical representation of women by men in Igbo and Bamana cultures; thus, Butler's (1990) argument that gender and sexuality are inherently performative could be relevant here. Also relevant in this context is Simone de Beauvoir's famous assertion that 'one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one' (1973: 301). If one were to agree with de Beauvoir and Butler, gender therefore is something the individual becomes through learning and continued performance of a set of culturally determined and approved acts and behaviours. This certainly is interesting, not only because it destabilizes the

seemingly fixed binary notion of gender in society, but also because it highlights the theatricalised and performative nature of life – a fact Ervin Goffman (1959) hints at in *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*. If gender is an act, then there is no reason why men's performance of female gender or vice versa should raise any eyebrows since nothing about femininity or masculinity is natural; it is observing, learning and repeating acts and behaviours culturally sanctioned as feminine and masculine. But that aside, the question, however, remains why men in these two cultures monopolise the art and instruments of representation, why do they not want women to represent themselves or the men as the latter are able to do, and why do they deny women access to the public space and thus to public speaking?

Looking at a majority of African societies and their forms of cultural representation, and in particular the two performance forms being used here as examples of the denial of the right of self-representation to women, it is obvious that the denial of the right to represent themselves is an integral element of male domination in patriarchal societies. This is still very much the situation in Igbo and Bamana cultures as nothing has changed in both societies nor in their main forms of theatrical performance. There is no doubt that within these social settings and their associated cultural practices, the fear of what the marginalized groups could do if given the freedom to occupy and make use of the public space is at the root of structures of repression that have been put in place, including theatrical performances and all other forms of cultural and artistic expression and representation.

The powerful and influential position of the spirits who are believed to inhabit the masquerades in *Mmonwu* enables the theatre to be a strong political as well as social instrument of cultural and social ordering. Spirits are higher than humans in Igbo thought and therefore they are never challenged by the latter, with the result that characters, and therefore the actors who perform them, become very effective mouthpieces for male hegemonic ideologies and discourses. In the past and up to a point still today, the masquerades were and are used to pass judgement on people, as well as to physically discipline them. They have remained the upholders of social morality and law, presenting what is right or wrong, and what images and behaviours that are socially approved. Because the judgements and moral injunctions which they give are perceived to be coming from the spirits, they are never questioned. The fact that contained in these injunctions are the male constructed images specified for women, and the fact that this is done by the men alone is usually culturally glossed over. Also, the fact that these roles, responsibilities and expected modes of behaviour and the codes and injunctions through which they are circulated in society are the way that men want women to act and see themselves is not even considered, and surprisingly, not even by women themselves. The same is true of the representations of social types in Bamana society by the

male actors in the *Kote-tlon* performances. The fact that a sizeable proportion of the characters in the sketches are women and that the way they are represented and the way they are expected to behave are those conceived of by men does not appear to be an issue.

To be able to represent oneself is a major step towards an individual's liberation. History has shown that contexts of oppressions, exploitation and subjection are usually also contexts in which there is a denial of self-representation. The colonial and slave contexts in the New World were very good examples. The ability to represent one's self transforms an individual from a passive object into an active subject. In patriarchal societies such as the Bamana and Igbo, in which women are more often than not objects of and vehicles for men's desires and manipulation, they tend to be spoken about and for, but not by or for themselves. The construction and representation of women in Bamana and Igbo societies is by and through the male perspective - the images of women which circulate in the public domain are those based on the way men see and want women to be and not the way the women really are or feel about themselves.

Thus, it is not surprising that most of the skits in the *Kote-tlon* are very critical of female characters who show they have a mind of their own, an opinion or go against the behaviours expected of them. And in the Nkpor *Mmonwu* performances, especially in the Ayaka and Osonigwe satiric masquerades who compose and gleefully sing derogatory songs about stubborn, strong-willed and physically strong female characters. To be a physically strong woman is construed and presented negatively as in the song about the wife who gets the better of her husband in a domestic scuffle. In both theatre traditions, on the other hand, the virtues of the woman who knows and accepts her place is extolled and she is presented as the ideal woman. That ideal of womanhood, of course, usually means docility and submission to the authority of fathers, uncles, husbands or brothers. Of the three *kote-tlon* skits watched in Markala, two were about domestic scenes in which there were more female characters than there were males, yet the story was still woven around the husband in Sketch One and around the father and the lover in Sketch Two. The first skit was about a polygamous household and its fractious relationships, especially the bickering and bitching between the co-wives, and the second, more or less a sequel to Skit One, was about the father, the daughter and her lover, in which the daughter merely served as a backdrop for the father and lover who play out their antagonisms by having a go at each other. From the two sketches, it was clear that the women were deliberately presented in such a way to suggest that they had no life or existence outside that circumscribed and defined by their husbands (Mariamoufin and Nyebaje in Skit One) or lovers or fathers (Jeneba in the second skit). Their roles in the narratives were only as foils or as recipients of the actions of their male counterparts; in short, they were acted upon rather than acting in the

narratives about their own lives.

*Mmonwu* sketches are no different in their representation of women as objects of men's desire and control. In fact, the Ayaka masquerades who compose and sing satiric songs about people in the town as a means of correcting deviant or unacceptable behaviour compose songs very critical of strong minded women who have the upper hand in their relationship with their husbands, and meanwhile such husbands are satirized as being weak while the women are presented as unusual or 'different'. In general, the ideal woman is presented as one who exists for her man. This study of the Nkpor *Mmonwu* tradition could not identify in the corpus of female characters strong independent women with equal status as their male counterparts. In the *Ochammili* performance, of the family of about ten members, there were only two female characters, a mother and a daughter. The mother's role was simply to support her husband; however, this was not in an active sense of helping him to run the affairs of the family. Her support came mainly in how she behaved, dressed and danced both to please her husband and to enhance his standing in the eyes of the public. This family outing consisted of the Nna Mmuo (Father) displaying his wealth which included his two exotic pets, Ochammili (Giraffe) and Anukaibie (Zebra), his array of police guards, his own private Ezeikolobia (hunter), the family Onuku (Fool), an obligatory foreigner represented by Mmonwu Awusa, Nne Mmuo (Mother) and Adamma (Daughter). As with the pets, all these characters too were on display. Together, including his wife and daughter who were very finely dressed as part of this display, they represent a measure of Nna Mmuo's wealth. The two female characters (of course played by male actors) were as colourfully attired as the Giraffe and Zebra, and Nna Mmuo constantly used copious self-referential gestures to proudly announce to the world his ownership and control of everything and everyone within his household. All of them belonged to him and they helped to enhance his status. This performed attitude very clearly reflects an underlying tendency in Igbo culture to treat women as property which can be owned and exchanged by and between men. In the performance, Nne Mmuo and Adamma 'belong' to Nna Mmuo and he is meant to have control over them (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 Nna Mmuo (left) leading Nne Mmuo out to the arena

The image of woman as something or someone to be shown off as an indicator of a man's wealth and social standing is very much a part of Bamana and Igbo iconography – for when a woman looks good, healthy and well-fed, it is because her husband or father provides for her. But, ironically, it is never the other way round, even if everybody in the community knows a husband is lazy and that it is the wife who works to feed and clothe her family, the man still gets praise for it. The image of a woman who can take care of herself, though not disapproved of, is not one found freely circulating in the public domain and in performances. In fact, such a woman is going against the grain, and thus a threat to the normal order of things. And by reinforcing this objectified and passive image of woman, by subtly disapproving of or suppressing the alternative image of the free-willed, active, thinking, doing and achieving woman, *Kote-flon* and *Mmonwu* performances contribute greatly in denying agency and subject positions to women. In this way a subjectivity which the patriarchal social order denies them is made to appear normal and natural in *Koteba* and *Mmonwu* performances. In the latter, this exclusion from active participation and denial of agency is presented as having been sanctified by the gods, while in the former the exclusion and denial are attributed to the social institution of marriage and the biological process of having children.

## Conclusion

In most illusionistic forms of theatre, according to Augusto Boal (1979), the spectator relinquishes his/her power of analysing and representing reality by delegating the responsibility to act to the actor; the latter then has the authority, as it were, to speak on their behalf. And this is wholly true of *Koteba* and *Mmonwu* performances in which the actors become the mouthpieces of their respective societies as they subject their cultures to scrutiny and revision. The fact that there is an element of spirituality underpinning the two theatrical practices gives added power to the actors, who incidentally are only men. Boal also advocates the creation of a theatre in which everybody can act and everybody can watch at the same time. The theatre is a context and an instrument for interrogating cultures and their social processes, and it is in the act of questioning and critically looking at these social processes that schisms, irregularities and injustices can be identified and possibilities for change explored. In *Koteba* and *Mmonwu* theatres, women are not allowed to be agents in this process of questioning or critically engaging with culture and society. Rather, they are at the receiving end of men's engagement with culture, with men's interpretation of the world, and also with men's representations of the different, shifting and contesting identities within culture. Through the subjective eyes of men, women are asked to see themselves; and also through the biased voices of the men, women's position, roles, responsibilities, feelings and thoughts are represented in Bamana and Igbo theatrical performances.

Finally, it is important to point out here that the feminine gender which the male actors in these performances enact is essentially ideology driven and therefore strategically constructed:

When spectators 'see' gender, they are seeing (and reproducing) the cultural signs of gender, and by implication, the gender ideology of a culture. Gender in fact provides a perfect illustration of ideology at work since 'feminine' and 'masculine' behavior usually appears to be a 'natural' - and thus fixed unalterable - extension of biological sex. (Diamond, 1996 quoted in Counsell and Wolf, 2001:79)

Femininity, as performed in *Koteba* and *Mmonwu* sketches, is a passive and submissive femininity, which reflects and at the same time reinforces the subjected and marginalized position of women in the patriarchal social structures of Bamana and Igbo societies. The femininity represented in *Koteba* and *Mmonwu* contrasts sharply with the active femininity which women themselves enact in their everyday lives and in other performances forms in these two cultures. In *Koteba* and *Mmonwu* performances the possibility of agency or a self-assertive and therefore potentially disruptive femininity is carefully underplayed or censored when present, or 'written'

out of the performance texts altogether.

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