

GENDER AND MAGIC IN JUKUN FOLKTALES

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I. INTRODUCTION

Gender conflict, fear of female sexuality and then magic to prevent women from predominating a society are a common topic in tales almost all over Africa and perhaps throughout the world. The Jukun of Northeastern Nigeria are, however, an extreme example for an almost overwhelming fear of female sexuality and are a whole society bound together by magic and fear.

The Jukun are an ethnic group that lives in scattered units along the upper Benue valley and the adjacent highlands and plateaus of northeastern Nigeria, with a cultural and religious centre in Wukari where their sacred king, the Aku Uka, resides. They are patrilinear, but discussions about a former matriarchate can be found in ethnographic sources (such as Meek 1931: 37, 51). Jukun modern societies are subject to many changes, losing the old values and ethics and giving way to a Western lifestyle or to Islam. Still, the fear of female sexual powers and then respect for the secrets reserved for the men – old shrines and magic practices – remain and are mostly depicted in and learned from the stories and tales told in Jukun communities until today.

It becomes evident in Jukun folktales that the latent conflict and the tension between the two spheres of the society – male and female – is a central topic. Even if the general theme of a story superficially deals with a different problem than gender conflict and magic, various motifs giving hints to a problematic relationship full of mistrust, suspicion, rivalry and sexual temptation can be found hidden in almost all its sequences. The principle gender concept of the Jukun is based on social relationships which are formally and categorially regulated. It is not evident to an outsider how the men and the women experience and estimate their role and status in the society. Being asked about rules, rites and tasks within the Jukun community, men and women alike would always describe a frictionless functioning set of complimentary gender roles. The gender concept of the society would be presented as an ideal pattern. If one wants to realize the underlying conflicts and tensions, about which people are obviously most often unconscious, folktales would give an answer with their encoded and hidden messages and motifs.

In order to illustrate some of these observations one story has been chosen which stands for a number of variations which are found amongst many Northern

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Jukun communities. The story we selected contains motifs which give clues to the gender and magic, both complex on various levels. A short résumé of the story will be given, with indications to similar motifs and their variations (see handout).

The tale has been analysed mainly by using a psycho-sociological method of interpretation. Motifs especially dealing with gender and sexuality have been analysed in interaction with the ethnographical background. In general, any interpretation is based on the original texts including all variations of the story. Experiences of several fieldwork sojourns among the Jukun play a central role in dealing with their oral tradition.

II. SUMMARY OF THE STORY

Hare has two wives, one being barren (Goat) and one being fertile (Daso, his first wife). Goat is always beaten by her husband and suffers as she has no children to help her so that her work is never done at the end of the day. One day she hangs up okra and red sorrel seeds under her roof. When she has left for her farm, Okra and Red Sorrel fall out of their encasements and come down as human beings to do Goat's household work. They cook food secretly and give it to Hare before they return to their places under the roof.

This is repeated for some days before Goat stays at home in order to find out – with the help of an old woman – what is going on in her house. She catches Okra and Red Sorrel and begs them to stay with her as her children. As both have no place to hide, they are forced to agree and stay. When Hare comes back home, he intends to beat Goat for her laziness as he always used to do, but he finds her sitting in her house with her two beautiful daughters. He is overwhelmed by the beauty of the two girls and touches the vagina of each of them. Both girls complain about this.

Hare decides to tell his friend Sunu¹ that he has two beautiful daughters at home and that Sunu should come to choose one as his wife. Sunu comes at night to play a game, and both girls are asked to come and bring fire, which is only done to allow Sunu to watch them and make a decision about which one to marry. The next day he decides to marry Okra, and he in exchange gives his own daughter called Oil to Hare.

Okra moves to Sunu's compound with her girlfriend, who has the task of tasting Okra's food, to see whether there is any trace of okra hidden in it, for the girl would die from it. Sunu's mother always finds ways to kill his wives, and she tries to feed Okra with a forbidden okra soup. Finally she succeeds, burning one tiny okra seed into the earthen dish from which Okra eats her soup. Sunu

¹ Sunu is an important traditional title of Kona.

himself is not present. He has left for the sacred town of Wukari to take part in an important religious feast. Okra finally dies and her girlfriend desperately tries to send a bird to Wukari to tell Sunu what has happened and to make him come back home. Through a tiny bird and an orphan listening to its song, Sunu receives the message. He returns home and finds the dead wife with her mourning, pale girlfriend, and his mother sitting nearby. Sunu knows that his mother has killed his wife and he leaves again to heat his spears. While his mother, being a witch, is dancing around the place and singing about her crime, he prepares his weapons and finally stabs three red-hot spears into her clitoris. The mother dies.

Before Okra's burial, Sunu sends the sad message to her parents whereby Goat starts to cry and asks for revenge. Hare then sends Oil, Sunu's daughter (and now Hare's wife), who cannot stand heat as she will melt otherwise, into the burning sun to thresh corn. As she obeys and starts threshing, she melts and dies, becoming scattered all over the guineacorn.

The story ends with the advice to always treat one's wife appropriately to prevent bad things to happen. Until today it is said that fat found in guineacorn stems from the poor Oil lady who melted when she was threshing in the hot sun.

III. INTERPRETATIONS

First Sequence

A barren woman is maltreated by her husband. This reflects the bad status and the hopeless and miserable situation of women without children in the Jukun society. But then this poor woman receives two beautiful daughters through magic. While the woman seems to attract magic and the supernatural, the man (her husband, Hare) is not capable of understanding or dealing with these phenomena at all. As soon as the husband sees the two girls – his daughters – he touches their vaginas, an incestuous and intolerable act to the Jukun. Insensitive to magic and supernatural phenomenes, the man is just overwhelmed by female sexual attraction, all centered in the vagina.

Similar motifs can be found in many other Jukun stories where Hare steals the vagina deposited by a bathing girl or, in another story, Hare is even glued to the vagina of a giant wax dummy. This motif belongs to a series of variations which is widespread in West Africa and has been documented, compared and analysed in all its ethnical characteristics and details by Paulme (*The statue covered with glue / La statue enduite de glu*; 1989: 55-77). In several stories discussed by Paulme Hare touches the breasts of the statue and gets stuck, while in the Jukun folktale corpus Hare touches the statue's vagina and is glued onto it. Here it becomes evident which important role the vagina – being the most attractive part of the female body – plays to the Jukun.

Second Sequence

Hare's friend Sunu marries one of the beautiful girls, Okra, and Hare in turn gets Sunu's daughter, Oil-Lady, as his wife. In the Jukun society the exchange of daughters for marriage between friends is very common in order to guarantee that each girl receives a just treatment and all her special needs and desires are observed. When one girl is treated badly, the other exchanged girl will feel a family's revenge.

The motif may point out that parents fear that their daughters will not be well treated by the family of the new husband. Therefore newly married girls keep rather close contact to their own family. The presence of the girlfriend in the story is a matter of security and indicates that at least one person of confidence should be available to a newly married woman.

Third Sequence

As it is common in many West African societies' oral traditions, the bad mother-in-law appears to do her trade by killing the young innocent wife of her son. Sunu in the meantime has left for a religious feast abroad. Making use of Okra's weaknesses, the mother-in-law poisons her by feeding her with the forbidden food – okra – from which the girl dies immediately. Again, it is the male who does not realize the presence of magic and, again, it is the female, his mother, who understands and uses magic as part of her witchcraft to change the situation to her favour. One will never find a story where a father-in-law would commit such a crime. Wickedness, cruelty and cold blood are adjectives mostly attributed to the women. The men fear the women's negative power and influence and their ability to reach their aim by using their female powers.

Fourth Sequence

A bird is sent by Okra's surviving young girlfriend to inform Sunu at Wukari about what has happened at home. Sunu does neither understand the bird's message fast enough nor does he listen to his horse's warnings on his way back home. The storytellers of all variations of this story indulge in describing Sunu's male insensitivity and stupidity.

Fifth Sequence

Sunu, upset about the murder of his wife Okra, kills his malevolent mother by stabbing three heated spears into her clitoris. In this motif the vagina and, more specially, the clitoris, being the most dangerous and vulnerable part of the vagina, again plays a central role in indicating female power and threat. It is a traditional belief of the Jukun that witches can truly be killed only by destroying their sexual organs. Among the Jukun, the vagina is a female organ having ambivalent effects on men: on one hand it is mostly feared for its seductive, secret and unknown character, but on the other hand it is the most attractive and exciting female part

for men. Because of the seductive female powers, the men find themselves in a conflict in their relationship to the women. They have to protect themselves from something tempting and dangerous, which, paradoxically, they permanently look for. So they find themselves in the tense situation of constantly trying to gain total control over the women, while simultaneously doubting and fearing them.

IV. CONCLUSION

We have given a summary of the tale as it was told by Jik, an elderly woman who usually likes to entertain her audience with colourful stories and beautiful songs. But apart from the amusing surface of the tale there are different levels of understanding its main motifs. First, there is the smart evening entertainment presented by a skilled storyteller who observes and influences the members of a community as well as amuses them. Second, there is a hidden message, expressed consciously by the storyteller through metaphors, symbols and more well-known motifs of the community's oral traditions. Third, there is a message which is not consciously understood by both, spectators and performer, and deals with the patterns of gender conflict and its strategies.

The crucial point on all levels of the story is the interaction of gender conflict and magic. The female sphere of the society is understood as being mysterious, dangerous and at the same time attractive to the men, who in turn invent magic practices to defend themselves against unverifiable female powers. Their most important congregations and institutions are the *janu* shrines and the *janu* cult. *Janu* means "shrine", "ancestor worship" or "the men's secret society" and is the medium through which the *mam* cult or religion of the Jukuns is performed in Kona.

Not only the fact that a barren woman receives two children by magic embarrasses the men, but the whole female complex of pregnancy and "giving life" seems strange and suspect to them. On the other hand, the men need the women to produce their offspring. Being aware of this dependency the men try to develop a certain counterbalance which they find, for instance, in the secret handling of their *janu*-cult. The men's basic belief and fear is that the women might gain leadership, the control of the whole society, and that they might become too powerful. Therefore the men have to look for a way – secret and not too obvious – to impress and suppress the women. In order to reach this aim they link themselves with magic and to the mystery of the *janu*.

By handling and worshipping the *janu* in a secret way, Jukun men make the women believe that every human being who once died will come back in another embodiment – personified by the masks, the *janu* – to communicate with the living. Initiated men are the only persons allowed to see and meet the *janu* (the ancestors) personally. Due to this fact, the women should have great respect for

the men, for they can only communicate with the ancestors through the men's help and mediation, which then creates a certain dependance.

The men themselves have another view of the *janu*. They neither believe in the existence or the return of the ancestors nor in hearing voices or advice given by them. All forms of appearance of the *janu*, the given explications and interpretations are men's inventions to frighten and to impress the women. All libations and offerings are not done for the ancestors but to please the evil spirits. The men hidden behind the masks ask for food, drinks, tobacco or even money and the women are anxious to fulfill these wishes not knowing that this is how the men receive their stimulants – by outwitting the women. In the name of *janu*, the men receive donations which they use for their own consumption.

The men, of course, have to worry about keeping their secret of the *janu*. Women should never happen to know the truth about ancestor worship. If the secrets would be revealed to the women, they could easily overtake power and obtain superiority over the whole community, and the men would have to suffer severely under a female revenge and rulership.

Secret languages of many ethnic groups are invented and used for the same purpose: to impress outsiders and to pretend to possess magic power and superiority. Bettelheim comments that this kind of behaviour can also be observed in childrens daily behaviour patterns. Children often pretend to possess a secret knowledge just because they feel insure and weak. In most cases a secret serves to acquire recognition and prestige by a group where a person feels weak and inferior. Jukun male secret societies are mainly created in order to impress and to deceive women, even if the men have to harm themselves to keep the secret. (Bettelheim 1954/1975: 168,169)

The women's secret is their knowledge of menstruation and birth-giving. But this female domain has always existed, whereas men created their secret systems in reaction to or counterbalance to the female superiority and mystery given by nature. (Bettelheim 1954/75:164-177)

In Kona, a rather fragile balance is kept between the two sexes. Both sides have developed their particular arms – magic, religion and sexuality – to keep each other at bay and thus render social life at ease.²

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ABSTRACT

The Jukun of northeastern Nigeria still observe, besides Christianity and Islam, their own traditional religion which is called *maam*. Within their patriarchally organized society the whole institutionalized ritual sphere of *maam* is taboo for women. The men seem to be superior in religious life, ancestor worship and political decisions. Especially the handling of the masks and the ancestor worship is a resort where the men use their dominance and superiority to betray the women in order to fulfill their own demands. The women in their own part practice a non-institutionalized worship and possess a particular secret knowledge. In a society where there is no natural cause of diseases as well as no natural death, the uncontrolled magic powers of the women mean a constant threat to the well-organized male domain.

In folktales of the Jukun of Kona which we were able to collect during various fieldwork sojourns since 1995, this latent conflict between the male and female spheres forms a central topic. It becomes evident in motifs of oral literature of Kona that in order to preserve the male dominance, it is inevitable to disarm potentially dangerous women by destroying their sexual organs. Various stories show in a complex way that the men are constantly afraid of the hidden, unknown female knowledge and abilities, especially of the female sexuality. It is generally noticed that female sexual organs are treated in a mocking and ridiculous manner, whereas male sexual organs are never mentioned. The ambivalent gender relationship in the Jukun society becomes more obvious by analyzing and decoding the often hidden motifs and messages in the oral traditions, where magic is always used as a clue to explain the unknown world of the opposite gender.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die Jukun im nordöstlichen Nigeria sind trotz zunehmender Beeinflussung durch Christentum und Islam ihrer eigenen Religion, *maam*-Kult genannt, bis heute noch sehr verbunden. Innerhalb ihrer patriarchalisch ausgerichteten Sozialorganisation ist die gesamte institutionalisierte rituelle Sphäre des Maam-Kultes tabu für Frauen. Im religiös-sakralen Bereich, in der Ahnenverehrung und in politischen Entscheidungen scheinen die Männer offensichtlich eine Vorrangstellung einzunehmen. Besonders die Handhabung der Masken und der Umgang mit Geistern und Ahnen ist ein Ressort, in dem die Männer ihre Dominanz und Überlegenheit nutzen, um die Frauen zu täuschen, sie zu unterdrücken und in Abhängigkeit zu halten, um so ihre eigenen materiellen Bedürfnisse erfüllt zu sehen.

Die Frauen ihrerseits praktizieren eine nicht institutionalisierte Form der Ahnenverehrung und besitzen ein spezielles geheimes Wissen über weibliche Lebensvorgänge.

In eine Gesellschaft, in der die allgemeine Vorstellung keinen Raum läßt für eine natürliche Begründung für Krankheit sowie für einen natürlichen Tod, bedeutet die unkontrollierte Zauberkraft der Frauen eine konstante Bedrohung der gut organisierten männlichen Lebenskonzepte.

In den Erzählungen der Jukun von Kona, die wir während zahlreicher Feldforschungsanfehlungen seit 1995 sammeln konnten, stellt dieser latente Konflikt zwischen männlichen und weiblichen Sphären ein zentrales Thema dar. In vielen Motiven dieser oralen Literatur zeigt sich die Angst der Männer vor der versteckten Macht der Frauen und wie die Männer bemüht sind, ihre Dominanz und Vorherrschaft zu wahren. In einigen Erzählungen wird als probates Mittel zur Entmachtung potentiell gefährlicher Frauen die Zerstörung ihrer Sexualorgane beschrieben.

Verschiedene Erzählungen zeigen deutlich oder auch verschlüsselt, daß die Männer eine dauernde Furcht vor den unbekannten, verborgenen, bedrohlichen und magischen Fähigkeiten der Frauen ausgesetzt sind. Dazu gehört speziell die weibliche Sexualität, die gleichzeitig als anziehend und bedrohlich empfunden wird.

Es fällt auf, daß in den Erzählungen die weiblichen Sexualorgane oftmals in einer lächerlichen und abfälligen Weise dargestellt werden, während männliche Sexualorgane niemals erwähnt werden.

Durch Analyse und Entschlüsselung der oft versteckten Motive und Botschaften in den Erzählungen wird die ambivalente Beziehung der Geschlechter in der Gesellschaft der Jibe zueinander deutlich. In den oralen Tradition wird Magie vornehmlich als ein Schlüssel zur Erklärung der unbekannten Welt des anderen Geschlechtes genutzt.

RESUMO

Os Jukuns do nordeste da Nigéria ainda praticam, além do cristianismo e do islamismo, a sua própria religião tradicional, o *maam*. Dentro da sua sociedade, organizada patriarcalmente, toda a esfera ritual institucionalizada do *maam* é tabu para as mulheres. Os homens parecem ser superiores na vida religiosa, no culto dos antepassados e nas decisões políticas. É sobretudo no uso das máscaras e no culto dos antepassados que os homens exercem o seu domínio e superioridade para traírem as mulheres, a fim de realizarem os seus próprios desejos. As mulheres, por seu lado, praticam um culto não institucionalizado e possuem

um saber secreto que só a elas pertence. Numa sociedade em que não existe conhecimento duma causa natural para a doença e para a morte, os poderes mágicos das mulheres, escapando ao controlo dos homens, são uma ameaça constante em relação ao sistema organizado de domínio masculino.

Nos contos dos Jukuns de Kona que recolhemos no decurso de várias jornadas de trabalho de campo desde 1995, esse conflito latente entre as esferas masculina e feminina constitui um tema nuclear. Em certos motivos da literatura oral de Kona, torna-se evidente que, para preservar o domínio masculino, é inevitável desarmar as mulheres, potencialmente perigosas, destruindo-lhes os seus órgãos sexuais. Várias histórias revelam, de uma forma complexa, que os homens têm medo dos saberes e das artes secretas das mulheres e especialmente da sexualidade feminina. Nota-se constantemente que os órgãos sexuais femininos são alvo de troça, enquanto os órgãos sexuais masculinos nunca são mencionados. É através da análise e descodificação dos motivos e mensagens, frequentemente velados, das narrativas orais, que se torna clara a relação ambivalente entre os sexos no seio da sociedade jukun, onde a magia é sempre usada como uma chave para explicar o mundo desconhecido do sexo oposto.