

Oral Tradition as Feminist Counter-Discourse: Reconfiguring Patriarchy in Alobwed'Epie's *The Lady With a Beard*

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This study examines the intersection of oral tradition and gender dynamics within an African cultural context, arguing that patriarchal structures embedded in oral forms have historically silenced women's voices while simultaneously providing tools for their resistance and self-assertion. In many traditional societies, women have functioned primarily as listeners rather than narrators of their own histories due to entrenched patriarchal norms (Lerner, 1986, p. 212). Drawing on feminist and African womanist theory, this paper explores how oral traditions—proverbs, rituals, songs, folktales, and praise forms—serve as cultural repositories that construct and reinforce gender roles in Bakossi society as represented in Emmanuel Alobwed'Epie's *The Lady With a Beard* (Alobwed'Epie, 2005, p. 14). The study further demonstrates that although these traditions have often relegated women to passive roles, female characters in the novel appropriate the same cultural spaces that marginalize them to articulate agency, narrate their experiences, and challenge patriarchal authority (Nnaemeka, 2013, p. 364). Through qualitative textual analysis of the novel alongside ethnographic insights into Bakossi oral culture, the paper shows how Alobwed'Epie's use of orality reveals the profound impact of gendered cultural norms on the African woman while simultaneously envisioning transformation. The emergence of the "new African woman", embodied in the protagonist Emade, signifies a shift from silent endurance toward active negotiation of power and identity (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, p. 32). Ultimately, the study advocates a redefinition of gender roles grounded in cultural continuity yet oriented toward equity, asserting that oral tradition can function not only as a repository of patriarchy but also as a medium of feminist reconstruction and social change.

Keywords: oral tradition, African feminism, patriarchy, feminist agency, Bakossi culture

Introduction

Every society is structured by norms, values, and behavioral codes that collectively constitute culture, and culture has historically played a decisive role in shaping gender relations (Giddens, 2006, p. 27). Across many traditional African societies, clearly demarcated roles have been prescribed for men and women, often privileging male authority while constraining female participation in socio-cultural development (Lerner, 1986, p. 239). As a result, women have frequently been marginalized, stereotyped, and rendered voiceless within communal decision-making structures. The suppression of women's capacities and public expression has contributed to the disempowerment of the African woman and reinforced patriarchal hierarchies across generations. This study interrogates these gendered cultural dynamics through the lens of oral tradition in Emmanuel Alobwed'Epie's *The Lady With a Beard*. It examines how women contest oppressive norms and harmful traditional practices

while negotiating new identities within their cultural milieu. Central to this analysis is the emergence of the “new woman”—fearless, assertive, and resistant—who challenges inherited constraints in order to create enabling spaces for herself and other women (Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 71).

Oral tradition occupies a foundational place in African indigenous culture. As Kontein Trinya observes, it encompasses “all unwritten traditional expressions of culture” transmitted across generations through folktales, myths, proverbs, songs, and ritual performances (Owomoyela, 2004, p. 5). These forms function not merely as repositories of communal memory but also as instruments through which societies encode behavioral values and social expectations. Owomoyela similarly emphasizes that folklore regulates nearly every dimension of traditional life, mediating the transmission of cultural knowledge from past to present (Owomoyela, 2004, p. 18). Through such processes, oral tradition both preserves cultural continuity and shapes social identity. Yet these same traditions have also participated in constructing gender hierarchies. Cultural narratives and practices frequently assign authority, leadership, and heroism to men while positioning women within domestic, reproductive, and supportive roles (Pateman, 1988, p. 6). As Mbatha notes, qualities associated with masculinity and femininity are socially constructed rather than biologically determined, yet they become naturalized through cultural repetition (as cited in Giddens, 2006, p. 110). Consequently, older generations often socialize younger women into accepting subordination as normative, while men monopolize decision-making power within family and community structures. Gender therefore becomes a crucial lens for understanding how power operates within society. African literary traditions have long reflected this imbalance: Writers such as Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, and Tsitsi Dangarembga portray women who, despite education or resilience, continue to function at the margins of patriarchal systems. Against this backdrop emerges the figure of the “new woman”, who resists subordination and asserts autonomy (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, p. 45). Alobwed’Epie’s *Emade* exemplifies this transformation, appropriating cultural authority and redefining womanhood through action rather than compliance.

The novel’s deep grounding in Bakossi orality reinforces this thematic project. As Solomon Iyasere suggests, the African writer relates to indigenous oral tradition “as a snail to its shell”, carrying cultural memory even within modern literary forms (Iyasere, 1975, p. 9). By embedding proverbs, ritual language, songs, and indigenous terminology within an English narrative framework, Alobwed’Epie demonstrates how oral tradition remains central to identity formation. This study therefore explores how these oral forms not only reflect gender roles but also enable their reconfiguration, showing that tradition itself can become a site of feminist negotiation and transformation.

Patriarchy and Masculine Authority in Bakossi Society

Patriarchal ideology constitutes one of the most pervasive structuring forces in the socio-cultural world represented in Emmanuel Alobwed’Epie’s *The Lady With a Beard*. The novel situates masculine authority within a ritualized Bakossi cultural framework in which gender roles are rigidly codified and symbolically reinforced through tradition, ritual practice, and communal expectations (Alobwed’Epie, 2005, p. 22). Patriarchy in this context is neither abstract nor merely ideological; it is enacted through everyday customs, social institutions, and embodied performances of masculinity (Lerner, 1986, p. 238).

Conceptualizing Patriarchy

Classical feminist theorists have long identified patriarchy as a historical system of male dominance. Friedrich Engels famously described it as the “world-historical defeat of the female sex” (Engels, 1985, p. 120),

while later theorists such as Kate Millett argue that patriarchy permeates all spheres of social life, structuring political, economic, and domestic relations (Millett, 2000, p. 25). Adrienne Rich further defines patriarchy as an institutionalized system of paternal authority that determines women's social roles, labor, and access to power (Rich, 1976, p. 57). These perspectives illuminate the Bakossi social order portrayed in the novel, where gender hierarchy is normalized through tradition (Alobwed'Epie, 2005, p. 31). Within Bakossi culture, patriarchy manifests through socially constructed roles learned through early socialization. As Anthony Giddens observes, individuals internalize cultural norms through socialization processes that shape identity and behavior (Giddens, 2006, p. 52). Male children in Muabang thus grow into positions of authority not through explicit coercion but through cultural expectation. This is evident in Ewang-Ename's assumption of familial responsibility after his father's death; his hunting success and ritual offerings symbolize masculine competence and lineage continuity (Alobwed'Epie, 2005, p. 27).

Patriarchal Control and Gendered Labor

The Bakossi social order assigns distinct activities to men and women, reinforcing masculine dominance through occupational exclusivity (Pateman, 1988, p. 3). Drumming, grave digging, ritual officiation, and membership in sacred institutions such as Muankum are reserved strictly for men (Alobwed'Epie, 2005, p. 33). When Emade violates these boundaries by beating the death drum for her sister Mechane, her action is perceived not merely as unconventional but as a profound transgression against cosmic and social order. Ahone's warning—"Where have you ever seen a woman beat the drum announcing death?"—reveals how gendered labor is sacralized within tradition (Alobwed'Epie, 2005, p. 35). Similarly, Emade's decision to dig Mechane's grave constitutes a direct challenge to male prerogative. The Muabang men interpret her action as an affront to collective masculinity: Allowing a woman to perform grave digging would symbolize male inadequacy and the collapse of patriarchal hierarchy (Alobwed'Epie, 2005, p. 38). Their outrage underscores how masculinity in the community depends upon exclusive control of ritual authority (Pateman, 1988, p. 9). Yet the narrative simultaneously exposes the fragility of this masculine dominance. The men's reluctance to dig the grave themselves reveals a contradiction between patriarchal ideology and male performance. Emade's competence demystifies the assumption that physical or ritual tasks are inherently masculine, thereby destabilizing the ideological foundation of gender hierarchy (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, p. 64).

Son Preference and Lineage Anxiety

Another crucial dimension of patriarchy in the novel is the privileging of male offspring. Bakossi inheritance customs and lineage rituals prioritize sons as carriers of family continuity (Lerner, 1986, p. 142). This preference mirrors broader African literary representations of patriarchal desire, such as Okonkwo's wish in *Things Fall Apart* that his capable daughter was male (Achebe, 1958, p. 65). In Alobwed'Epie's narrative, the lament over Mechane's lack of sons—"Would we have performed this rite if Wobe were a boy?"—reveals how female children are perceived as genealogically expendable (Alobwed'Epie, 2005, p. 28). The ideology of son preference places psychological pressure on women, who internalize patriarchal valuation by measuring their worth through male reproduction (Rich, 1976, p. 83). Female identity thus becomes entangled with biological function, reinforcing gender inequality across generations.

Traditional Hierarchy and Male Institutions

Patriarchal authority in Muabang is institutionalized through male-exclusive structures such as Muankum and the Kad ritual (Alobwed'Epie, 2005, p. 41). These institutions regulate land, ritual legitimacy, and communal

law. Their exclusion of women ensures that decision-making power remains concentrated among men (Engels, 1985, p. 137). Even during Mechane's funeral, ritual protocol dictates that men be served first and preside over ceremonial exchanges, reinforcing gendered hierarchy in public space (Alobwed'Epie, 2005, p. 46). When Emade performs Kad offerings on behalf of her lineage, she symbolically infiltrates a male domain. Her participation does not merely fill a ritual gap created by the absence of male relatives; it redefines the boundaries of authority by demonstrating that ritual competence is not inherently gendered (Nnaemeka, 1997, p. 112).

The Male Prerogative Syndrome

Emade herself names the ideological core of Bakossi patriarchy the "male prerogative syndrome"—the assumption that excellence, leadership, and authority naturally belong to men (Alobwed'Epie, 2005, p. 34). Her rhetorical challenge—"Why must the best things always be done by men?"—articulates the feminist critique embedded in the narrative. This critique extends beyond male characters to women who internalize patriarchal values, such as female diviners who refuse to assume authority and defer to male counterparts (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, p. 71). Through Emade's resistance, the novel exposes patriarchy as a socially sustained fiction rather than an immutable tradition. Masculine authority persists not because men are inherently superior but because cultural institutions repeatedly validate male privilege (Millett, 2000, p. 158).

Orality as Cultural Power and Feminine Agency

Oral tradition in *The Lady With a Beard* functions not only as a repository of Bakossi cultural memory but also as a contested space where gender ideology is negotiated and transformed. Proverbs, songs, rituals, praise poetry, and indigenous language encode social values, yet they also provide expressive tools through which marginalized voices can challenge patriarchal norms (Owomoyela, 2004, p. 22). Alobwed'Epie thus reconfigures orality from an instrument of cultural continuity into a medium of feminist articulation (Ngũgĩ, 1986, p. 13).

Ritual Performance and Gendered Authority

Ritual practice occupies a central place in Bakossi cosmology, mediating relationships between the living, the ancestors, and the spiritual realm (Owomoyela, 2004, p. 44). Funeral rites in particular reveal how ritual authority is gendered. The beating of the death drum, traditionally a male prerogative, becomes the site of Emade's first major act of resistance (Alobwed'Epie, 2005, p. 34). By announcing Mechane's death through drum and praise chant, she not only performs a forbidden act but reclaims ritual voice for women. Her eulogistic declaration—"She who wrestled with the gorilla at the crossroads is no more"—attributes heroic qualities to a woman, thereby disrupting gendered narrative conventions that reserve valor for men (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, p. 58). Community shock arises not merely from the act of drumming but from the symbolic masculinization of female identity within praise discourse (Nnaemeka, 2013, p. 370).

Totemic Cloth and Female Ritual Agency

Bakossi burial rituals require the presentation of a totemic cloth symbolizing ancestral continuity and male lineage authority (Owomoyela, 2004, p. 63). Traditionally supplied by male kin, the cloth affirms patriarchal inheritance structures (Lerner, 1986, p. 147). Emade's provision of the cloth for Mechane's burial subverts this symbolism (Alobwed'Epie, 2005, p. 54). By performing the invocation—"Return to your forebears in peace...let this cloth be the bridge between us"—she assumes ritual authority typically denied to women. This act reinterprets tradition rather than rejecting it. Emade operates within Bakossi cosmology while altering its gender boundaries, demonstrating that cultural continuity and feminist agency are not mutually exclusive (Nnaemeka, 1997, p. 119).

Songs, Proverbs, and Gender Socialization

Songs and proverbs constitute key mechanisms of socialization in the novel. Hunting songs praising Ewange-Ename reinforce masculine ideals of strength and provision, while initiation songs instruct women in domestic obedience (Alobwed'Epie, 2005, p. 29). Such oral forms transmit gender hierarchy across generations (Owomoyela, 2004, p. 18). Proverbs such as “you don't beat the head and expect the mouth to smile” encode communal wisdom yet also normalize authority structures (Alobwed'Epie, 2005, p. 21). However, oral forms also enable reinterpretation. Emade's public speech and ritual chants transform praise discourse into a vehicle of female affirmation. By occupying oral performance spaces, she demonstrates that voice itself is power within oral cultures (Ngũgĩ, 1986, p. 15).

Indigenous Language and Cultural Identity

Alobwed'Epie's integration of Bakossi vocabulary—terms such as ahieg, ngandu, and Kad—anchors the narrative in indigenous epistemology (Alobwed'Epie, 2005, p. 19). Language here functions as cultural memory, preserving worldview and ritual knowledge. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o argues, language embodies a people's history and identity; its use resists cultural erasure under colonial modernity (Ngũgĩ, 1986, p. 4). Within the novel, indigenous language also marks authority. Those fluent in ritual speech command respect, regardless of gender (Owomoyela, 2004, p. 27). Emade's mastery of oral forms therefore legitimizes her leadership and undermines patriarchal claims to exclusive cultural competence.

Orality as Feminist Reclamation

Ultimately, orality in the text becomes a medium of feminist reclamation. Rather than abandoning tradition, Emade appropriates its expressive tools—drum, chant, proverb, ritual speech—to articulate female strength (Nnaemeka, 2013, p. 372). Oral tradition thus shifts from a mechanism of gender containment to a resource for gender transformation.

Redefining the New African Woman

Through the character of Emade, *The Lady With a Beard* constructs a model of African womanhood that transcends patriarchal stereotypes while remaining rooted in cultural tradition. This “new woman” is neither Westernized nor anti-traditional; rather, she reinterprets indigenous values to assert autonomy, dignity, and communal responsibility (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, p. 102).

Widowhood and Resistance

Widowhood in many African societies entails social marginalization and vulnerability (Amadiume, 1987, p. 92). Emade's refusal to abandon her marital compound after her husband's death constitutes a radical assertion of spatial and social autonomy (Alobwed'Epie, 2005, p. 116). Her declaration—“I refused to be an elephant killed at the crossroads”—rejects the expectation that widows become passive dependents. By resisting Muankum authority and retaining her dwelling, Emade disrupts gendered spatial control (Pateman, 1988, p. 78). The community's eventual concession signifies recognition of female agency within tradition (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, p. 109).

Sexual Autonomy and Moral Authority

The novel also confronts the sexual exploitation of widows. Emade recounts persistent male advances after her husband's death and her refusal to submit (Alobwed'Epie, 2005, p. 18). Her resistance reframes widowhood

from vulnerability to moral strength. Male characters acknowledge her autonomy; Hunze notes that men no longer loiter near her compound seeking illicit access. Through this portrayal, Alobwed'Epie critiques patriarchal entitlement to female sexuality while affirming women's right to bodily autonomy (Rich, 1976, p. 156).

Breaking Female Stereotypes

Emade consistently rejects communal expectations of female submissiveness. When village women attempt to patronize her after Ntube's accident, she refuses performative pity and asserts emotional independence (Alobwed'Epie, 2005, p. 17). Eduke's warning that Emade is "not an empty woman...she is full to the brim" recognizes her exceptional strength. Such moments redefine femininity not as passivity but as resilience and self-determination (Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 76). Emade embodies a womanhood grounded in competence rather than compliance.

Womanism and Complementary Equality

The ideological framework underlying Emade's character aligns with African womanist thought, which emphasizes partnership rather than antagonism between genders (Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 72). African feminism often prioritizes social justice, economic survival, and communal balance over gender separatism (Nnaemeka, 2013, p. 357). Emade does not seek to replace male authority with female dominance; instead, she demonstrates that capability, not gender, should determine leadership (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, p. 118). Her actions reveal that tradition can accommodate gender equality when stripped of patriarchal exclusivity.

Cultural Continuity and Feminist Transformation

Crucially, Emade's empowerment remains culturally embedded. She invokes ancestors, respects ritual forms, and participates fully in communal life (Alobwed'Epie, 2005, p. 121). Her feminism is therefore indigenous rather than imported. By mastering oral tradition and ritual practice, she shows that cultural authenticity and gender equality can coexist (Amadiume, 1987, p. 187).

Conclusion

Across patriarchy, orality, and female agency, *The Lady With a Beard* presents Bakossi culture as a dynamic system in which gender norms are negotiated rather than fixed. Patriarchal structures restrict women, yet oral tradition provides tools for resistance and reinterpretation (Owomoyela, 2004, p. 91). Through Emade, Alobwed'Epie articulates a vision of the African woman as culturally rooted, socially responsible, and uncompromisingly autonomous (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, p. 131) and a model of female agency grounded in African feminist principles of negotiation, relationality, and cultural continuity (Nnaemeka, 2013, p. 376). Emade's appropriation of male-coded ritual roles reveals that authority derives from competence and communal service rather than biological sex. Her symbolic "beard" encapsulates the fluidity of gendered authority and the possibility of inclusive tradition. The novel ultimately argues that gender equality need not emerge from cultural abandonment but from internal transformation, as well as it reimagines oral tradition not as a static patriarchal archive but as a dynamic cultural system capable of adaptation. By entering performative spaces historically denied to women, Emade transforms oral tradition into a medium of feminist agency while preserving its communal significance. Alobwed'Epie thus proposes a gender-inclusive cultural order in which tradition evolves through participation rather than exclusion. By reclaiming voice within tradition, the African woman reshapes both herself and her society (Nnaemeka, 1997, p. 203). This study has examined how *The Lady With a Beard* stages the intersection of oral tradition and gender ideology within Bakossi culture. The analysis demonstrates

that oral forms—ritual speech, proverbs, and ceremonial performance—serve both to reproduce patriarchal hierarchy and to provide symbolic resources for its renegotiation (Ngũgĩ, 1986, p. 26). Patriarchy in the novel operates through lineage ideology, ritual exclusion, and institutional authority that privilege masculinity as the basis of cultural legitimacy (Lerner, 1986, p. 221). Yet this system proves neither monolithic nor immutable.

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