



The Social Place and Roles of Queens and Queen Mothers in Mofolo's *Chaka* and Niane's *Sundiata: an Epic of Old Mali*

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ABSTRACT

This article based on an Africa centered world view examines the social place and roles of queens and queen mothers. The article points out some social tasks performed by queens and queen mothers. The latter are discovered as lovers and objects of love; rights and duties holders. They are as well discovered as warriors and rulers. This article succeeds in revaluing the image of women by using some stereotypes that the society has attributed to them: woman-machine, woman-source of pleasure, and woman-producer.

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INTRODUCTION

This article studies the social place and roles occupied by queens and queen mothers in Mofolo's *Chaka* and Niane's *Sundiata: an Epic of Old Mali*. By social place and roles, I mean the different social positions that queens and queen mothers not only occupy for particular purposes, but also their duties in the ruling of their kingdoms and the well-being of their royal families.

The American Heritage dictionary defines a queen as the wife or widow of a king; a female monarch or ruler; or a goddess or a thing personified as a woman, and having eminence or supremacy in a given domain. The same dictionary defines queen mother as a dowager¹ queen who is the mother of the reigning monarch. But this definition is not totally true of queen mother in Africa because of the issue of land. In the *Journal of Black Studies*, (vol. 33, n°1, 2002: 13) Nah Dove defines a queen mother as an *Ohemmaa* who is often a sister or a mother of a chief, who has a hand in the choice of the royal successor and participates in legislative processes.

Nevertheless in polygamous royal families the queen mother is one of the king's wives, mother of the would-be king. There can be many queens but only one queen mother, due to the privilege given to her son to become the next king even before the death of the king. Such an aspect can be seen through the two epic books on which our work is based.

Mofolo and Nianemention respectively the social place and roles played by Queen Nandi and Queen Sogolon as well as their co-wives in the Zulu and Mandingo societies. In these polygamous kingdoms, the queen mother's position was usually more important than the position of any other king's wives.

For a better analysis of the social place and roles of queens and queen mothers, the article uses three stereotypes: woman-machine, woman-source of pleasure, and woman-producer. These stereotypes are developed in two subsections: "Queen and Queen Mothers as Women" and "Queens and Queen Mothers as Children's Bearers".

Queens and Queen Mothers as Women

Whatever the rank, title or prestige of a woman, she is bound to perform some activities innate to women. Queens and queen mothers are not exceptions to the rule; they are women and possess feminine qualities and

¹A Dowager: A woman of high social class who has land or title from her dead husband.

feelings. These feminine qualities and feelings are highly developed in some writings especially epic narratives. So, the women we are going to talk about are mostly epic heroines.

Tandina [1] states that in West African epic, especially the Nigerien one, the female character evolves in a hierarchical traditional society which often gives a less enviable place to women than men. The latter hold a supreme power on women in all public affairs. He also states that a woman, regardless of her age and her social status, cannot attend a meeting and discuss about some issues; no matter how serious these issues are with regard to the community's life. But every man, even the less important one can attend meetings and discuss any kind of issue.

However, in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*, we realize that the Most Royal Lady summoned a meeting to discuss an important matter as:

Samba Diallo remembered. "This is the day [...] that the Most Royal Lady has convoked the Diallobé. The tom-tom is calling them." [...] One side of the rectangle opened, and the Most Royal Lady entered the arena.

It was in the midst of a great silence, now, that she spoke: "People of the Diallobé, I saluated you." [...] It is to exhort you to do one of those things that I have asked you to come to this meeting today. [2]

Tandina [1] also states that in the Nigerien epic which reflects its society, woman had played two main functions: bearers and producers. In such a society it is very important to bear as many male children as possible; people prefer boys in whom they see the continuation of the family and power. A father, a king has wishes, plans for his sons, but nothing for his daughters; he wishes only a good husband for his daughters. In this kind of society, the roles of women are: child bearer, house maid, and helper in the field. Women live under their husbands' shadows in a polygamous system. They are parts of men's properties; men take all the decisions concerning the family without consulting their wives.

On the other hand, when we read the epic novels *Sarraounia: le drame de la reine magicienne* by Abdoulaye Mamani, Pantengou Aissata Soumana Kindo's article "Sarraounia: Symbole de l'Identité des Aznas de Doutchi", the article "La Femme et le Pouvoir dans l'épopée nigérienne" by Ousmane M. Tandina, and *Sonni Ali Ber* an analysis on an epic from Adam Konare Ba...etc; we can see a contradiction with the above statement. In these writings, women are not passive, not resigned, and do not accept their fate as fatality. These women play major functions but their image differs from one epic narrative to another. We have an important image of some women who are invested in all their femininity. They are discovered as lovers and objects of love; rights and duties holders; and as rulers. [1]

But, before being warriors, rulers or great politicians, women are of course stereotyped as followed: woman-machine, woman-source of pleasure, and woman-producer. Moreover, Dr Abdul-Razaq Ibn Abdul-Mouhsin Al Badr asserts in *L'Islam et la dignité de la femme* that woman is:

[...] that being created by God to be the partner of man in his life. At the origin, she has been created from man himself in order to establish a profound, solid, and harmonious link between them, which can be a pledge of affection and kindness.²

The above stereotypes are also very important in the sense that life will be senseless without women; and queens and queen mothers are not omissions.

²[...] cet être qu'Allah a créé pour qu'elle soit la partenaire de l'homme dans sa vie. A l'origine, elle a été créée à partir de l'homme lui-même, afin d'instaurer un lien profond, solide et harmonieux entre eux, qui soit gage d'affection et de bonté. (Ibn Abdul-Mouhsin Al Badr, 2006: 19)

In a society, even though the queen is most of the time selected among royal or honorable families as any woman, physical beauty and other social virtues are needed. Ki-zerbo describes Nandi as 'the delightful', an incomparable dancer of 'motchocho', a dance 'cafre' (an ethnic group of South African) [3]

And Mofolo adds:

Nandi was a great singer and dancer, and she was also skilled in clapping hands and caroling for the young men as they danced. Nandi stood tall and erect, had a well rounded face a light brown complexion like a cannabis seed. She had an impressive presence, and a dignity to which many people said she owed her beauty[4].

Moreover, Niane's *Sundiata: an Epic of Old Mali* points out physical beauty while it insists on the ugliness of Sogolon that the handsome king Naré Maghan was obliged to marry for the accomplishment of a divine prediction. In fact, queen Sogolon: "...is ugly,...hideous,...bears on her back a disfiguring hump..., but, mystery of mysteries,...she will be the mother of him who will make the name of Mali immortal forever"[5]. So, even though fulfilling a divine prediction for one's people is important, we can state that royalty is also linked to beauty in all its forms (artistic and physical). That was why after the birth of Sogolon's crippled child boy and her second child daughter's, who was as ugly as her mother;

The disheartened king debarred Sogolon from his house and she lived in semi-disgrace for a while. Naré Maghan married the daughter of one of his allies ...She was called Namandjé and her beauty was legendary[5].

Subsequently, most queens and queen mothers were beautiful since they were chosen among the prettiest girls; and they were also educated to become great lovers.

Hence, as any woman, queens and queen mothers were great lovers and were loved in return most of the time. We can see queen Nandi's and Noliwa's love respectively for king Senzangakhona and king Chaka and their love were shared by their partners. One day when a game which consisted in choosing a lover was played by young boys and girls, Mofolo reports that: "Since Nandi herself loved Senzangakhona, she did in fact choose him, and Senzangakhona was greatly pleased that he had been chosen by the one he loved"[4].

Concerning Chaka and Noliwa's relationship, Mofolo adds:

Noliwa became infatuated with Chaka and would always cry whenever she did not see him...Chaka too, loved Noliwa very much...All beautiful and worthy things which a true wife might do for her husband and which Chaka ever experienced he received from Noliwa"[4].

In the same vein, we can also see Sarraounia, the great queen warrior of the Azna: "[...] going far in her sexual relations [...] taking lovers (Baka and Gogué) in all freedom, just for her own pleasure."³

Consequently, the stereotype 'woman-source of pleasure' is a very important role played by woman because it leads to the most important place held by women next to men. Through this stereotype wars were won and many wicked kings were vanquished due to its wonderfulness; the case of Soumaoro king of Sosso is an illustration. Queen Nana Triban, half-sister of Sundiata used her feminine qualities to pierce the mystery of Soumaoro's magic power. She remembered:

One night I took the bull by the horns and said to Soumaoro: "Tell me, oh you whom kings mention with trembling, tell me Soumaoro, are you a man like others or are you the same as the jinn who protects humans? No one can bear the glare of your eyes, your arm has the strength of ten arms. Tell me, king of kings, tell me what jinn protect you so that I can worship him also." These words filled him with pride and he himself boasted to

³"[...] jusque dans ses relations amoureuses [...] prend des amants en toute liberté uniquement pour son plaisir (Baka, Gogué)"

(Pantengouh, 2005 :75).

me of the might of his Tana. That very night he took me into his magic chamber and told me all [5].

The night synonym with rest and love is an appropriate moment chosen by the queen to use her feminine qualities: beauty, tenderness, and eloquence to fathom the mystery of Soumaoro's magic power that later caused his downfall.

However, the stereotype 'woman-machine' also shows some social roles played by queens and queen mothers. As a result, Niane and Mack point out in their writings the issue of domestic works. Thus, among all domestic works, cooking is something that a queen as any woman should know well. This is the reason why Soumaoro snatched and locked in his palace his nephew's wife, who was the greatest cook among the Sosso women. Niane narrates:

His chief general was his nephew [...] , Fakoli Karoma [...] had a wonderful wife, keleya, who [...] could cook better than the three hundred wives of Soumaoro put together. Soumaoro abducted Keleya and locked her up in his palace"[5].

On the other hand, Mack states that in Hausa-Fulani kingdoms:

[...] a royal wife [...] prepares meals for her own household and [...] for the emir⁴, but she need not cook unless she wishes to [...] Even if she does not cook the meals herself, she is responsible for overseeing them. In terms of preparing food [...], the royal wife's obligation is as difficult as the average wife's, and she too must play the role of gracious hostess without complaint[6].

At the image of the hausa-fulani royal wives, Sogolon too prepared for her family; because, we can see her begging baobab leaves for cooking when she was in short of it. For such a situation, she: "[...] kept a little garden in the ground behind the village"[5].

Mofolo too points out farming but also herding as queens' and queen mothers' activities. As a matter of fact, queen Nandi, after leaving her husband's house help her mother in these tasks; at a time when Chaka was too young to perform such works and later because he was persecuted by a group of boys [4].

Even if a royal wife is free from domestic works, sometimes she is tempted to do other things. In Kano for instance, when a royal wife is freed from domestic works; she:

[...] may spend her time preparing snacks for sale within her compound, which enjoys the constant traffic of children from other parts of the palace looking for playmates. Because she often has access to technology that others do not-refrigerators, cotton candy machines, popcorn poppers-the snacks she prepares may be more exotic than the usual fare, and if she sends little girls out to hawk them around the palace, she can be assured of good sales. This is just one way in which a royal wife, like other urban Hausa women, earns her own income [6].

The above quotation shows that queens and queen mothers performed domestic works. Most of them enjoyed so much house works that when they were freed of it, they would be tempted to do other thing similar. But royal wives are not only house workers, they contribute greatly to the continuation of the royal lineage; they are children's bearers.

Queens and Queen Mothers as Children's Bearers

In any household, be it royal or not, getting children is very important for its development and stability. A household which does not enjoy the playing, running, and laughing of children is like a graveyard. Children are source of happiness and family continuation. A childless family is similar to a straw fire, it won't live long; but vanish as soon as the couple dies.

⁴Emir: King, Chief.

For all the above reasons, a childless woman is not well seen in a society; she is marginalized by her husband who can take a second wife or even replace her. Baba Kaké agrees that: “[...] a barren wife must never see anything, that to be repudiated without a child is a misfortune which has no remedy [...]”⁵ just to say that a barren woman has to behave well in her household, that whatever the acts of marginalization she undergoes, repudiation without any child will be worse for her. We can also affirm that like any woman the value of any queen lays upon her aptitude to bear children, especially males. The major role allocated to a queen as any woman is that of reproduction. Her focal purpose is that of the propagation of the royal lineage.

Whenever people are getting married, we have the idea of a family founding, thus getting children. Niane recalls the words of an old hairdresser who was plaiting queen Sogolon’s hair, the day of her marriage with King Naré Maghan. That day, Sogolon’s sisters-in law’s gibes made her crying but the hairdresser comforted her in these words:

There, there, stop crying. It’s a new life beginning, you know, more beautiful than you think. You will be a mother and you will know the joy of being a queen surrounded by your children [5].

This shows how children are important in a household, because they can be source of happiness.

So, as any woman, a queen has to bear children, and especially males; otherwise she will be marginalized. But when a queen gave birth to a male child, all the King’s best regard will be on that fortunate mother. Mofolo and Niane witness respectively: “Nandi was given enough food so that her breasts should swell with milk for Chaka. She was the queen of the household...” [4]. As for Sogolon who was just pregnant, “All the king’s attentions went to the mother to-be. On returning from the wars he would bring her the best portion of the booty-fine loin-cloths and rare jewels”[5].

On the other hand, Mofolo attributes Senzangakhona’s multiple marriages to the lack of an heir in his palace. Mofolo states:

...Senzangakhona...had three wives, or maybe four. However, he had no male child in any of his houses. He had girls only. For that reason he was dissatisfied and he lacked peace in his heart, fearing that his estate would be without an heir...., Senzangakhona decided to marry again so that he might obtain male children through his younger wives [4].

Moreover,

...for a King it was more painful not to have a male child than it was for a commoner, because a King was concerned not only about the wealth of his own personal household and his livestock which would have no one to inherit them, but also about the estate of kingship, which involved the land and the people [4].

This shows that queens as any woman have to play an important role in the continuation of kingship and humanity. Tandina agrees:“The senior royal wife [...]‘furnishes’ the potential heirs for the throne”⁶This just means that the queen mother who is generally the first wife of the king is supposed to give birth to the heir apparent. If she fails to do so, another queen will do it in her place, either by replacing her or as another royal wife.

In both *Chaka* and *Sundiata: an Epic of Old Mali*, the birth of the heir apparent was foretold by diviners from especial women out of the king’s household, that he had to seek for. While in Mofolo’s book, the king had to seek for a male child; Niane’s sent the king to seek for the best one, since he had already a son: Dankaran Touman. Both

⁵“[...] une épouse stérile ne doit jamais rien voir; qu’être répudiée sans enfant est un Malheur qui ne connait pas de remède [...]” (1976 : 15)

⁶«La Grande Epouse Royale [...] “Fournit” les héritiers potentiels du trône. » (2005:101)

kings' research would lead them to the right heir apparent, the one loved and favored by the ancestors' gods to develop the two different kingdoms: Zulu and Mandingo. To achieve such a task both kings had to take a new wife as predicted by diviners. To king Naré Maghan kon Fatta, a soothsayer said:

You have ruled over the kingdom which your ancestors bequeathed to you...but, fine king your successor is not yet born. I see two hunters coming to your city...a woman accompanies them...she will be the mother of him who will make the name of Mali immortal for ever [5].

As for king Senzangakhona, his priests told him to organize a feast where all the young girls of his small villages would gather, singing and dancing. Only at that moment he could find by himself the suitable wife who would give him the heir that he had for longtime desired [7].

For queens, as for any woman, bearing children is really very important; this can even lead them to sign a pact with the devil when they are victims of barrenness. Sterility can direct a queen to sacrifice the security of her kingdom just to cure her infertility. Tandina agrees:

In *Awli Djawando et Farra Fanta Djawando*, the king's sister is always next to him [...] Awli Djawando is going to devote himself entirely to her. Seeking to heal her from the sterility which is tormenting her, Awli's sister finds herself imposed by an impostor from the enemy's camp, to claim her brother's, the king's magic ring. She sacrifices her brother's security to her desire to give birth. To allow his sister to triumph from sterility, Awli abandons the magic ring which protects his own life.⁷

In this quotation, Tandina shows how great a queen's desire can be to become a mother. In fact, King Awli Djawando's sister's desire to bear a child at any cost led to the destruction of their kingdom by their enemies. An impostor told the queen that the only thing which could let her bear a child was her brother's ring, a magic ring which protected the King. So, Awli sacrificed his life and his kingdom to cure his sister's barrenness by giving her his magic ring.

The desire of queens to become mothers added to the kings' preference for male children make the stereotype 'woman-bearer' very important and sometime difficult to achieve. But, it is no use to give birth; one must know how to take good care of children, how to mold them into important persons for the society through the process of education.

CONCLUSION

The goals of this article have been to examine the social place and roles of queens and queen mothers in Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* and Djibrill Tamsir Niane's *Sundiata an Epic of Old Mali*. The article is grounded on an Africa centered world view which is focused on how African women are important in their societies. This is the reason why we invite modern women to go back to their origin and get inspiration from some legendary queens and queen mothers. The latter transformed into gold the stereotypes that the societies attributed to women that they used in their own interests.

⁷Dans *Awli Djawando et Farra Fanta Djawando*, la sœur du roi est très présente aux côtés du roi, [...] Awli Djawando va se consacrer entièrement à elle. Cherchant à la guérir de la stérilité qui la tourmente, la sœur d'Awli se voit imposer par un imposteur appartenant au camp de l'ennemi, de réclamer à son frère, le roi, la bague magique de celui-ci. Elle sacrifie la sécurité de son frère à son désir d'enfanter. Awli [...], pour permettre à sa sœur de triompher de la stérilité abandonne la bague magique qui protège sa propre vie, [...] (2005:103)

In fact, the image of woman is often stereotyped in some narratives as a woman-source of pleasure, woman-machine or woman-producer. However, the feminine image is serene and carrier of optimism. It shows different rhythms concerning power: time of glory and time of fragility [1]. For example, physical beauty, the ability to bear children, and the ability to cook well were used to obtain certain roles and positions.

In terms of beauty, Queen Nandi, mother of Chaka; Queen Namandjé, co-wife of Sundiata's mother; Queen Nana Triban, daughter of Queen Namandjé to name only few, are illustrations. They owed their higher position to their legendary beauty.

For the stereotype woman-producer, certain queens such as Nandi, Sogolon, Kassai, the sister of King Awli Djawando are shown through this article as examples. Nandi and Sogolon are said to be queens who would bear great warriors by diviners; and while Kassai's children were killed by her brother [8], Awli Djawando's sister was tormented by barrenness.

In a nutshell, the results of this study reveal that African queens and queen mothers are positively represented as actors with willingness, self-determination and self-reliance with regard to their social place and roles in both epic narratives.

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