



## Women, Children Educators and Protectors in Some African Writings

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### ABSTRACT

Children are fragile beings that need protection. They are like exam blank papers which are graded according to the effort of candidates. The more effort parents put in educating their children the better future social members they are molding. This article grounded on an African world view shows that African children are well educated and protected by their mothers than fathers. This education and protection are mostly based on physical, behavioral, and mystical aspects of African women.

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### INTRODUCTION

This article centered on an Africa world view explores through an African perspective, the roles of women as children educators and protectors in a society. It is mostly based on African epics which are long narrative books or films telling the story of the deeds of great men and women. For instance Niane's *Sundiata: an Epic of Old Mali* and Dani Kouyaté's film, *Keita! L'Heritage du griot* tell the deeds of Sogolon and her son Sundiata. As for Mofolo's *Chaka* and William C. Faure's film, *Shaka Zulu*, they tell the exploits of Nandi and her son Chaka. Our African epics are founded on oral literature which is forged in the reality transmitted from fathers to sons by word of mouth. These fathers and sons who hold the oral literature are called griots. The latter:

[...] are vessels of speech [...] the repositories which harbour secrets many centuries old [...] the memory of mankind; by the spoken word [they] bring to life the deeds and exploits of [the old generations] for younger generations. [Their] word is pure and free of all untruth [...] griots do not know what lying is [1].

Focusing its analysis on women as children educators and protectors, this article will mostly talk about queens mothers. However, whatever the social position and the skin color of a woman, they have the same feelings and affection for their children. Mothers have just one thing in heart, the well-being of their children. Whatever women's responsibilities are, they remain mothers. As mothers, they will educate and protect their children using the same feeling, the same strength and the same aggressiveness. In a nutshell, the article examines women as children's educators and protectors using African perspective as approach. However, the roles of educator and protector are analyzed separately. Consequently, the article has two subtitles: "Women, Children's Educators" and "Women, Children's Protectors".

### Women, Children's Educators

An educator is a person who educates to develop the mind and the character of people through the process of teaching. It can also be defined as an expert in the upbringing of children, and their molding into important persons for the society. A child is like clay in the hands of a potter, or a hot iron between the smith's hammer and anvil; and as clay and hot iron take the forms that these artists want them to take, a child also becomes who an educator wants him/her to become. Mothers are at the image of the above artists, they are the ones who shape their children in accordance to the wishes of their societies. According to many writers like Niane [1], Mofolo [2], Mack [3], and Kane [4] I can assert that the role of educator is well played by women. Because mothers have precious physical elements that contribute in children education that fathers don't have. First, mothers have breasts that produce milk. In fact, it is very imperative to note that the maternal milk maintains children in good health, strengthens them and allows them a fast growing. This is the reason why King Senzangakhona gave special attention to Nandi, his wife, who just gave birth: "Nandi was given enough food so that her breasts should swell with milk for Chaka [...]" [2].

Moreover, the maternal milk can have significant effect on children. As Pantengouh, Aissata Soumana Kindo in her article "Sarrounia : Symbole de l'Identité des Aznas de Dutchi". In *Epopée et Identité : rois, peuples, guerriers, héros*,

*divinités* says: “Milk [...] is the carrier of either blemishes, either powers in most of black African stories and legends.”<sup>1</sup> This quotation conveys the idea that women transmit certain imperfections or powers while giving their breasts to their babies. For example witchcraft, invulnerability, and other supernatural powers are transmitted by mothers to babies through breast feeding. The power of the maternal milk can affect even babies who receive milk from another woman other than their own. Pantengouh illustrates this statement through the case of the Zarma warrior, Issa Korombé, who received his power through Queen Kassey’s milk. She explains:

It’s by giving suck to the zarma warrior Issa Korombé that Kassai, the one breast woman, the hero maker, transmitted to him powers which made of him the master of war («wangougna») who put an end to Touareg and Fulani hegemony over the Zarmas of the region of Boboye.<sup>2</sup>

Second, women’s quietude, tenderness, leniency, and bravery also owe them the role of educators. Tandina, Ousmane M. in his article “La Femme et le Pouvoir dans l’Épopée Nigérienne”. In *Épopée et Identité : rois, peuples, guerriers, héros, divinités* explains that:

The queen mother in epic [...] is source of life and strength; she is also a woman who has her heart set on educating her child who carries the sacred essence, even though this education is female. The image of the mother distinguishes itself obviously from that of the spouse. She symbolizes peace, quietude. She is the one who accepts everything from the child, she who does not judge.<sup>3</sup>

Third, in African royal families, women's major responsibility is molding children into important persons to the society. So, in modern kingdoms, such as Hausa-Fulani kingdoms presented by Mack Beverly in his article “Royal Wives in Kano” in *Hausa Women in the Twentieth Century*; queens and queen mothers are responsible for teaching their children the rigors of praying five times a day. They arbitrate childhood quarrels; monitor their children’s interest in activities outside the palace. A royal wife ought to monitor also the manner in which royal children interact with their contemporaries among the palace slave populace.

Mack agrees that:

Part of a Hausa Muslim wife’s domestic obligation involves the responsibility for molding her children as proper Muslims. This is especially true for royal wives, whose sons are prospective emirs and whose daughters will be married to influential men [...] a royal wife bears responsibility for the proper upbringing of [...] children [...] since they are the potential to ascent to the throne and to marry into powerful families [3].

Apart from teaching their children the Islamic codes and conducts, mothers send also their children to modern schools. Cheikh Hamidou Kane in his *Ambiguous Adventure* remembers the Most Royal Lady saying to her people: “I come here to say this to you: I, the Most Royal Lady, do not like the foreign school. I detest it. My opinion, nevertheless, is that we should send our children there.” (1963: 45) And Mack adds that the royal wives send their children:

[...] to the palace’s western primary school in the morning and Qur’anic classes in the afternoon [...] The education youngsters receive in the royal community itself may be as important as the classes they attend. It is in these situations that the royal wife’s role as educator, arbiter, and resident historian are crucial to children’s intellectual and social development, especially since children have very little direct contact with their father [...] [3].

The last part of the above quotation shows that a child is always under the supervision of his or her mother: he or she first comes in life in the hand of her or his mother and grows under her eyes, while the father is at work or is having good

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<sup>1</sup> « Le lait [...] est le vecteur soit des tares, soit des pouvoirs dans la plupart des contes et légendes d’Afrique noire. » (2005 :78)

**NB: All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.**

<sup>2</sup> C’est en faisant téter le guerrier zarma Issa Korombé que Kassai, la femme au sein unique, la faiseuse de héros, lui transmet les pouvoirs qui furent de lui le maître de guerre («Wangougna») qui mit fin à l’hégémonie des Touaregs et des Peuls sur les Zarmas de la région du Boboye. (Pantengouh, 2005: 7)

<sup>3</sup> La Reine-Mère dans l’épopée...est source de vie et de force. C’est aussi une femme qui a à cœur d’élever son enfant qui porte en lui l’essence sacrée, même si cette éducation est femelle. L’image de la mère se distingue nettement de celle de l’épouse. Elle symbolise la paix, la quietude. C’est elle qui accepte tout de l’enfant, celle qui ne juge pas. (2005: 100)

time with friends. On the other hand, people use to say that traveling and journeys are sources of knowledge acquisition. Queen Sogolon had impregnated her son with diverse knowledge through her several years of exile which led her to many kingdoms. In fact, Sundiata had learned to become a great warrior-ruler through these journeys; especially in Mema where king: "Moussa Tounkara took the son of Sogolon in his arms and said, 'It is destiny that has sent you to Mema, I will make a great warrior out of you'" [1].

The above analysis shows that women are the best educators. Since they bring up, teach and mold well their children. Bringing up, teaching, and molding are education factors that help to arise children's consciousness about certain danger and failure of life. Therefore, a good educator is also a good protector.

### Women, Children's Protectors

A protector is a person who can defend or shield from injury or danger. The previous sub-section shows that children are always under the supervision of their mothers. This monitoring allows women to best defend and shield children from injury and danger. Tandina agrees that a woman is: "[...] able to face everything to rescue her son. She is source of life and strength [...]"<sup>4</sup>

In fact, women are ready to face everything to protect their children. We can see Queen Nandi and Queen Sogolon respectively in Thomas Mofolo's *CHAKA* and Niane Djibrill Tasmir's *Sundiata: an Epic of Old Mali* leaving their households with their children just to protect them from witchcraft and the ill treatments of their co-wives. Both queens tasted the bitterness of exile just to protect their sons from the hatred of their co-wives. Mofolo extends the explanation in this way: "[...] Nandi returned [...] to her own home with her infant Chaka, to keep him away from witchcraft, since it was rumoured that senzangakhona's wives had been bewitched so that they would not carry male children" [2]. As for queen Sogolon, the exile she experienced to protect her children is more painful compared to that of Nandi; because the latter's exile was within South Africa and the former's one was throughout African kingdoms. The above statements show that women can leave their own households and even their own country for the security of their children that is threatened.

Women can go further in their role of protector by using the supernatural powers to defend their kids. Both Nandi and Sogolon used the same procedures in the protection of their children: exile and supernatural powers. Hence, as a family deeply soaked in the art of witchcraft, Queen Sogolon and her daughter, Kolonkan used all their talents as sorcerers to protect Soundiata against Sassouma Béréte's (Sogolon's co-wife's) cruelty. Because Sassouma Béréte viewed Sundiata as a threat to her son's, Dankaran Touma's, ruling. So, after the witches sent by Sassouma Béréte failed in their mission to kill Sundiata, his sister Kolonkan said:

'You were really frightened; those nine witches really scared you, eh?' said Sogolon Kolonkan, Djata's younger sister.

'How do you know,' retorted Sundiata, astonished.

'I saw them at night hatching their scheme, but I knew there was no danger for you.' Kolonkan was well versed in the art of witchcraft and watched over her brother without his suspecting it [1].

As for Nandi, after her exile, and the refusal of King Senzangakhona (her husband) to protect his son: Baba Kake Ibrahim in his *Chaka: Fondateur de la Nation Zouloue* states that Nandi:

[...] at the end of her hope concerning men [...] solicits the gods' assistance. She keeps her son trotting from sorcerer to sorceress. She hopes miraculous verdicts: so that he can be the strongest, so that he can become invulnerable, so that he will no longer be tormented [...] One hundred times, small daggers have scarified the child's forehead, cheeks, and stomach. One hundred times, old erudite magicians have glided between skin and flesh drugs which avoid attack and terrify the enemies.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> « [...] capable de tout braver pour sauver son fils. Elle est source de vie et de force [...] » (2005: 100)

<sup>5</sup> [...] ne pouvant rien espérer des hommes,... demande l'assistance des dieux. Elle promène son fils de féticheur en féticheuse. Elle espère des verdicts miracles: pour qu'il soit le plus fort, pour qu'il devienne invulnérable, pour qu'on ne le tourmente plus [...] Cent fois, de petits coups de poignard ont scarifié le front, les joues, le ventre de l'enfant. Cent fois, de vieux mages<sup>5</sup> savants ont glissé entre cuir et chair les drogues qui évitent l'attaque et terrifient les ennemis. (Baba Kaké, 1976: 22)

The above quotation shows how women, as hens protect their chicks against sparrow hawks and eagles, protect their children against every danger. And that protection can go beyond the natural and stand to the divine spheres. Tandina, quoting Christiane Desroches Noblecourt agrees that:

In the divine spheres, says Christiane Desroches Noblecourt “the feminine element, rather than being passive, is going to be [...] the protector [...] if necessary it can be aggressive or rather ruddy, but she is always the good mother who provokes the gods’ joy.”<sup>6</sup>

A mother can of course be aggressive in her duty of protector up to committing murder. Tandina illustrates how Queen Kassay pushed her son, Askia Mohamed to kill his uncle Sonni Ali Ber and usurp his throne. When we know that Sonni Ali Ber had already killed other male newborn babies of his sister that are said to be threats for his throne. So, Kassay told her son to kill Sonni before the latter kills him to take the power. After Askia Mohamed killed his uncle, it was Kassay who protected him against the sons of her brother who were seeking to avenge their father’s death. Queen Kassay also helped her son, King Askia, through her supernatural power to win his multiple wars. Tandina comments:

During the childhood of the royal child in his uncle’s house, Sonni Ali Ber, the emperor of Songhai kingdom; his mother will have much influence on him. It is she who will order him to behead his uncle, the emperor, at the time of a feast and usurp the throne. It is also she who will protect him when the sons of the emperor try to take their revenge on their cousin. She is evidently the ultimate shelter in case of difficulty. Finally, it is she who will ensure next to him all his conquests by the strength of her magic power and her traditional healer practices, she will guarantee her son victory over victory.<sup>7</sup>

Mothers can accomplish their duty of protectors even when there are insurmountable natural barriers like distance, old age, and death, between them and their sons. In terms of distance as obstacle, Hayidara [5] shows how mothers can transcend it to protect their children. Hayidara explains how Ba Fanta, a Bozo woman, adoptive mother of Fanta Maa, the hero of Hayidara’s book, used magic to feed her children who were blocked on a tree by a dangerous crocodile in another village far away from their village. Hayidara states that:

[...] [The hero's] foster mother was even more versed in witchcraft than Maa himself.  
She prepared a famous rice, which she garnished with fresh fish;  
she brought it to them  
by magic,  
[...] And she woke them up.  
They got up; [but] they did not see a living soul.  
The younger to [Fanta Maa] asked him, "And who did that?" "  
He said: "It can only be our mother."  
He said, "She rescued us with that, knowing we were hungry." »<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Dans les sphères divines, nous dit Christiane Desroches Noblecourt “l’élément féminin, bien loin d’être passif, va donc être...le protecteur ... s’il le fallait, agressif ou encore truculent, étant toujours la bonne mère et aussi provoquant la joie des dieux” (2005: 99)

<sup>7</sup> Pendant la jeunesse de l’enfant-royal qui se déroule chez son oncle Sonni Ali Ber, empereur du Royaume songhay, la mère aura beaucoup d’influence sur lui. C’est elle qui lui demandera de décapiter son oncle l’empereur au cours d’une fête et d’usurper le trône. C’est elle aussi qui le protégera au moment où les fils de l’empereur tentent de prendre leur revanche contre leur cousin. Elle est bien évidemment l’ultime refuge en période de difficulté. C’est elle enfin qui assurera auprès de lui toutes ses conquêtes et par la force de sa magie et de ses pratiques animistes<sup>7</sup> lui garantira victoire sur victoire. (2005: 100)

<sup>8</sup> « [...] la mère nourricière [du héros] était encore plus versée que Maa lui-même dans la sorcellerie.

Celle-ci apprêta un riz fameux, qu’elle garnit de poisson frais ;

elle le leur apporta

par magie,

[...] et elle les réveilla.

Ils se levèrent ; [mais] ils ne virent âme qui vive.

Le cadet [de Maa] lui demanda : « Et qui a fait ça ? »

Il dit : « Ce ne peut être que notre mère ».

As far as old age as obstacle is concerned, we can see Queen Nandi in her old ages stating to her age mates:

Don't you see that I am old? When he was a child, I looked after him. Now also I am looking after him but in a different way. I pray Nkoulou-Nkoulou and the ancestors [...] that they protect him [...] Was it the efficiency of these prayers? Chaka seemed well protected than anyone.<sup>9</sup>

Concerning death as natural obstacle, we can see Sogolon also protecting her son even after her death through her wraith. In fact, Sogolon was the wraith of the Buffalo of Do, a miraculous buffalo which used to destroy the countryside of Do; Queen Sogolon, even after her death, kept on blessing and protecting her son. In fact, that buffalo was the King of Do's sister transformed into a buffalo to punish her brother, the King, for depriving her of her part of the inheritance [1].

So, when Sundiata son of Sogolon went to her mother's kingdom, where:

The inhabitants of Do had raised a great mound on the spot where the buffalo had expired. Sundiata sacrificed a white cock on the mound. When the cock had died on its back a big whirlwind swirled up and blew towards the west [1].

I can state that the sacrifice on the mound of the buffalo of Do which Sogolon was the spirit; can be the same thing as to make a sacrifice on the grave of Sogolon. Subsequently, I can assert that it was the dead queen mother who had accepted her son's sacrifice and invited him to free Mali under her protection and blessings; thus the death of the cock on its back and the direction taken by the whirlwind. Niane agrees through the dialog between Sundiata and his griot, Balla Fasséké:

«'Look,' said Balla Fasséké, 'the whirlwind is going towards Mali.'  
'Yes, it is time to go back there.'» [1]

Moreover, Johnson et.al confirm that: "Son-Jara's mother dies, [...] in order to enter the next world to better serve him through powerful occult."

Chinua Achebe in his book, *Things Fall Apart*, also paints mothers as symbols of peace and quietude but also as protectors even after their death. When Okonkwo, the main character of the book committed unconsciously a crime, he was forced to exile to his mother's country. His old uncle seeing that Okonkwo gave way to despair advised him in these terms:

"It's true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you. She is buried there. And that is why, we say that mother is supreme [...]" [6].

The above analysis proves how mothers accomplish their duty of protectors even when there are challenging barriers between them and their sons. The above quotation points out the supremacy of mothers over fathers. This shows that women deserve the role of protector. They can make great sacrifices just to see the blossoming of their children.

## CONCLUSION

This article has analyzed through an African perspective that the role of educator and that of protector is best played by women in a society. It has attributed these roles to women because of certain criteria that men could not fit. Among these criteria we have physical ones and emotional ones such as: breast feeding, quietude, tenderness, and leniency. Women can go up to the supreme sacrifice to educate and protect their children. And as we use to say that learning never ends, women even in their old ages educate and protect their children. What owes to women the roles of educator and protector is mostly the fact that children are always with their mothers while their fathers are at work or with friends.

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Il dit : « Elle nous a secourus avec ça, sachant que nous avions faim ». (Hayidara, 1987: 173, 175)

<sup>9</sup>Ne voyez-vous pas que je suis vieille? Quand il était enfant, je veillais sur lui. Maintenant, je veille encore, mais de façon bien différente. Je [prie] Nkoulou-Nkoulou et [les] ancêtres [...] qu'ils le protègent [...]

Etait-ce l'efficacité de ces prières? Chaka paraissait mieux protégé que personne. (Baba Kaké, 1976: 67)

But now that women are doing the same jobs as men, can they continue holding the roles of educator and protector? I can, without hesitation, assert that they keep on playing these roles. Because even if they leave their households for their offices or job places, they leave their children in the hands of wet nurses or maids that take good care of them. These wet nurses and maids are most of the time hired and paid by these mothers who are doing office works. Some women are even teachers, thus they are also educating other women's children. Some are working as doctors and nurses, thus protecting other women's children. They leave their houses to teach and protect other children while they leave their own in the hands of wet nurses and maids. On the other hand, wet nurses and maids are they not women too?

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