

# **Irene Salami's *EMOTAN: A Benin Heroine as a Myth and the struggle for Women's Liberation in Nigeria***

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## **Abstract**

Culture is the greatest regulator of human life and existence within a given society. Due to its importance, it has become a major source of social, political, economic, and even religious raw material for artistic creativity, especially drama. The use and treatment of culture, however, depends on the writer who may accept, reject, or modify it, including its myths, to advance a cause or pursue a quest for a new social narrative. Benin culture, noted to be rich in history and antiquities, like other ancient kingdoms in Nigeria, has become the creative environment or setting of the plays of Irene Salami-Agunloye. She has projected it from different perspectives, especially concerning issues on the status and position of women in Benin culture. This paper is aimed at evaluating one of her plays, *Emotan*, the myth in Benin culture relating to the current struggle for women's liberation in Nigeria. The objective is to assess the persona of the eponymous heroine Emotan in her struggle to fight injustice, oppression, inequality, and suppression in ancient Benin history, and identify with her struggle to encourage and support women in their individual and collective efforts in changing cultural practices that continue to enhance imbalances in current society.

**Keywords:** Emotan, Culture, Benin Kingdom, Myth, Injustice, Liberation

## Introduction

African/Nigerian culture and tradition have provided writers with rich ‘raw material’ for artistic creativity over the years. From such early writers as James Ene Henshaw, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, John Pepper Clark, Christopher Okigbo, to such later writers as Ola Rotimi, Femi Osofisan, Sonny Oti, Zulu Sofola, and Irene Salami-Agunloye, culture and tradition have been reflected in the subject matters of their works, irrespective of their divergent views. Whether they are speaking about pre-colonial, colonial, post-colonial, or contemporary socio-political issues, they have made clear and assertive statements on culture and tradition providing material for the current discourse on drama, novels, poetry, and other forms of literature. The attraction of writers to certain cultural issues demonstrates that they do not create in a vacuum, but rely on the immediate environment supplied by their culture and tradition.

Culture is the totality of a way of life of a given people over a period of time. With its dynamic nature, culture mutates either through changes in the larger society, or through its encounter with other cultures. Tradition is a part of culture that is passed from one person to another, or from generation to generation, sometimes differing in detail between them. It is also a commonly held system, delivered to others over a given period. Cultural and traditional issues have populated the minds of Nigerian writers over the years. These include, *inter alia*, cultural conflicts such as the clash between African culture(s) and colonialism. They also include concerns with patriarchy, religion, leadership (kingship struggles), family inheritance, the role of women, and more recently, political challenges of insecurity, cybercrime, the trafficking of women, and child labor. In contemporary times, the role of women has become a major focus particularly in women’s writing because the quest for women’s liberation, emancipation, and gender equality that hitherto took a back seat in male populated writings have become issues of serious engagement. Jane Bryce (53) is of the view that Nigerian female dramatists have contributed to the development of indigenous theater in Nigeria. Their academic work has added to knowledge and broadened perspectives in theater arts. By so doing, they have reinforced the place of women in Nigeria’s socio-political platform as well, taking advantage of their experiences as women. No other group could be more qualified to speak about some of the

issues they have addressed and the way it was done. According to Bryce, “the works of playwrights are products of their ideologies shaped by their environment and experiences. The sources of the play creator’s ideas is the memory bank, as well as the current issues that are topical in the society” (53). Sam Smiley reinforces these ideas, adding that:

The major source for most writers is direct experience which includes the people, situations, joys and sorrows that the writer personally experiences. They benefit from looking inside and outside themselves as consciously as possible so that they observe and store any emotion they experience for future use. The creative ability of a play creator is complemented largely by his/her experiences to create a well-rounded play. It is in this regard that Tse-Tung advances that all culture, art and literature derive their roots from particular classes and are for particular purposes. This explains the uniqueness of art that originates from various societies, each reflecting distinct sense of history and ideology of that society. (2)

The nature of a given society therefore explains the reason(s) behind the themes expressed in the plays that originate from it. The works of such Nigerian female dramatists as Zulu Sofola, Tess Onwueme, and Irene Salami-Agunloye demonstrate their desire to give voice to issues concerning women. According to Irene Salami Agunloye “... Nigerian women dramatists have resolved to rewrite and subvert the negative portrayal of women in texts written by men” (126).

In their different ways, the female dramatists have expressed the position of women in relation to the patriarchal nature of African society. Osita Ezenwanebe, however, argues that “there are few playwrights who have shown great interest in the female question in the contemporary Nigerian society. However, their portrayal of women in drama hardly reflects the actual views of African women and the message they would want to communicate” (24). Female dramatists have thus contributed to the development of theater in Nigeria.

In contemporary writings, discourse on the role of women has come under different nomenclatures, such as feminism, womanism, gender equality, and women’s liberation. In this new writing, female authors have taken the space to tell “their stories” in order to change the popular narrative in which women have been presented as docile, lacking in intelligence, seductive, quarrelsome, unimaginative, or somehow idiotic, foolish and stupid. They have been shown as totally reliant on and obedient to men or as being objects of insignificance in terms of

acquisition and inheritance. These opinions are reflected in Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*, *Kongi's Harvest*, *The Lion and the Jewel*, and *Trials of Brother Jero* (in the characters of Madam Tortoise, Segi, Sidi, and Amope). Chinua Achebe expresses similar ideas in *Things Fall Apart*, in the character of Ezinma, as do John Pepper Clark in *Ozidi* and *Song of a Goat*, in the characters of Oreame and Ebiere; Ola Rotimi in *Kurunmi* and *The Gods are not to Blame* in the characters of Mosadiwin and Ojuol; and Sonny Oti in *The Old Masters* and *Evangelist Jeremiah*, in the characters of Ugo and Rebekah.

One of the major champions in the liberation advocacy of rewriting popular stereotypes in Nigerian drama is Irene Isoken Salami-Agunloye. She is arguably the most prolific African feminist writer presently. Her polemics on the role of women in Nigeria has uplifted, encouraged, and been instrumental in encouraging and equipping women to rise to the challenge of the 'secondary' position in which culture and tradition have placed them to positions of importance. She refers to this as a move "from margin to centre" (17). In her opinion, "... Nigerian women dramatists have resolved to rewrite and subvert" the negative portrayal of women in texts written by men (17). In different ways, contemporary female dramatists have expressed the position of the women in relation to the patriarchal nature of Nigerian society. They have thus contributed to the development of theater in Nigeria. Her view recognizes the fact that the best way to express the opinion of women correctly and as desired is for women to do so themselves.

Olu Obafemi (63) suggests that it has taken a courageous effort on the part of female playwrights in Nigeria to rise to the challenge of speaking for women in a male-dominated arena. In her plays, therefore, Irene Salami-Agunloye has delved deeply into her rich Edo background in her pursuit of a new narrative for women. As a Benin princess and feminist ideologue, she has not missed any opportunity to project and promote Benin with its rich culture and traditions. Her plays *Emotan* (the subject of this essay), *Sweet Revenge*, *The Queen Sisters* (Ubi and Ewere), *More than Dancing*, and *Queen Idia* interrogate issues of Benin culture from a feminist point of view.

This writer's interest in the thematic narratives of Salami-Agunloye is because he worked extensively with her plays. He has directed on stage *The Queen Sisters*, and assisted in

directing two of her other plays, *Sweet Revenge* and *More than Dancing*, as Convocation Plays at Nigeria's University of Jos. He has also written seminal essays on three of her plays. These essays have placed the writer in a position to fully study and understand those aspects of Benin culture and tradition that concern women through the lens of Salami-Agunloye.

This essay stands as an evaluation of her play *Emotan*, the myth in Benin culture as it relates to the current struggle for women's liberation in Nigeria. The objective is to assess the persona of the eponymous heroine Emotan in her struggle to fight the injustice, oppression, inequality, and suppression associated with her time in ancient Benin history, and to identify with her struggle to encourage and support women in their individual and collective efforts to change cultural practices that continue to support current imbalances in society.

### **Historical and Philosophical view of the Status of Women in Ancient Benin Culture**

The geographical space known as Benin City occupies the forest belt between the Yoruba of the South West and the Igbo of the South East (Anthonia Yakubu, Online). The Bini (Benins) are ruled by a revered monarch referred to as the Oba who represents perfection. The Oba has significant influence over his subjects. In her study of Benin society, Kathy Curnow (76) - a social anthropologist - demonstrates the centrality of the Benin monarch in the affairs of the kingdom. Consequently, the male prestige structure is inextricably linked to the palace, the jurisdictional sphere of influence of the Oba, the king of the kingdom.

Benin is a classic patriarchal society. Early anthropologists have employed the term "patriarchal" to denote the rule of the male (father or son). This definition, however, has obscured the power dynamics inherent in the patriarchal structure itself, where men rule. Historically, Benin women have occupied subservient and inferior positions except for the Queen Mother (Iyoba) who is given relative prominence, while other women pale into insignificance in prestige. The socio-political system of Benin is built on a firm patriarchal tradition (R.E. Bradbury 15). In this context, Bradbury reveals that the Oba had a retinue of wives and concubines who served as a royal reserve from which such women are given as gifts to loyal chiefs or for services rendered to the monarch. Women were generally seen as commodities to satisfy the cravings of males within a marriage arrangement that had a master/slave-like

relationship (Osezua 2012, Yakubu Online). Despite a hostile environment that was averse to their being able to thrive, women have defied the odds and excelled in society. A very good example is Emotan, a female trader, who gave spiritual and financial support to Prince Ogun, leading to his ascension to the throne. In pre-colonial Benin society, marriage was sacrosanct and divorce highly frowned upon, except for those of noble birth (Bradbury 17). Within marriage, if a wife defaulted in adhering to the sanctity of sexual purity in thought or behavior within her marriage, she was expected to make a confession.

Critical indicators of patriarchy are the institutionalization of primogeniture, the excessive sexual restriction placed on women, and gender-segregated utensils, among other practices - except for women of royal heritage. Also, polygynous marriages are prevalent as the number of wives a man has is seen as boosting his status (Osezua 1). Categorizing traditional Benin social structure as a classical patriarchal arrangement is substantiated by empirical findings. The law of inheritance has no provision for female children to inherit property. Primogeniture is still the order of the day. Women are generally conceived as an inversion of the ideal. Female children when birthed are derogatorily referred to as “half current,” a vernacular expression depicting the notion that less virility is required to birth girls and alluding directly to a girl’s inferior status (Osezua 1). Thus, ancient Benin culture provides a context for marginalized women, discriminated against and existing in an extremely disadvantageous position in relation to men. This was the environment in which Emotan was raised and where she operated.

### **Emotan, the legend in Benin History**

Emotan (real name *Uwarraye*) was a 15th Century market woman who plied her trade at the Oba Market in the ancient kingdom of Benin during the reigns of Oba Uwaifiokun and Oba Ewuare the Great. She was known for her humanitarian work, love for children, and most importantly, the key role she played during the period of Prince Ogun’s (Oba Ewuare I) succession of travails following his time in exile. Although she had no biological children of her own, Emotan loved and took care of many children in her foster home. Some parents would send their children to live with her for a period of time and learn a trade. She also kept and trained

orphans, many of whom became industrious and useful members of society (Akenzua, in Ukwem 40). Emotan is credited with founding the first informal creche in Benin as her home was a popular make-shift nursery for the children of families patronizing the market. Her home also served as a refuge and hideout for Prince Ogun. She showed immense kindness to the prince when he was fighting to regain power from his usurping brother Oba Uwaifiokun who reigned about 1432 AD.

### **Brief Synopsis of the play *Emotan***

Emotan and Prince Ogun (later Oba Ewuare I) conspired to topple the usurper king, Oba Uwaifiokun. She played an instrumental role in helping Ogun reclaim his throne following his younger brother's betrayal. Prince Ogun took refuge in Emotan's humble abode at the Oba market as this was the only place of safety for him, and she became his eyes and ears in the city, as Uwaifiokun, who had already usurped Ogun's rightful throne, sought to kill him in order to retain kingship.

Having learned about Uwaifiokun's plan to make a procession to the ancestral shrine to sacrifice to the gods of his father, Prince Ogun dashed towards his younger brother's location and put him to the sword. This act cleared the path for Ogun to take the throne. The death of Uwaifiokun ended the crisis of succession in the kingdom and Prince Ogun marked it by adopting the title Ewuare (*Oworuare*), meaning *the heat has abated* or *the trouble has ceased* (Amadasun, Online). Ewuare went on to appoint Emotan as the *Iyeki* (leader of the authorized *Ekpate* guild), a position given to someone with the task of enforcing market rules and checkmating security matters.

Oba Ewuare reigned as the 12th Oba of Benin in about 1440 AD. Emotan passed on soon after Ewuare's installation as Oba. Upon her death, he (Oba Ewuare the Great) ordered that she must not be forgotten, and in order to establish this decree, he deified her by planting a sacred *Uruhe* tree by her grave (the same spot where she resided) adjacent to the Oba market. He also ordered that any man invested with a title had to visit her grave to pay homage, as did all funeral processions. According to Osaze Amadasun:

The *Uruhe* tree that was planted over her grave lived for more than 300 years, only dying during the reign of Oba Osemwende. The Oba replaced the tree with

another Uruhe about 150 years ago and supported it with an Iroko tree. The tree, however, was replaced with a bronze statue of a full-size woman by the British Council in Benin during the reign of Oba Akenzua II in 1954 ... (Online).

The statue of Emotan presently remains a monument and testimony in recognition and celebration of her life, role, and an exemplary template for women's liberation.

### **Emotan, the Myth in Irene Salami-Agunloye's play *Emotan***

The play *Emotan* presents the inspiring story of the eponymous heroine, Emotan. At the beginning of the play, the playwright, Salami (iii), presents her "mission statement," when she states that, "writing *Emotan* is my contribution to the effort to celebrate women's achievements in 'history' books." In her own evaluation, Mabel Ewverhoma, a feminist writer and crusader, states that:

In *Emotan*, Salami creates simple but bold, firm, resilient and influential woman who dominates the pages. This is a transformation of women's image and role in drama ... Hiding under the cover of history, she uncovers some harmful traditional practices amongst the Bini women. (v)

Emotan's persona in the play is seen under the premises of fighting for justice: selfless sacrifice, respect for others, unity, mobilization, and leadership. These are the basic links between the myth of the heroine and the play.

The first manifestation of Emotan's human nature and leadership qualities is seen from her accommodation, invitation, and support of other women to participate in trading at the Oba market. In the play, she does this against the background of Benin culture and the tradition of women's total dependence on their husbands. She therefore advocates for self-reliance, independence, and freedom.

**EMOTAN:** Come, you all, come and trade, the market is large enough for us all to sell and make our individual profits. There is enough for us



all. Look at the sky, there is enough space for each star to stay and shine. (28)

The playwright presents the lack of economic independence, part of the hegemonic tool of patriarchy which tradition placed on the women of Emotan's time. Her actions and activities in changing the mindset and therefore the status of the Benin women in the play stands as a signpost of her mission in setting a template for women's cooperation and self-liberation, which could not be negotiated or freely given by men as an act of benevolence.

It is common to anticipate financial gains as a person's or group's motivation in most liberation struggles. However, this is not the case with Emotan in her pursuit of a new Benin built on justice. Her rejection of Oba Uwaifiokun is based on a sense of justice, and this is clear in her arguments with the men sent by the Oba to her:

**AGBOGHIDI:**...The Oba of Benin, Oba Uwaifiokun has ordered that you be taken to his palace, to become his queen (p.29).

**EMOTAN:** Oba of where? Oba Uwaifiokun is a usurper. Tell him I have never taken delight in being a queen and I never will. I am content with my present status. That house you call a hut is my palace. Tell the Oba to stay in his palace and enjoy the company of his numerous queens ... (30)

The second aspect of Emotan's personality is her fight against injustice and her determination to fight and redress it. In the play, Prince Ogun's sufferings at the hands of his brother is twofold: First Oba Uwaifiokun, his younger brother, had usurped the throne that was rightly his, with the connivance of the Kingmakers (Uzamas). Secondly, with the same conniving Uzamas, he banished Prince Ogun from the kingdom. Emotan's fight against injustice is therefore directed at redressing these wrongs, even at the risk of her own life.

**EMOTAN:**... Have no fear for my life. I am ready to lay it down for the sake of this cause. Put yourself in Prince Ogun's situation, a prince and

heir apparent to the throne of Benin, wandering about in the forest, living on wild fruits, lizards and rats. I am not just fighting for Ogun, I am fighting for the good of Benin. The injustice must not be allowed to take a bed and lie down in our land. No. never! (47)

Emotan's determination to sacrifice and succeed in her mission, goes beyond the ordinary. Her love for justice and a better Benin kingdom may come at the personal cost of her life, the ultimate price to pay. She offers herself as a sacrifice to the gods for the success of her mission. Her discussion with Okutukutu, the Priest of the Oracle, demonstrates the intensity of her determination:

**OKUTUKUTU:** ... The oracle proclaims that you should be offered as a sacrifice for Okoro Ogun to be enthroned. You are the only sacrifice that can bring Okoro Ogun to his throne and peace to Benin. There is no other person we can offer (p.63).

**EMOTAN:** ... I have always lived my life for humanity, for Benin and for Ogun. But now having to die for the throne of Benin to be rid of injustice, is a different thing entirely ... I will lay down my life for the throne of Benin. I will, I will. Difficult through it may be, I have no choice ... I am ready to pay the price. Benin will know peace. Benin will know prosperity and fame.

**OKUTUKUTU:** Well done Emotan ... Benin will tell your story from generation to generation. Children yet unborn will remember this sacrifice. They will honour you. They will sing your praise Emotan. (64-5)

What a woman! What a heart! What a sacrifice! What a heroine! The priest's prediction accounts for why Emotan is a celebrated heroine, an icon, and a godhead in the Benin kingdom. That is

why the history of the kingdom is replete with the myth and persona of Emotan. That is why Salami celebrates her in her play *Emotan*.

The final victory of Prince Ogun in reclaiming the Benin throne is equally achieved through Emotan. She teaches the women and mobilizes them with her vision of unity and friendship, on which the success of every recorded struggle depended:

**EMOTAN:** ... We need to work hand in hand. Not claiming to be greater or superior than the other. All we need do is to concentrate on people's strengths and talk about those, not their weaknesses. When we notice a weakness, call the person aside and correct her if you know better...

This is a time for us to be united in purpose and strength, not dissipating our energies in fights that yield no benefits ... (81-2).

Emotan's prowess in mobilizing women to support Prince Ogun is novel and exemplary, in her use of the Oba market where she created room for all to trade. Her discussion with Prince Ogun reveals her determination in this regard:

**EMOTAN:** ... I have just agreed to perform a priceless sacrifice

**OGUN:** ... What is this priceless sacrifice that has brought tears to your eyes? I noticed you are not as cheerful as usual ... (74)

When Emotan's mission has been accomplished, that is, the restoration of Benin throne to the rightful owner, Prince Ogun, we see the nature of her celebration on the success:

**EMOTAN:** I hear shouts of joy ... My mission is accomplished, my dream is realized. My vision is fulfilled. My gods here I am, a worthy sacrifice for the throne of Benin: my Benin ... Live on, Benin, live on. Ogun ascends the throne of Benin, for I. the price to pay.

Painful though it is. I am fulfilled. Today justice is enthroned in Benin.... (87)

It is only after the death of Emotan for justice in Benin and for him to be enthroned king, that Oba Ewuare (Prince Ogun) realized the extent of her love for Benin and for justice.

**OLIHA:** Your Majesty, we are told that she offered herself as a sacrifice to the gods for the kingdom of Benin and your throne.

**EWUARE:** *Emwen* Oba! My God ... Could that have been the priceless sacrifice she spoke of, that was to be performed for me to be enthroned, and for peace in Benin? Emotan, what is the throne of Benin without you? ... Did you labour for another to inherit ... You were my eyes and my legs. For my sake you were called names ... Emotan your exit tears my heart apart .... (91-2)

Yes! Emotan labored for her kingdom, for justice and fairness, equity and truth. She labored for Prince Ogun to be enthroned as Oba Ewuare the Great. The acceptance, recognition, and eulogy of Emotan's sacrifice can be appreciated from the other women who traded with her, lived with her, and associated with her:

**ADESUWA:** I am so proud of her. I wish I had her boldness.

**EKI:** I wish I had her calmness and resilient spirit.

**OMO:** I wish I had her charm and charisma.

**IRIOWEN:** I wish I had her zeal and loyalty.

**IMOSE:** I wish I had her beauty and eloquence.

**EKI:** I wish I had her love and humility

**ADESUWA:** I wish I had (her) patience and confidence. (88)

**EKI:** Your courage in preaching against injustice is worthy of note. Your stand against the oppression of the less privileged will forever remain memorable in our minds.... (93)

The play *Emotan* celebrates the heroine Emotan as a myth and, as a story, stands before us to motivate and encourage all women in their struggle against certain cultural proscriptions inherited from past generations. It stands as a roadmap for those struggling against oppression, injustice, bad leadership and governance.

The playwright, Irene Salami, presents in the character of Emotan, a fearless, bold, assertive and selfless fighter who remains a role model and quintessential personality; whose name and image still resonate in the minds of the present generation. In the play, therefore, Emotan, a Benin hero, is portrayed as a brave woman who stands up for truth and justice against culture and tradition that relegates women to a secondary status, even laying down her life for the cause. She is presented as who she was: a woman who possessed a strength of character classified as “legendary,” especially taking into consideration the background and demands of her Benin society. She was able to remove the reigning Oba, a usurper, when the people could not do anything about him. Emotan, a plain woman made a remarkable effort to achieve this feat though the great warriors of the day had not the courage to attempt it. In support of this view, Mabel Evwierhoma states that, “the play has cogent feminist strategies which can be very instrumental in mainstreaming women’s concerns in national development.” (vii)

## **Conclusion**

The measure of success for every writer is the acceptance of his/her work in communicating a message capable of arousing some level of interest, understanding, and consciousness. In the play *Emotan*, the playwright uses the historical facts of Benin oratory to weave a dramatic truth that is celebrated as a work of great creativity. Though her Benin culture stands strong against current struggles by women to effect certain changes, Irene Salami interrogates certain aspects of that culture fearlessly through her play, using the persona of Emotan as a motivation.

This same vision and mission of change is clearly seen in another of her plays, *Sweet Revenge*. This play brings out the issues of subjugation in a society where women are not considered or seen as capable of taking decisions on their own, but rather take orders from men

who rule the house. The play captures the experience of women who are the victims of desertion by their husbands, leaving them with the responsibility of catering for the children. In the play, Aisosa does not resign herself to self-pity. Her determination to succeed despite the condition necessitated by Sota's ill treatment is rewarded by a reversal of fortune. Other plays, *The Queen Sisters*, *More Than Dancing*, and *Idia – The Warrior Queen of Benin* also address the subjects of fighting against injustice, oppression, bad leadership and governance.

A strong criticism of Salami-Agunloye's plays, however, is her inability to permit her strong and assertive female characters to triumph even after they have fought for a change in their society. That Emotan died after helping to wrestle the throne from the usurper king for the success of Oba Ewuare demands rejection as a creative effort. The question that begs for answer is, "Why destroy the heroine after her success, and deprive her of the victory of her struggle?" The same observation can be made about Ubi, the quintessential change agent in Salami-Agunloye's other play, *The Queen Sisters*, who was destroyed by a cultural prohibition against "bed wetting," an abomination according to Benin tradition, for a victim is regarded as cursed and possibly suffering from the punishment of the gods for various offences against them. It seems to be a fundamental contradiction in writing such motivational and feminist oriented plays when the female heroic character, who signposts the change for women's liberation, is destroyed and disallowed the victory of her struggle. The message is truncated and the quest for change and liberation becomes questionable and less compelling. Despite this, feminist writers should be commended for excavating history to teach women that their positions can be changed, and they are the agents and catalysts for that change. Salami-Agunloye portrays her women as revolutionary but not radical, since she suggests in all her plays that women should work together with men, as Emotan did with Prince Ogun, to effect the needed change. It is such collaborations that will develop a better and lasting existence for both men and women in society. The play *Emotan* should therefore be appreciated as a template for the current struggle and advocacy for equality of women in Nigeria.



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