

## DECONSTRUCTING PATRIARCHAL PARADIGMS AND (RE)DEFINING AFRICAN WOMANHOOD: THE POLITICS OF CULTURE IN ALOBWED'EPIC'S *THE LADY WITH A BEARD*

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### Abstract

Drawing on Alobwed'Epie's *The Lady with a Beard*, this paper examines how patriarchal paradigms are interrogated and deconstructed through the character of Emade, the novel's heroine, who is endowed with attributes culturally coded as masculine. Through her resilience, intelligence, and authoritative engagement with cultural practices traditionally reserved for men, Emade challenges entrenched gender hierarchies and redefines African womanhood. Her assertiveness in matters of inheritance, succession, ritual authority, and sexual autonomy positions her as a transformative figure who negotiates, rather than rejects, culture to assert female agency. Anchored in African feminist thought, cultural politics, and structuralist theory, the paper argues that while patriarchal ideologies persist in reinforcing male dominance, women possess equal capacity to lead, innovate, and reshape societal norms. By examining widowhood as both a socially constructed site of marginalization and a potential locus of empowerment, the study demonstrates how Alobwed'Epie interrogates the intersections of culture, gender, and power. Ultimately, the paper reveals that African women, exemplified by Emade, can challenge oppressive traditions while preserving and re-signifying the cultural heritage of their communities.

**Keywords:** Cultural politics, Patriarchy, Womanhood, Ideology, Deconstruction.

### Introduction

African societies have historically been structured around patriarchal systems in which power, authority, and social legitimacy are predominantly vested in men (Bruey, 2021; Edeagu & Uchendu, 2021). These systems are sustained not merely through overt domination but through deeply embedded cultural norms, customs, and symbolic practices that normalize and legitimize gender hierarchy. Within such frameworks, women are often positioned as subordinate subjects whose social roles are restricted to domesticity, obedience, and reproductive functionality (Abianji-Menang, 2019; Edeagu & Uchendu, 2021). As a result, gender inequality becomes naturalized as cultural common sense rather than recognized as a social construct.

The subjugation of women has therefore remained a central concern in African literary discourse. African writers and critics have

consistently traced women's oppression from precolonial structures through colonial disruptions to postcolonial realities, highlighting how patriarchal dominance intersects with colonial and socio-economic forces to marginalize women (Amadiume, 1987; Emecheta, 1974; Tamale, 1999). Within this continuum of oppression, women are frequently represented as "second-class citizens," subjected to layered forms of exclusion that affect their social, economic, and cultural autonomy.

Despite ongoing efforts to address gender inequality, the experiences of rural women—particularly widows—remain comparatively underexplored in African literary criticism. Widowhood constitutes one of the most extreme forms of female marginalization, exposing women to social stigma, ritual humiliation, economic dispossession, and sexual vulnerability (Abianji-Menang, 2020, 2024). In many African societies, widowhood intensifies patriarchal control,

rendering women vulnerable to harassment and exclusion under the guise of tradition. This paper conceptualizes widowhood as a “fourth level” of female colonization, produced through the convergence of patriarchal cultural norms and residual colonial power structures.

Nevertheless, African literature has increasingly emerged as a critical site for challenging these gendered structures of power. Through narrative reimagining, African writers interrogate the ideological foundations of patriarchy and propose alternative visions of womanhood rooted in agency, resistance, and self-definition. One of such intervention is offered by Alobwed’Epie in *The Lady with a Beard*, a novel that radically disrupts conventional representations of gender by centering a female protagonist who embodies qualities traditionally associated with masculinity. The heroine, Emade, occupies a paradoxical position within her society: she is biologically female yet symbolically masculine, celebrated for her courage, decisiveness, and leadership. Through Emade’s character, the novel unsettles rigid gender binaries that underpin patriarchal ideology, particularly the assumption that authority, rationality, and cultural legitimacy are inherently male attributes. Her ability to navigate male-dominated cultural spaces challenges the ideological foundations of gender hierarchy.

### **Theoretical framework**

This study is anchored in the feminist literary analysis of Simone de Beauvoir (1949), Judith Butler (1990) and grounded in Ogundipe-Leslie’s (1994) African feminist theory, Hall (1997) and Gramsci (1971)’s cultural politics and Levi-Strauss’s (1963) structuralism. Beauvoir’s assertion that “one is not born, but becomes, a woman” highlights the socially constructed and performative nature of gender, demonstrating that inequality is produced through cultural norms, practices, and institutionalized power rather than biological determinism. Complementing this, Butler’s concept of gender performativity reveals how repeated actions, behaviors, and societal expectations reproduce and reinforce gender hierarchies. Together, these theories provide a lens for understanding how the protagonist of *The Lady*

*with a Beard*, Emade, embodies both traditionally feminine and masculine traits, thereby challenging the binary logic of patriarchy and asserting that womanhood can transcend socially imposed limitations.

African feminist theory, including the work of Ogundipe-Leslie (1994), contextualizes women’s experiences within African socio-cultural and political frameworks. It emphasizes the recognition of women’s intelligence, creativity, and agency while asserting that access to power should be determined by competence and cultural knowledge rather than gendered assumptions. Similarly, STIWA (Social Transformation in Africa with Women) emphasizes gender equality in tandem with social transformation, aligning with Emade’s dual role as a cultural agent and political actor within Bakossi society. Cultural politics, as articulated by Stuart Hall (1997) and Antonio Gramsci (1971), illuminates the novel’s depiction of gender equality as a contested ideological and cultural terrain, where dominant patriarchal norms are challenged by counter-hegemonic practices. Structuralism provides an additional analytical lens, revealing how rituals, spatial organization, and social hierarchies operate as systematic mechanisms through which gender roles are constructed, maintained, and potentially subverted (Cudden, 1991).

By combining these frameworks, this study examines how Emade’s mastery of ritual, inheritance, drumming, and leadership constitutes both a performative and structural challenge to patriarchal authority. Her actions exemplify how African women can leverage culturally grounded knowledge and strategic agency to contest gender hierarchies, transform widowhood, and promote social and political equity.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in literary and cultural analysis. The paper employs close textual reading as its primary methodological approach in examining Alobwed’Epie’s *The Lady with a Beard*, with particular attention to narrative structure, characterization, symbolism, and cultural representation. Close reading enables a

detailed exploration of how patriarchal ideologies are constructed, sustained, and challenged within the text, especially through the figure of Emade and her engagement with male-dominated cultural spaces.

The analysis is theoretically informed by an interdisciplinary framework that integrates African feminist theory, gender theory, cultural politics, and structuralism. African feminism provides the contextual lens for interpreting women's experiences within indigenous socio-cultural systems, emphasizing agency, negotiation, and transformation rather than outright cultural rejection. This approach allows the study to situate Emade's resistance within African cultural realities while avoiding universalized Western feminist assumptions. Ogun-dipe-Leslie's Stiwanimism further informs the analysis by foregrounding social transformation and women's active participation in redefining societal norms.

The paper focuses on selected key episodes involving widowhood, inheritance disputes, ritual practices, and sexual autonomy. These episodes are examined not as isolated events but as culturally coded moments that reveal broader ideological struggles surrounding gender and power. Secondary sources—including scholarly works on African feminism, patriarchy, gender theory, and cultural studies—are used to contextualize the textual analysis and strengthen the interpretive claims. By combining close textual analysis with theoretically informed interpretation, this methodology enables a nuanced examination of how *The Lady with a Beard* deconstructs patriarchal paradigms and redefines African womanhood. The approach foregrounds literature as a critical cultural space in which dominant ideologies are questioned and alternative social possibilities are imaginatively articulated.

### **Widowhood and Patriarchal Marginalization in Bakossi Society: A Gender-Performativity Perspective**

Widowhood in many African societies constitutes a deeply traumatic and socially marginalizing experience for women, exposing them to stigma, loss of social status, and economic vulnerability. In *The Lady with a Beard*, the social

world of the novel is largely insensitive to the plight of widows, who are systematically oppressed. Alobwed'Epie presents widowhood as a condition of social subjugation deeply embedded in Bakossi cultural norms and sustained within a broader patriarchal framework. From a gender-performativity perspective, widowhood in the novel operates as a disciplinary category that polices women's behavior by enforcing narrowly defined scripts of femininity—silence, submission, spatial withdrawal, and ritual passivity. Through Emade, the novel exposes how gender in Bakossi society is not a biological essence but a set of repeated acts regulated by cultural institutions. As Djockoua (2018) observes, Emade, “like other men and women of the Bakossi community, is a victim of enslaving and unbending traditions that condition men and women's behaviour and lives” (p. 9). This conditioning reflects what Butler (1990) describes as the performative production of gender, whereby norms are sustained through repetition and enforced through social sanction. Widowhood thus becomes a heightened site of gender regulation, where deviation from prescribed feminine behavior attracts communal punishment.

In Bakossi society, as depicted in the novel, the death of a husband signifies not only personal loss but also the withdrawal of social authority, political relevance, and control over property. Widowhood marks a rupture in the gendered performance of legitimacy: without a husband, a woman's access to power becomes culturally unintelligible. Cultural practices therefore enforce spatial displacement as a means of re-inscribing gender norms. Abianji-Menang (2020) notes that the first compound symbolizes male authority, while the center of the village represents the female domain. Emade's forced relocation from the first compound after her husband's death functions as a symbolic correction of gender transgression—an attempt to realign her body with culturally sanctioned feminine space. The narrator recounts this corrective act through Munge's memory:

I remember very well when Nye  
Emade's husband died twelve years  
back. Ntube was just four months old.

The chief and his councilors wanted to move her to the village because, in a village where men incarnated *Muankum*, a woman could not occupy the first compound—the entrance into the village (Alobwed’Epie, 2019, 17).

From a performative standpoint, Emade’s continued occupation of the first compound constitutes an unauthorized enactment of masculinity—leadership, visibility, and authority. Her removal is therefore not merely spatial but symbolic, reinforcing Butler’s (1990) assertion that gender norms are maintained through the regulation of bodies in space. Widowhood, in this sense, becomes a mechanism for reasserting patriarchal order by rendering female authority illegible.

Inheritance customs further intensify the systemic organization of widows by linking legitimacy to male lineage. Bakossi tradition grants inheritance rights exclusively to male children, effectively erasing women’s claims to continuity and legacy. For widows like Emade and her sister Mechane, whose daughters cannot inherit unless they bear male children, the ritual of “closing the door” dramatizes the performative erasure of female lineage. This ritual does not merely signify biological extinction but enacts a symbolic declaration that womanhood, without male mediation, cannot sustain social continuity. As Beauvoir (1949) argues, woman is constructed as the “Other,” denied historical and symbolic permanence—a condition vividly enacted through these inheritance practices. The absence of a male heir compounds Emade’s political marginalization, exposing the structural mechanisms through which patriarchal societies restrict women’s participation in governance. Her exclusion from inheritance and leadership reflects the performative logic of patriarchy: power is not denied because she is incapable but because her gender performance violates established norms of authority.

Patriarchal enforcement is most visibly embodied in the *Muankum* Sacred Society, which functions as an institutional regulator of gender performance. The *Muankum* cult arrogates exclusive masculine rights and polices violations

through ritualized violence and spiritual intimidation. Emade’s decision to dig a grave and bury her sister Mechane—acts reserved for men—provokes the invocation of *Muankum* as a corrective force: “It is *Muankum* that will settle this matter now... we shall incarnate *Muankum* to handle a serious violation of our tradition by a male malewoman from Atieg...” (Alobwed’Epie, 2019, pp. 44, 47). The label “male malewoman” reveals the community’s anxiety toward gender ambiguity. Emade’s actions disrupt the binary logic of masculinity and femininity, exposing what Butler (1990) identifies as the fragility of gender norms. The violent response of the *Muankum* cult underscores how patriarchal systems rely on coercive repetition to preserve the illusion of stable gender identities.

Cultural performance through music and drumming further illustrates the regulation of gender. The prohibition against women singing *ebenzu* or *Muankum* songs reinforces gender boundaries by controlling expressive practices. When Emade initiates the eighth song during the naming ceremony, she violates this boundary: “That is a *Muankum* song... that is not a woman’s song. That is a men’s song. A *Muankum* song” (Alobwed’Epie, 2019, p. 75).

Similarly, Emade’s drumming to announce Mechane’s death and her panegyric praise—“she who beats the gorilla at the cross-road is no more” (Alobwed’Epie, 2019, p. 34)—constitute performative acts that masculinize female subjectivity. The babysitter’s incredulous question, “do women wrestle with gorillas at the cross-roads?” (p. 34), exposes how deeply heroism is gendered as male within Bakossi cultural discourse. Ahone’s warning—“where have you ever seen a woman play the drum to announce death?” (Alobwed’Epie, 2019, p. 34)—further reflects the policing of gender performance. Drumming, like spatial authority and ritual leadership, functions as a performative marker of masculinity. Emade’s repeated engagement in these acts renders her body a site of cultural disruption.

Through these narrative moments, *The Lady with a Beard* reveals widowhood as a site where gender performativity is both enforced and

contested. While patriarchal institutions seek to discipline Emade into compliant femininity, her sustained defiance exposes gender as a mutable and socially constructed performance rather than a fixed biological destiny. Widowhood, therefore, becomes not only a condition of intensified marginalization but also a critical space through which patriarchal gender norms are destabilized and reimagined.

### **Widows and Sexual Objectification**

Patriarchal ideologies in Bakossi society extend beyond spatial and economic marginalization to shape perceptions of female sexuality. One of the most pervasive stereotypes in patriarchal African societies is the construction of widows as sexually available, predatory, or threatening to male authority. Widows are often treated as objects of male desire and subjected to community-imposed sexual expectations, a condition that exposes them to harassment, coercion, and social censure. In *The Lady with a Beard*, Alobwed'Epie foregrounds this sexualized vulnerability to reveal how widowhood intensifies women's exposure to patriarchal control.

In Atieg, lecherous men attempt to exploit Emade following her husband's death, using the strategic position of her compound as a pretext for sexual coercion. Emade explicitly articulates this experience: "When my husband died, the men tried to use the position of my compound in the village as a way by which they will be putting down my occiput. I told them no, and my no stood" (Alobwed'Epie, 2019, p. 26). The metaphor of the widow as an "elephant killed at the crossroads" powerfully captures her vulnerability, emphasizing the intersection of gender, sexuality, and power in patriarchal domination. Positioned at a visible and strategic communal space, the widow becomes an exposed body, subjected to male surveillance and entitlement. Hunze further illustrates this predatory environment when she reveals that village men have been frequenting Emade's compound, "feigning being herbalists and looking for herbs and stray goats around her compound" (Alobwed'Epie, 2019, p. 18). These encounters reveal how patriarchal societies construct widowhood as an invitation to sexual

access rather than as a period of mourning and dignity.

Beyond sexual harassment, the Bakossi societal framework systematically denies widows access to institutional power. In Atieg, widows face marginalization from both men and women. Male authority structures—represented by the chief and his councilors—exclude widows from decision-making processes, while other women often regard them as destabilizing figures who threaten marital order and social propriety (Abanji-Menang, 2020). Political deliberation is reserved exclusively for male elders, silencing women on matters that directly affect their lives.

Women, however, also participate in reinforcing patriarchal discipline. Emade is ostracized from women's groups and communal activities because she openly challenges gossip disguised as sympathy. Her resistance provokes hostility from women who perceive her independence as disruptive. When Ahone suggests involving the village to mediate Emade's conflicts with other women, Emade articulates a philosophy of self-determination:

"This time it's not the men but the women... when male-rain fell on me did I wear a raincoat? Now it is female-rain, shall I bother myself? As the file wears out the cutlass so do the cutlass wear out the file. Atieg men and women take turns to wear me out; we are all in the cauldron" (Alobwed'Epie, 2019, p. 26).

The metaphors of the "file" and the "cutlass" underscore the relentlessness of social pressure exerted upon widows, while the "cauldron" symbolizes the oppressive environment in which women must navigate both male aggression and female hostility. This dual marginalization legitimizes male authority under the guise of tradition and creates structural barriers to female empowerment. From a womanist perspective, such institutionalized exclusion reflects broader patriarchal practices that restrict women's agency in political, economic, and cultural spheres (Atanga, et al, 2013).

### Widows and Witchcraft

Another recurring stereotype addressed in *The Lady with a Beard* is the association of widows with witchcraft. In many African cultural contexts, widows are often accused of possessing mystical or supernatural powers—an attribution that simultaneously evokes fear and suspicion (Owe, 2009, p. 153). In the novel, Emade is rumored to wield witchcraft because of her ability to defend her inheritance, assert autonomy, and challenge male authority. According to Munge, Emade is perceived as spiritually dangerous: “If we are tackling Nye Emade’s problem, we should be deep rooted. Nye Emade is not an empty woman. She is full to the brim... she who wants to fight a tiger must have claws and fangs” (D’Epie, 2011, p. 17). These mystical representations serve a dual purpose. On the one hand, they reflect the awe inspired by Emade’s competence and resilience; on the other, they reveal deep-seated societal anxiety toward women who disrupt gender hierarchies. Labeling such women as witches becomes a strategy for containing their power and delegitimizing their authority. A comparable tension is evident in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, where Chielo’s spiritual authority as a priestess simultaneously empowers her and places her outside normative femininity (Achebe, 1958).

The women’s inability to resolve a minor incident involving Ntube’s fall—choosing instead to ostracize Emade—demonstrates how accusations of witchcraft often mask social insecurity rather than genuine spiritual concern. Munge’s narrative exposes how witchcraft discourse becomes a patriarchal and communal weapon deployed against autonomous women. The novel thus critiques the cultural logic that mystifies women’s competence while simultaneously stigmatizing it, preventing widows from being acknowledged as legitimate social actors.

Emade’s experiences resonate with Beyalla’s (2005) framework of African women’s multiple layers of marginalization: first as women, second as Black women, third in social integration, and fourth as widows. By navigating and resisting these intersecting forms of oppression, Emade exemplifies the potential for widows to assert

agency within restrictive cultural systems. Her strategies—mastery of ritual knowledge, economic assertiveness, resistance to sexual coercion, and refusal of social silencing—demonstrate a nuanced mode of empowerment that negotiates rather than rejects culture, aligning with womanist principles of context-sensitive resistance (Atanga, 2018).

Alobwed’Epie’s portrayal of Emade ultimately subverts patriarchal constraints through her strategic assumption of masculine-coded attributes, symbolized by the titular “beard.” These attributes—strength, courage, and authority—enable her to reclaim social and economic power without relinquishing her identity as a woman or widow (Djockoua, 2018, p. 15). This resistance echoes African feminist arguments that women’s capacities are not inherently inferior but socially constrained by constructed hierarchies (Adichie, 2014). Emade’s dual embodiment of masculine and feminine traits allows her to negotiate male-dominated spaces while redefining widowhood as a position of resilience, authority, and cultural legitimacy within Bakossi society.

#### Emade as Cultural Agent: Resistance, and Redefinition of Female Roles

In *The Lady with a Beard*, Alobwed’Epie portrays Emade not merely as a widow navigating patriarchal oppression but as a cultural agent who actively reshapes the gendered dynamics of her society through what can be read as gender performativity in action. Drawing on Judith Butler’s theory that gender is not an innate essence but a set of repeated acts, gestures, and performances that acquire the appearance of naturalness, Emade’s interventions expose masculinity as a socially rehearsed script rather than a biological destiny. Her resistance does not take the form of outright rejection of culture; instead, she performs culture differently, revealing the contingency of gendered authority.

In Bakossi society, as in many African traditions, cultural rituals—burial ceremonies, drumming, song, dance, inheritance, and land management—are highly gendered domains in which masculinity is repeatedly enacted as authority while femininity is associated with passivity and symbolic support (Ewane, 2011, p.

475). These rituals function as what Butler would describe as regulatory performances, through which gender norms are stabilized and reproduced. By mastering and publicly performing these male-coded cultural practices, Emade interrupts the ritual repetition that sustains patriarchal masculinity, thereby destabilizing the binary opposition between masculine authority and feminine subordination. Her actions demonstrate that cultural competence is not naturally male but produced through performance, training, and recognition.

Rather than imitating men in a mimetic sense, Emade re-signifies masculinity by performing it differently and for alternative ends. Her authority emerges not from biological sex but from her ability to *perform* leadership, ritual knowledge, and cultural expertise convincingly within socially legible frameworks. In this way, Emade embodies Butler's argument that subversion occurs not outside norms but within their repetition, where norms are cited and redeployed in ways that expose their instability.

#### Rituals, Cultural Expertise, and the Performativity of Authority

Burial rituals in Bakossi tradition are deeply codified performances through which social order, lineage continuity, and masculine authority are reaffirmed. Men's exclusive control over burial rites is not merely symbolic but performative: it repeatedly enacts men as custodians of tradition and women as cultural dependents. Emade's intervention in Mechane's burial, therefore constitutes a performative rupture in the ritual economy of gender.

When Emade declares, "*We should assume the position of men*" (Alobwed'Epie, 2019, p. 39), she articulates gender not as an essence but as a role that can be assumed, enacted, and legitimized through performance. Her decision to plan the burial, determine the grave site, and physically dig the grave dramatizes Butler's claim that gender authority is constituted through action rather than anatomy. By pegging and digging the grave "with the mastery of a professional" (Alobwed'Epie, 2019, p. 44), Emade performs masculinity so effectively that it ceases to appear exclusively male. The act exposes

patriarchal gender roles as conventions sustained by repetition, not natural laws.

Similarly, her role in the confining ceremony positions her as a ritual speaker, a role traditionally denied to women: Emade in an incantatory tone addresses Mechane's corpse:

Daughter-of-the-dieties-of-Kupe-  
Muanenguba-Mountains, Wife-of-the-  
water-source, Twine-of-the-spreading-  
pumpkin plant," return to your forebears  
in peace. When you arrive, identify  
yourself with this cloth (*abad d'esake*)  
which the deities themselves left with us  
as a sign of solidarity and oneness with  
the underworld. Let it be the bridge  
between us (Alobwed'Epie, 2019, p. 52).

The incantatory address to Mechane's corpse is not simply an assertion of cultural knowledge; it is a performative speech act that authorizes Emade as a mediator between the living and the dead. Butler's notion of performative utterance is useful here: Emade's words do not merely describe authority; they produce it. By successfully completing the ritual, she demonstrates that ritual legitimacy is not gender-bound but performance-dependent.

Her strategic placement of the grave in the center of the compound further underscores her performative agency. This act redefines inheritance and lineage through practice rather than proclamation. Emade's interventions extend beyond mastery to innovation. She modifies traditional burial rites, challenging the rigid adherence to male-dominated norms without undermining the cultural significance of the practices. By placing her sister's grave in the center and personally constructing protective markers, Emade adapts ritual practices to serve practical and equitable purposes. When Emade asserts that "female children have equal rights to inheritance as male" (Alobwed'Epie, 2019, p. 51), the statement gains force because it is backed by ritual enactment. This act reflects a form of womanist praxis, wherein cultural knowledge is employed strategically to achieve social justice and gender equity. Emade's approach demonstrates that tradition is not immutable but can be harnessed to empower women and protect

familial legacies. In Butlerian terms, Emade does not argue against patriarchy abstractly; she reconfigures its material practices, thereby unsettling the gender norms they reproduce.

#### Drumming, Dance, and the Performative Deconstruction of Masculinity

Drumming in the Bakossi tradition functions as a quintessential site of masculine performance. It is through drumming that men publicly enact authority, command space, and communicate power. Emade's decision to drum—especially the drum announcing death and war—constitutes a direct challenge to the performative monopoly of masculinity. She argues that:

Women who guard the village entrance must not only understand, but must also know how to play the drum, not the drum announcing death but also the drum announcing war. All the people of this village are gone to the bush. How do we get to them if we rely only on men playing the drum?

(Alobwed'Epie, 2019, p. 35).

Emade defies the hegemony of patriarchy by playing the drum to announce Mechane's death and reframes the purpose of the drum by emphasizing its role in ensuring community survival rather than perpetuating male dominance. Her argument that women must both understand and play the drum reframes cultural survival as dependent on functional competence rather than gendered symbolism. By taking up the lead drum, Emade does not merely enter a male space; she re-performs masculinity in a female body, thereby revealing the constructed nature of the association between drumming and male power. Butler argues that when gender norms are performed by bodies they are not meant to inhabit, the illusion of naturalness collapses. Emade's drumming achieves precisely this effect: it renders masculinity visible as a stylized repetition of acts rather than an exclusive male property.

The imagery of Emade making "the lead drum speaks to the living and the dead" (Alobwed'Epie, 2019, p. 65) underscores her mastery of the performative language of power. Her fusion of the male *ebenzu* dance with the female *mbesu* dance creates a hybrid performance

that destabilizes rigid gender scripts. This synthesis illustrates Butler's claim that new gender possibilities emerge when norms are reworked rather than rejected. Emade's performance does not abolish tradition; it queers it by exposing its flexibility.

The men's invitation to play the drum "A *mue*, people are waiting for you. Come and satisfy them. the place is cold" and the "women's ululation—"if hens crow, (referring to Emade) instead of the cocks, the day will still break" (Alobwed'Epie, 2019, 65) —marks a collective recognition that gender hierarchy is sustained by convention, not necessity. The women of Muabag hail her for challenging the men and crowing in their place. Here, the women are crusading for equality between the sexes as women can do what men can do and why not better. When Emade refuses to continue drumming after male protest, her withdrawal itself becomes performative, exposing the fragility of male authority when it is no longer uncontested. Authority, the text suggests, depends on recognition and repetition, both of which Emade controls.

Through ritual leadership, burial practices, and drumming, Emade demonstrates that gendered power in Bakossi society is performed into existence rather than biologically ordained. Her actions align with Butler's theory of gender performativity by revealing masculinity as a cultural script that can be learned, enacted, interrupted, and re-signified. Emade's resistance thus operates not outside tradition but within its performative structures, transforming culture into a site of feminist renegotiation and redefining African womanhood as an active, authoritative, and culturally legitimate presence.

#### **Inheritance, Land, and the Performativity of Widowhood**

Inheritance practices in Bakossi society function as a powerful site for the ritualized performance of patriarchy, where masculinity is repeatedly enacted as ownership, succession, and spatial control, while widowhood is constructed as loss, dependency, and erasure. Within this framework, Emade's intervention in inheritance is not simply oppositional but performative: she re-enacts the very gestures, rituals, and spatial

practices through which male authority is constituted, thereby exposing inheritance itself as a gendered script rather than a natural entitlement.

Emade's reclamation of her late husband's property—"I told them no, and my no stood" (Alobwed'Epie, 2019, p. 26)—further illustrates the performative constitution of authority. Property ownership, like inheritance, is maintained through repeated spatial occupation and recognition. By refusing displacement and occupying the first compound, Emade performs sovereignty in a space coded as masculine. This occupation destabilizes the spatial grammar of patriarchy, where men control visibility and women inhabit marginal interiors.

Drawing on spatial theory, Emade's movement across the first compound and central compound reveals space itself as gendered performance. Her presence re-signifies these locations, demonstrating that authority is produced by who occupies space and how, rather than by gender alone. Her economic autonomy thus parallels her ritual authority, reinforcing the argument that patriarchal dominance survives through repeated practices that can be disrupted.

By arrogating the role of male gravediggers and digging Mechane's grave at the center of the compound rather than behind it, as custom demands, Emade performs what Butler would describe as a subversive citation of masculine authority. The act of digging, traditionally read as masculine labor, becomes a performative declaration of ownership and legitimacy. Her strategic decision to locate the grave centrally—"don't you see that by burying Mechane in the middle of the courtyard her sisters want to deter potential violators of their sister's land?" (Alobwed'Epie, 2019, p. 48)—transforms burial from a symbolic rite into a material inscription of lineage and property rights. Through this embodied performance, Emade demonstrates that inheritance is not biologically transmitted but ritually and spatially produced.

Emade's innovation does not reject tradition but reiterates it differently, illustrating Butler's claim that norms are destabilized through altered repetition. By placing protective markers and redefining burial space, she re-signifies

cultural practice to affirm female succession: "Female children have equal rights to inheritance as male" (Alobwed'Epie, 2019, p. 51). This declaration gains authority precisely because it is backed by ritual enactment. In this sense, Emade's act constitutes a womanist praxis, where cultural knowledge is strategically mobilized to produce equity without cultural rupture. Her confrontation with the Muabag men—where she declares that digging the grave is "a woman spitting in your faces" (Alobwed'Epie, 2019, p. 44)—further underscores the performative dimension of power. The insult is not merely verbal; it is materialized through action, exposing male authority as fragile when it fails to be enacted. Her herculean labor in heaping stones on the grave, admired and likened to professional craftsmanship, reinforces this destabilization. Masculinity here is revealed as performative competence, not anatomical privilege.

Furthermore, the ritual of locking Mechane's door and throwing the key into the bush functions as a symbolic performance of extinction, declaring a lineage dead in the absence of male heirs. This rite exemplifies how patriarchy uses ritual repetition to naturalize female disposability. Emade's refusal to complete this ritual marks a decisive performative rupture. By questioning—"Would we have been performing this rite if Wobe were a boy?" (Alobwed'Epie, 2019, p. 84)—she exposes the gendered logic underpinning the custom. Her decision to drop the key at the doorpost instead of throwing it away—declaring "this family is not extinct" (Alobwed'Epie, 2019, p. 84)—is a counter-performative act. Butler argues that performativity works not only through speech but through gestural acts that resignify norms. Emade's gesture rewrites lineage itself, affirming that continuity can be enacted through daughters. Widowhood here is no longer a condition of closure but a site of reauthorization, where women actively produce social meaning.

### **Masculinity, Symbolism, and Performed Duality**

Emade's embodiment of strength, decisiveness, and leadership—symbolized through animal imagery such as the lion, python, and

elephant—constitutes a performative reconfiguration of masculinity. These attributes, traditionally coded as male, are not appropriated through imitation but re-authored within a female subjectivity, revealing masculinity as a transferable cultural script. Her physical and symbolic mastery is repeatedly reinforced through textual imagery: “[She] is the lady with a beard, ‘slaughterer-of-slaves’, ‘lion of the unbroken tradition’, ‘widow of the upstream python... you have an elephant double. You are nine women put together (Alobwed’Epie, 2019, pp. 13, 81), emphasizing her heroic status and symbolic power thereby—signal a gender hybridity that destabilizes binary logic and aligns with Butler’s insistence that gender coherence is an illusion sustained by repetition.

This duality positions Emade as a “womanman,” not as an anomaly but as evidence that gendered power is relational and enacted, not fixed. Her character thus dramatizes Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion that womanhood is socially imposed, while also extending it through African cultural contexts where power is negotiated through ritual, labor, and space.

### **Surveillance, Ostracization, and the Policing of Performativity**

Emade’s assertion of agency is not without resistance. Both men and women initially perceive her independence and authority as threatening. She is stigmatized as a witch and ostracized from community groups, reflecting the broader societal attempt to control and discipline women who defy patriarchal norms. Nevertheless, Emade navigates these challenges through strategic negotiation, skillful cultural performance, and assertive discourse. Her defiance is articulated in her refusal to submit to communal pressures: “When male-rain fell on me did I wear a raincoat? Now it is female-rain, shall I bother myself? As the file wears out the cutlass so do the cutlass wear out the file. Atieg men and women take turns to wear me out; we are all in the cauldron” (Alobwed’Epie, 2019, p. 26). Emade’s refusal to retreat—captured in her cauldron metaphor—signals her awareness that oppression itself is sustained through repetitive violence and surveillance. The metaphor of the cauldron encapsulates the oppressive

environment faced by widows and women at large. Emade’s strategic resistance transforms her marginalization into a site of empowerment, demonstrating the possibility of transcending patriarchal constraints through cultural literacy, strategic action, and assertive agency.

### **Empowering Women through Visibility, Example, and Gender Performativity**

Emade’s defiance carries profound social implications, extending beyond individual resistance to collective transformation. Through her mastery of male-dominated cultural practices, assertion of inheritance rights, and control over her sexuality and social identity, Emade becomes a visible embodiment of alternative womanhood, offering other women a living counter-script to patriarchal norms. Mboke, a character in the novel, acknowledges Emade’s exemplary widowhood:

“Nye has been a widow in this village for the past twelve years. Can any woman here say that (in spite of her compound being isolated) she has contested her husband with her! Can any woman say (that Nye Emade is a widow) she has cupped her hands before her supplicating for help!” (Alobwed’Epie, 2019, p. 19).

Emade’s visibility and competence challenge prevailing stereotypes that depict widows as passive, sexually deviant, or socially marginal. Her resilience transforms widowhood from a position of vulnerability into a site of performative resistance, where repeated acts of defiance accumulate into authority. Widowhood, in this narrative, becomes not an endpoint but a transformative condition, enabling women to renegotiate gender, property, and power. Her actions demonstrate that women can occupy positions of authority, perform critical cultural functions, and contribute meaningfully to the continuity of social and familial structures, thus redefining the African woman in postcolonial literary discourse. Her actions illustrate Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity, whereby gendered authority is constituted through repeated acts rather than rooted in biology. By repeatedly performing competence, restraint, and leadership, Emade produces a form of authority

that unsettles the normative association between masculinity and power.

Alobwed'Epie's narrative positions Emade as a transformative figure, advocating for gender equity, cultural innovation, and the reclamation of female autonomy. By integrating womanist and structuralist perspectives, this analysis underscores that the deconstruction of patriarchal paradigms is both a cultural and political act, capable of redefining the African woman's role in society. By mastering male-dominated cultural practices, asserting control over inheritance, and reclaiming her sexual and social autonomy, she becomes a role model and a source of inspiration for other women. Mboke's intervention functions as a public validation of Emade's performative authority, recognizing that her moral standing is produced through sustained action rather than marital status. By contrasting Emade with Eduke, whose sexual transgressions are socially condemned, the narrative exposes how widowhood and femininity are policed through visibility and surveillance. Emade's exemplary conduct thus destabilizes stereotypes that frame widows as deviant, dependent, or socially disposable, repositioning them as ethical and authoritative actors within the community.

Emade's visibility operates as a pedagogical force within the community. Her actions demonstrate that women can occupy leadership roles, perform critical cultural functions, and ensure social continuity. In Butlerian terms, her repeated performances create the conditions for gender resignification, making alternative enactments of womanhood imaginable and actionable for others.

Emade emerges as a cultural agent whose engagement with rituals, drumming, and inheritance practices subverts patriarchal norms and redefines the social and cultural position of women in Bakossi society. Her strategic appropriation of male-dominated spaces, dual embodiment of gendered traits, and assertive negotiation of social norms exemplify the potential for widows and women to assert agency within oppressive cultural frameworks. Alobwed'Epie's narrative positions Emade as a transformative figure, advocating for gender equity, cultural

innovation, and the reclamation of female autonomy. By integrating womanist and structuralist perspectives, this analysis underscores that the deconstruction of patriarchal paradigms is both a cultural and political act, capable of redefining the African woman's role in society.

Through inheritance rituals, spatial occupation, and symbolic labor, Emade reveals that patriarchy in Bakossi society is sustained not by biology but by repeated performances of masculinity and exclusion. By re-performing these acts differently, she exposes gender norms as contingent and revisable. Emade's widowhood thus becomes a performative site where authority is reconstituted, affirming Butler's claim that gendered power can be unsettled from within its own rituals of reproduction. Through Emade, Alobwed'Epie redefines the African woman in postcolonial literary discourse not as a passive bearer of tradition but as an agent capable of remaking it.

### **Emade as a Political and Social Reformer: Redefining Leadership, and Community Development**

Beyond cultural mastery and ritual innovation, Emade's influence extends into the political sphere, where leadership in Bakossi society is traditionally monopolized by men through the chief and his councillors (Djockoua, 2018, pp. 17–18). Widows are excluded from governance and rendered politically invisible. Emade disrupts this structure by performing leadership in spaces that deny her formal authority, thereby exposing governance itself as a gendered performance rather than a natural male prerogative.

### **Challenging Male Hegemony in Governance**

Emade refuses to accept the passive role imposed upon her by tradition. She asserts her authority as the next of kin and strategically engages with the chief and his councillors to influence decision-making. Her mastery of cultural knowledge and ritual authority enables her to negotiate power in a male-dominated political landscape. Alobwed'Epie emphasizes her tenacity: "She mesmerises the councillors whenever they invite her to the council until the

village succumbs to her decision and they move the grove behind her compound to the chief's compound" (Alobwed'Epie, 2019, p. 17). Her ability to influence the council to move the grove behind her compound to the chief's compound, demonstrates that political power is not solely institutional but also rhetorical, cultural, and performative. Emade's occupation of both the first compound and central spaces further underscores the performative nature of power. In Bakossi cosmology, space encodes gender hierarchy, with male authority mapped onto visibility and women relegated to marginal interiors (Djockoua, 2018, pp. 17–18). By refusing displacement—"my no stood" (Alobwed'Epie, 2019, p. 26)—Emade performs sovereignty through spatial presence. Authority here is not granted but enacted through occupation and refusal. Emade's insistence on participating in decision-making processes demonstrates a womanist approach to governance, wherein women are recognized as equal stakeholders capable of contributing to communal decisions. Her success in negotiating the relocation of the grove signifies a symbolic and literal reclamation of authority within a system designed to exclude her, reinforcing the argument that patriarchal norms are socially constructed rather than divinely mandated or inherently natural (Simone de Beauvoir, 1949). Through strategic speech, ritual literacy, and moral authority, Emade negotiates decisions that reshape communal space, such as the relocation of the grove. Her widowhood, rather than disqualifying her, becomes the very site from which she reconstitutes legitimacy.

Her adoption of masculine-coded symbols—the beard, drumming, land management—does not signal gender imitation but gender re-authorship. These acts align with Butler's assertion that gender norms persist only through repetition, and that altered repetition can destabilize them. Emade's leadership thus functions as a womanist intervention, asserting women's right to participate as equal stakeholders in communal governance.

### Teaching, Mentorship, and the Reproduction of Alternative Gender Scripts

Emade's reformist impact is amplified through mentorship and instruction. She grooms her daughter, Ntube, on the culinary process of preparing the favourite Bakossi delicacy of fufu 'nzabengen' and porcupine 'alem' (Alobwed'Epie, 2019, p. 7). She does not want her daughter's meal to be rejected when she grows up, as having been prepared by a "nchong" (stranger) (Alobwed'Epie, 2019, 8). During the naming ceremony of Ahone's daughter's child at Kodmin, she takes Ntube along. She draws her attention on the ritual procedure and the key messages communicated at each stage of the ritual (Alobwed'Epie, 2019, p. 72-74), so that she imbibes and applies them in life when she grows up.

In Muabag, her village of refuge, she assumes responsibilities typically reserved for men, such as leading drum ceremonies, orchestrating burial rites, and coordinating communal events. By performing these roles, Emade articulates a clear message: women possess the capability to lead in all spheres of life, including those traditionally dominated by men (Ewane, 2011, p. 475). Her instructions to the boys on drumming and playing the *Ebenzu* male rhythm—while she herself beats the master drum—reverses normative hierarchies and models leadership as skill-based rather than gender-based. By training her daughter Ntube in Bakossi traditions, teaching skills, and instructing young boys in drumming, she redistributes cultural authority across gender and generational lines. This redistribution of knowledge/authority challenges the binary between masculine and feminine competencies, and promotes a model of leadership based on merit and skill rather than gender. These acts are crucial to performativity: they ensure that alternative gender performances are learned, repeated, and sustained. Through Emade, Alobwed'Epie advocates for a society in which both men and women share responsibilities, reflecting a complementary rather than hierarchical conception of gender roles thereby promoting a complementary vision of gender roles, consistent with African womanist thought.

### **Sexual Autonomy as Performative Resistance**

Widowhood in traditional African societies often carry stigma, including stereotypes of sexual impropriety, witchcraft and moral laxity (Owen, 1996). Emade actively deconstructs these stereotypes, refusing sexual advances, asserting her moral autonomy, and leveraging her cultural and political competence to gain recognition: “I told them no, and my no stood” (Alobwed’Epie, 2019, p. 26). Emade’s refusal to comply with these expectations challenges patriarchal control over women’s bodies. She is described as a “boulder” and “a lady with the beard” (Alobwed’Epie, 2019, pp. 12,15), symbolic of her resilience and refusal to conform to patriarchal expectations. By asserting control over her sexuality and rejecting coercion, she converts the widow’s body from a site of oppression to a locus of agency, aligning with Butler’s (1990) theory of performativity and African womanist empowerment. Her actions highlight the centrality of sexual autonomy in broader struggles for female agency. Emade’s control over her sexuality constitutes a decisive performative act. In resisting coercion, she transforms the widow’s body from an object of patriarchal desire into a site of sovereignty. Her refusal—repeated, public, and unwavering—redefines sexual autonomy as moral and political authority. Widowhood becomes not a condition of vulnerability but a performative position from which power is asserted. Her transformation from a socially marginalised widow to a respected socio-political and cultural leader demonstrates the potential for widows to redefine their identities and assert agency. By rejecting oppressive norm and claiming roles traditionally reserved for men, Emade challenges the pejorative representations of widows as powerless, immoral, or subservient. Her narrative underscores the importance of self-determination and cultural knowledge in achieving social and political recognition.

Through visibility, repetition, and example, Emade demonstrates that gendered power is not fixed but produced through everyday practices. Her leadership, sexuality, spatial occupation, and cultural mastery reveal patriarchy as a fragile system sustained by performative norms that can be disrupted. By making alternative

gender performances visible and viable, Emade empowers other women and reclaims widowhood as a transformative site of agency, authority, and social reform.

### **Transformative Impact on Community Development**

Emade’s leadership and resistance extend beyond personal empowerment to produce tangible implications for community development. By asserting women’s competence in ritual performance, governance, and social organization, she demonstrates that gender equity is not merely an ethical ideal but a structural necessity for communal stability and progress. Her actions challenge the entrenched cultural logic that privileges men as the sole custodians of authority and expertise, revealing instead that leadership is performative—produced through competence, visibility, and repetition rather than biological sex. In this sense, Emade’s repeated enactment of authority functions as a transformative social practice that fosters cohesion and encourages women’s participation in civic life (Djockoua, 2018, p. 60). Through her example, the narrative underscores that empowering women enhances collective well-being and sustains communal development.

By occupying leadership roles traditionally reserved for men, Emade destabilizes the performative scripts through which masculinity is equated with power. Her visible competence compels the community to reassess its gendered assumptions, illustrating that social development depends on the inclusion of women as active contributors rather than passive dependents. Thus, gender performativity emerges as a critical lens for understanding how Emade’s actions generate social change: through sustained performance, she normalizes women’s authority and reconfigures communal expectations.

### **Legacy and Broader Implications**

Emade’s leadership and cultural innovations carry long-term implications for gender relations in Bakossi society and beyond. By demonstrating that women can perform, innovate, and lead in traditionally male-dominated spheres, she challenges entrenched patriarchal structures and inspires a reevaluation of gendered

assumptions. Her return to Atieg, where she is received with admiration, symbolizes communal acknowledgment of female capability and the potential for structural change: “The same community that had ostracized her gives her a heroine’s welcome back to Atieg because of her achievement at Muabag” (Alobwed’Epie, 2019, p. 51). This recognition signals a shift in collective consciousness, suggesting that gender equity is not merely a theoretical ideal but a socially attainable reality. Emade’s story reinforces the argument that empowering women—culturally, economically, and politically—benefits the broader community, facilitating more inclusive and just governance.

Emade’s legacy exemplifies the intersection of womanist praxis and cultural adaptation. By integrating her understanding of tradition with innovative leadership strategies, she establishes a model for redefining the African woman’s place in public, cultural, and familial spheres. Her actions illustrate that women’s empowerment is both a personal and societal project, requiring strategic engagement with existing cultural frameworks to achieve sustainable change.

### **Intersection of Womanist Ideology and Widowhood**

Alobwed’Epie’s portrayal of Emade aligns closely with African womanist principles, which emphasize women’s empowerment within indigenous cultural frameworks rather than the imposition of external feminist models. She embodies African womanism’s holistic approach to empowerment, integrating personal agency, cultural knowledge, and communal engagement (Fatunde, 2004, p. 70). By challenging pejorative stereotypes associated with widowhood—sexual deviance, witchcraft, and dependency—Emade transforms social perception through action. Her resistance to sexual objectification, ritual exclusion, and social ostracization illustrates how widowhood—traditionally coded as vulnerability—can be re-performed as authority and influence. Her sustained visibility destabilizes patriarchal narratives and offers an alternative model of widowhood grounded in dignity, competence, and leadership. Her success in asserting political authority, negotiating ritual

practices, and redefining widowhood exemplifies the womanist belief that women possess the capacity to reshape their societies from within. Through deliberate acts of refusal, leadership, and ritual mastery, Emade reclaims widowhood as a performative site of power rather than marginality. Her agency is not oppositional to culture but dialogic, engaging tradition as a living system capable of adaptation.

Alobwed’Epie thus critiques patriarchal constructions while affirming women’s capacity to reshape social and cultural environments through performative agency. Through her integration of collective identities and cultural knowledge, Emade demonstrates that resistance can be enacted performatively—through ritual mastery, public leadership, and moral authority—rather than through outright rejection of tradition. This approach affirms that women can resist oppression while contributing meaningfully to the preservation and transformation of cultural heritage. Emade’s leadership thus models a womanist praxis grounded in cultural literacy, communal responsibility, and strategic negotiation.

### **Conclusion**

Alobwed’Epie’s *The Lady with a Beard* offers a compelling exploration of gender, culture, and agency in African societies. Through Emade, the novel deconstructs patriarchal paradigms, exposing the social mechanisms through which male dominance is sustained and the cultural practices that marginalize women. Emade’s mastery of ritual, political negotiation, and economic autonomy illustrates how women can contest traditional hierarchies and redefine their social positions.

Emade’s trajectory demonstrates that gendered hierarchies are neither natural nor immutable but socially constructed systems sustained through repetition and surveillance. By performing authority in spaces traditionally reserved for men, she embodies a womanist philosophy that prioritizes agency, competence, and social justice. Her narrative redefines widowhood from a condition of vulnerability to one of strength, leadership, and cultural innovation.

The novel calls for a re-evaluation of gender roles in African societies, advocating for the recognition of women's capacities in cultural, socio-political, and economic domains. Emade's legacy illustrates that when women claim visibility, exercise agency, and demonstrate competence, they can dismantle patriarchal norms

and contribute meaningfully to communal development. *The Lady with a Beard* thus functions as both a literary and socio-cultural intervention, affirming the transformative potential of women's performative agency and redefining the African woman's place in society.

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