

Malezile Defy Master Narratives:
Articulating an African Feminism through the Nana Esi Archetype

by

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ABSTRACT

Oral history methodologies are used to conduct fifteen interviews with Martha Akesi Ndaarko Sennie-Tumi over the course of three months. Research responded to the following questions: How do African women defy master narratives? When do African women defy master narratives and move from the margins to the center? What roles do African women take on to defy master narratives and why? To what extent does the concept of *malezile* (women who stand firm) address human rights? Twelve stories of defiance (three of which are folktales) are analyzed for recurring themes, concepts and motifs. Research showed that African women defy master narratives when the system worked to their detriment through the Nana Esi archetype. The stories also showed that women adopt nontraditional roles during defiance by using whatever means available to them at the time of defiance.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my beloved grandmother, Martha Akesi Ndaarko Sennie-Tumi.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work is a communal women's effort and must be viewed as such. This thesis is dedicated to my beloved grandmother, Martha Akesi Ndaarko Sennie-Tumi, who raised me and taught me my first feminist lessons. I am most grateful to all of my mothers, Eunice Abrema Tanoë Muzuma II, who gave me physical life and encourages me to excellence; Martha Akesi Ndaarko Sennie-Tumi, my maternal grandmother; Efua Nyamekye my paternal grandmother, who was given the gift of healing; and Mary Atia Manza Asefuah, my great-grandmother, who vowed to educate all her descendants. I am most grateful to *Nyame Obatanpa* (God the good woman), my ancestresses who laid the framework for women's resistance, and all the *malezile* throughout Africa, who continue to stand firm in search of their justice.

I would also like to thank my thesis committee for all their assistance and guidance in putting together this paper. I learned a great deal through them and was introduced to various concepts via their assignments.

Dr. Duku Anokye introduced me to the concept of defying master narratives through the Nana Esi archetype, which she has studied both formally and informally. I am most grateful to her for all her advice and guidance in both academic and nonacademic arenas throughout my undergraduate and graduate studies.

Through an independent study with Dr. Alejandra Elenes, with whom I learned that women's liberation is not monolithic, I expanded upon the concept of master narratives to include an African feminism. I am grateful for all her

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I am also very thankful for Dr. Gloria Cuàdriz for all her feedback throughout this process. She, too, has encouraged me to claim the *malezile* territory in my work through oral history.

My thesis was expanded to include stories of *Malezile* (told through the lens of my own personal upbringing in Ghana and my grandmother's stories) to combat the stereotypes that the Western media places on everyday African women.

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Chapter 1

Excuse Me: I Do Not Need Your Pity Blessing!

Women of the African continent are often pitied through the Western media, rhetoric and discourse. In stereotypical thinking, Westerners assume that our African mothers are always passive, quiet, and have no rights. Such false assumptions bring about unwarranted pity for African women such as me. Within this context, I wish to speak of an experience I had wherein an Anglo teacher, possibly in her mid-60s, complimented me on my daughter. She proceeded to tell me how well the missionaries were doing in aiding the women in Africa. She then asked me if I was from Kenya, and I told her that I was from Ghana. At this point, she stared at me with drooped eyes, as if to shed a tear, as she told me rather softly, “*Bless your heart.*”

I analyzed the teacher’s *pity blessing* as her inherent and unconscious need to pity the African woman, who at this moment happened to be me, an Akan-Nzema woman of Ghana. I felt the need to tell her that African women are not puppets—that our mothers played very powerful roles in our households, that I grew up with *malezile* (women who stood firm), that the women in my family were probably braver than the women in hers, that our women defy and are silenced by master narratives as frequently as white women, and that we Africans did not need missionaries to save us. Although my words were silent, I stared at her in retaliation and pitied her silently until she felt uncomfortable enough to excuse herself.

This thesis responds to these *pity blessings* (far too numerous in Western discourse) and gives voice to the experiences of African women by demonstrating the feminist experiences of *malezile*. The term *malezile* is used to describe assertive African women who stand firm in search of justice and create their own narratives through any means necessary. Malezile, as a category of African feminism, addresses human rights by demonstrating how everyday African women secure social justice for themselves and move from the margins to center of society.

This thesis also engages an African feminist theory via the lens of the Nana Esi archetype (discussed in chapter two) to analyze stories of defiance that are told of *malezile* by Martha Akesi Ndaarko Sennie-Tumi, who I refer to as Ndaarko throughout this thesis. To articulate and develop these theories of African feminism, I have proposed the following research questions:

- How do African women defy master narratives?
- When do African women defy master narratives and move from the margins to the center?
- What roles do African women take on to defy master narratives and why?
- To what extent does the concept of *malezile* address human rights?

In answering my research questions, I use oral history methodologies to interview my grandmother, Martha Akesi Ndaarko Sennie-Tumi. These interviews were conducted face to face with my grandmother in the Nzema language over a three-month period. I conducted a total of fifteen interviews and

compiled over forty hours of tape recordings. During these interviews, my grandmother would often drift into other issues. It was during these unplanned moments that I got the most relevant information. These moments also gave me deeper insight into my grandmother as a person, outside the granddaughter/grandmother dynamic.

Biographical Information

In order to engage into my grandmother's story, it is important to also situate myself. I was born to Eunice Tanoë Muzuma Tumi and Ebenezar Kojo Essuman of Ghana. My mother, defied Nzema traditions by naming me, a role strictly reserved for fathers. She named me Portia, despite my father's reluctance to name me after Shakespeare's heroine in the *Merchant of Venice*. I acquired the name Ama because I am female child born on Saturday. My father named me Nana Akwanze, which means *she who leads the way*, after his grandmother, making me Nana Akwanze II. My name in its entirety is Portia Nana Ama Akwanze II Essuman.

From birth I became a child with many mothers: my mother, Eunice Tanoë Muzuma Tumi; my maternal grandmother, Martha Akesi Ndaarko Sennie; my paternal grandmother, Efua Nyamekye; and my great-grandmother, Mary Atia Manza Asefua. My father's mother, Efua Nyamekye, is an *okomfo* (traditional African priestess) from Princess town (Nzemaland) and had nine boys. I grew up seeing the scorn my paternal grandmother received from Christian evangelicals simply for being an *okomfo*. As a child, I felt protective of her and stood up for her whenever I could.

I grew up in a syncretic African Catholicism. In times of need, I was taught to respect and call on Mary, the mother of Christ, and also on God the good woman. I was raised by my grandmother, who mothered and nurtured me as her own child and called me her youngest daughter. I spent my vacations with my great-grandmother, where I was taught the skills of economics. At a very young age, I remember my great-grandmother, Mary Besea Atia Asefuah, giving me a packet of toffee to sell. I was to either place a table in front of her small home and sell the toffees, or to carry the toffees on a tray that was to be carefully balanced on my head, as I vocally advertised my product. The profits were to be used to buy more packets of toffee to sell, as well as condensed milk, which I was to use to make and sell homemade toffees. Profits were also to be used to purchase personal items and establish my own personal savings account. My great-grandmother also taught me how to grow my own food, barter, bargain, and other life skills.

Additionally, my great-grandmother encouraged all her descendants to plant coconut trees, one of the main cash crops of the Nzema people. Her reasoning was that coconut trees took so long to grow and produce fruit that by the time the tree produced fruit, one might be an elder, and then sell the coconuts or benefit from the sale of coconut oil. The coconut tree was one of many forms of an Nzema woman's retirement. When my great-grandmother passed away in 2002, her female descendants, according to Nzema custom, inherited all of her coconut trees; some of them have used and continue to use the profits acquired through the sale of coconuts and coconut oil to pay for their tuition.

Besea Atia, my great-grandmother, also made it a point to tell me stories of the bravery of my ancestresses and ancestors through oral traditions, parables, proverbs, and folktales. She also taught me how to occupy many roles as a future mother, wife, scholar, and activist.

I also remember my grandmother, Martha Ndaarko Tumi, visiting me while I completed my undergraduate studies. While visiting, she witnessed my fear of driving to certain places by myself. After watching this happen once, she told me to drive her to the gas station. I sat and waited for her as she came out of the gas station with a map and told me: "Every woman needs a map." My grandmother is one of my greatest inspirations, and she continues to encourage me in all areas of my life.

From my mother I learned many lessons, including (but not limited to) the testament of her life experiences. My mother returned to school at the age of 41 to earn an associate's degree in science. She used to tell my sisters and me that a woman needs everything. By "everything," my mother meant motherhood, marriage, an advanced education, independence, and whatever else my sisters and I desired. I have been loved and nurtured by strong Nzema women and proudly say that I have had four mothers: My mother, my maternal and paternal grandmothers, and my great-grandmother.

I analyzed my grandmother's stories from an Nzema perspective (which I describe in Chapter 4) while using the Nana Esi archetype (described in detail in chapter two) to search for themes and recurring motifs throughout these stories.

In chapter two, a review of literature examines what has been said about African feminism, and how, and what has been said about oral history. This chapter also introduces Nana Esi and the Nana Esi archetype.

Chapter three gives a history of Ghana and introduces the reader to the Akan, African, and Nzema worldview. This section also provides a brief history of Ghana and a background of the Alonwonba clan and my grandmother, Martha Akesi Ndaarko Tumi.

In chapter four, I present a summary of the stories I have collected and analyze these stories to see what the master narrative is in each story and how or when women defy them. I also analyze these stories for elements of the Nana Esi archetype, recurring themes and concepts.

Chapter five concludes my thesis with my findings and a recommendation to use the *malezile* category to speak of African feminism through the Nana Esi archetype.

Definition of Terms

Master narrative. That which is considered the norm or conventional. Master narratives are recurring motifs in a society. For example, in many Western nations it is the master narrative for baby boys to wear blue and girls to wear pink.

Culture presents different narratives for men and for women as tools for understanding ourselves and others. As children, we learn such stories, which operate as master narratives. These master narratives present us with differences and contradictions. They may also restrict and contain us by supporting hegemonic groups. Master narratives may also serve as a framework with which film producers determine what movies to make and the audience that it is most likely to appeal to. Judges and jury members may also use master narratives to determine who the victim is and who is criminalized.

Feminism. A set of theories originating from the Latin word *femina*. Feminism as a category is used to describe women's experiences and issues. As a movement, it is often defined differently by different women or by the larger society, but the term may refer to actions taken by women for the benefit of society. Feminists use but do not limit feminism to the following nouns: self-determination, agency, defiance, resistance, and liberation of all forms. In academia, feminism is often used as a category to speak of women's agency or resistance experiences.

African feminisms. Feminisms originating from the African continent. African feminisms are numerous and are often based on traditional customs or modes of resistance. African feminists typically use motherhood as the ultimate symbol of solidarity and unity. African feminisms are often geared toward, but are not

limited to, liberation from economic hardships, Westernization, impartial divorce settlements, war, colonialism, invasion, impartial inheritance settlements, male supremacy and customs or beliefs that are harmful to women.

Chapter 2

African Women Have Always Had Feminism

Sisterhood

Sisterhood is a term used to denote kinship. It may also be used to relate to people who originate from nations close to each other, have common ethnic origins or share customs, experiences and equal levels of personhood.

Western Feminisms use sisterhood as a mode of solidarity. However, the use of sisterhood in feminism is criticized and viewed hypocritically by many African women, because they share neither the same experiences of womanhood as women in the West nor the same forms of oppression or victimhood. Oyeronke Oyewumi (2003), an Africanist and professor of sociology states,

Using the discourse of sisterhood—a mantra which assumes the common victimhood of all women—we examine the effects of unthinkingly adopting Western language and cultural terms of discourse. Notwithstanding the equality and homogenization of positions of women worldwide that the concept of sisterhood is meant to convey, the reality is that women are linked together in a variety of unequal relationships...sisterhood Has emerged as the dominant model of feminist intercommunity relationships” (p. 3).

The notion of sisterhood in feminism is also viewed critically by Africanists because of feminism’s failure to face history. Abena Busia (2003), a Ghanaian who identifies as an African feminist, expands upon this point, stating, “We are not obliged to break bread together, though that is always comforting. But to work together, what it takes is a deep, enduring respect based on the acceptance of our mutual humanities. But that compassion can only come if we but show charity to each other, and doing that requires a facing of history (p. 258). Sisterhood is also

seen as a false concept in African American feminism. Oyewumi expands upon bell hook's view of sisterhood:

Sisterhood amongst women of a racially and culturally diverse group, [Bell] hooks concluded, is possible, but only with a great deal of unrelenting work against all sorts of divisions, most importantly race. Thus for hooks, the problem with the concept of sisterhood is that it takes political solidarity for granted rather than as a goal to be worked at and achieved (Oyewumi, 2003, p 4).

Sisterhood among women of similar racial backgrounds can even become problematic to African women, who often view feminism as an imperialist tradition.

Imperial Feminism

In speaking about Western feminists, Oyewumi (2003b) criticizes imperialist traditions through the actions of Alice Walker, an African American feminist and writer. Oyewumi states,

Western feminists, as heiresses to the imperialist tradition of at once demonizing and saving Africa from itself, have been no less active in refurbishing the old images of Africa; they added new dimensions, including a more gender specific elaboration of these myths about Africa. Imperial feminism had discovered its social mission. Walker has borrowed from this neo- Western feminist tradition in her project of "saving Africa." (p.161)

Alice Walker is cited as one of the greatest examples of imperial feminism because of her use of the term "female genital mutilation" as opposed to "female circumcision." The term *mutilation* is offensive to many Africanists and African feminists because such terms extend the assumption that those communities that practice female circumcision intend to mutilate their women. In addition to this, Oyewumi is critical of Walker's use of Eurocentric language in her bestial

description of her African characters. As an example, Oyewumi (2003b) cites Tashi, the protagonist of Walker's book, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, whom Walker describes as follows: "Tashi was standing beside Catherine, her mother, a small swaybacked woman with an obdurate expression on her dark lined face, and at first there was only Tashi's hand— a small, dark hand and arm, like that of a monkey, around her mother's lower body clutching" (Oyewumi, 2003b, p. 164). Describing a psychoanalysis session depicted in the novel, Oyewumi writes, "Tashi recounts that in her dream the first thing she drew was the meeting of her mother with the leopard on her path 'But I drew, then painted, a leopard with two legs, my terrified mother with four'" (Oyewumi, 2003b, p.164). Walker's depiction of Tashi is bestial and re-enacts imperial traditions of a bestial portrayal of Africans. Oyewumi (2003b) also compares Walker's prejudiced language to French scientist Cuvier's description of Saartje. Oyewumi writes, "Saartje, (also called Sarah or Hottentot Venus), a twenty-five-year old Khoi-San woman from Southern Africa, was exhibited in many parts of Western Europe; only her death in 1815 put an end to this spectacle. . . . Saartje Baartman had been exhibited to present European audience a so-called anomaly they found riveting: her protruding buttocks. The alleged large size of her labia and nymphae, labeled the 'Hottentot apron,' was also of immense fascination in scientific circles" (p. 160). Oyewumi quotes Cuvier, who describes Saartje as follows, "When she was alive, her movements were brusque and capricious like those of a monkey. I have never seen a human head more resembling a monkey's than hers" (p. 160). Cuvier and Walker's dehumanizing caricatures of African women in both instances are

viewed as offensive. They also heighten tensions that portray certain Black feminists as Western feminists to African women. Oyewumi states that Walkers portrayals of Africans in her writings “are not informed by African realities; instead, they reflect the mind of the writer and the Western culture of which they are a part” (p. 161). This prompts African feminists to focus on geography instead of color.

The Difference between Focusing on Geography Instead of Color

African women are homogenized by the mainstream into black feminism regardless of their geographic location. Busia (2003) expands upon this homogenization with the following statement: “I did not used to think of myself as “Black” at all. I have known I am an African all my life. I did not know I was black until I started living in the United States a decade and a half ago, and the difference can mean all the difference in the world” (p. 261). Busia’s statement shows that grouping all black women together erases the lives and experiences of women from the African continent, who are black and African.

It also shows that the experience of American racism itself imposes race upon women, regardless of their choice of self-identification. Busia (2003) states, “Being born black in the United States, you have no choice. It comes to you, in your mother’s milk, so to speak.” (p. 261). Busia suggests that African women are lumped into an African American feminism based on skin color. The grouping of all black women into one feminism has implications, because African women have different experiences and histories stemming from their unique geographic locations. Although black feminists and African women share the same ancestral

bonds and similar customs, the American slave experience worked to strip African Americans of their African heritage. This, coupled with years of separation from Africa, has led African Americans to adopt new syncretic traditions that are both American and African.

In this regard, African women's theories and feminisms differ significantly from those of black feminist theory in the U.S., even though they share numerous similarities. This calls for the need for African women to develop and analyze their feminisms through African theories.

The Need for an African Theory

As Western theories dominate intellectual scholarship, African researchers, whose theories have historically relied on oral traditions, are left burdened by the restraints that Western theory imposes on them. Taiwo Oyefemi (2003), a Nigerian feminist, addresses the conscious and unconscious burden that theory itself imposes on the African researcher and writer: "During most of the 1970s, valuable time was needlessly expended on the question of whether or not African philosophy even exists" (p. 46). Oyefemi's stance is complex because questioning whether an African philosophy even exists is in itself a marginalizing experience for African women. It is an element of white supremacist ideology and marginalization, in which philosophy itself is assumed to be of Western origin. These false assumptions have false realities, forcing us to speak of an African philosophy, rather than question the existence of an African philosophy. Visualizing issues through the lens of African theory also forces us to engage African models of solidarity within African feminism.

An African Model of Solidarity: Motherhood as an Alternative to Sisterhood

Motherhood goes above and beyond sisterhood, becoming the ultimate symbol of African solidarity. For African women, “motherhood is the greatest symbol of unconditional love, togetherness, unity, solidarity and loyalty” (Oyewumi 2003a, p.12).

Because of the matrifocality of many African family systems, the mother is the pivot around which familial relationships are delineated and organized. The category of *omoya* transcends gender; sometimes it is used to refer to an individual, but what it encapsulates is the collectivity. It functions to locate the individual within a socially recognized grouping. . . . To put it crudely, in the traditional Yoruba household, the first thing you need to know is not whether you are a boy or girl but who are your *omoya-siblings* with whom you share the same mother. . . . Thus, the most important shared experience that *omoya* recalls and builds on is the fact that the group of siblings shared the same womb of the mother. . . . What emerges from such household and family organization is the importance of motherhood, the fact that the mother-derived ties are the most culturally significant, and that mothers have agency and power (Oyewumi 2003a 12-13).

Motherhood is desired and privileged within many African households.

Sisterhood, which is used as a symbol of solidarity in Western feminisms, therefore exists only through motherhood. So, African feminism advocates for the use of motherhood, as opposed to sisterhood, as a symbol of solidarity.

An African Theory through the Lens of Motherhood: The Nana Esi Archetype

Nana Esi is a folkloric figure. As such, details of her actual date of birth are unknown. Her existence, however, is seen through oral tradition stories of the Akonnedi shrine of Ghana. Nana Esi was a midwife from Potin in Fanteland. She belonged to the Fante tribe (an Akan tribe). Oral history accounts confirm that

Nana Esi was mistreated in a Fante town because she could not have children in a society that privileged women with children. She defied the norm by refusing to remain in a place where she was mistreated. This led her to walk from her hometown to Larteh in the Akuapem region to begin a new life. After arriving in Larteh, she contributed to the establishment of the Akonnedi shrine and worked spiritually to help women who could not have children.

Nana Esi had no biological children of her own yet became a mother figure to the whole community. She also saw to the spiritual and physical needs of the community by organizing community events, advocating for women, delivering babies, and resolving conflicts. Nana Esi was dedicated to philanthropy and assisted the sick and needy. She was also a tradition bearer, who taught children about the Akan culture. Today, she is known not only as one who was instrumental in founding the Akonnede Shrine, but also as a cultural mother who transcended cultural norms, an okyeame (spokesperson) for the gods and a mother to all who solicit her help.

As a priestess and midwife, Nana Esi provided prenatal care to local women, resolved conflicts (peacemaker), delivered babies, served as an okyeame (spokesperson) for the gods, and advocated for others. As an ancestress, she is a mother to the women who come to her for help (community mother), a caretaker and a cultural mother or tradition-bearer.

Nana Esi was childless in a society that privileged women with children. This was detrimental to Nana Esi because Akans believe that life and death form a continuum. In this view, death is merely a crossover into the spiritual world. Akan

ancestors and ancestresses depend on their children to take care of them when they reach the spiritual world, through sacrifices of food and libations poured for deceased ancestresses and ancestors. When Nana Esi was older and could no longer take care of herself, the children in the community helped physically care for her as they would do for their own mothers.

Nana Esi's greatest desire in life was to have a child, and she feared dying childless. According to traditional narratives, Nana Esi died in childbirth and was immediately deified. Oral history accounts do not confirm whether her child lived or died, but as a deity she has many children, because she is mother to all who appeal to her for help. As a deity, she is also sacred to pregnant women and those who desire but cannot conceive children. She also performs miracles and helps women have children when they appeal to her for help. Women may also seek her assistance when dealing with illness, fertility, marital problems, abuse and fatal pregnancies. As a deity, she has reign over the domestic, women's lives and continues to fulfill her duty as a peacemaker, community mother, spokesperson and advocate in both the spiritual and physical worlds.

Karla Holloway, a literary theorist, writes that many female characters in works by authors of African descent are "assertive women connected to an African goddess/ancestor, a metaphorical spiritual guide" (1992). The Nana Esi archetype exhibits the following characteristics: communal mothering/nurturing, spokeswomanship, spirituality, activism, peacemaking, healing, activism, economic entrepreneurship, and defiance to norms as seen in her role of okyeame (spokesperson) to gods, a role that is reserved for men only. Her defiance of

master narratives is also seen in her refusal to stay in Potin, where she would have been mistreated. Nana Esi created a new narrative for herself when she came to the Akonnedi shrine. The Nana Esi archetype is an authentic African motif, pointing toward an African theory that engages a model of motherhood for women's solidarity. Her traditions and archetype (as we know it) also highlight the importance of oral history (which I discuss below) in preserving African spirituality, history and women's liberation movements.

Oral History

Oral history is viewed positively by Africanists and African feminists. Most African cultures relied on oral traditions to preserve culture and pass on traditions from generation to generation. Nana Esi, for example, has been passed on as a deity through oral history. When speaking of African women's experiences and culture, oral history is crucial and important. Jan Vansina, a professor of anthropology and history notes that "Oral history should be central to students of culture, ideology, of society, of psychology, of art, and, finally, of history"(Anima 1985, xi). Vansina also speaks of how oral tradition allows us to analyze the present by using oral history to view both the present and past.

Vansina states,

Yes, oral traditions are documents of *the present* because they are told in the present. Yet they also embody a message from the past, so they are expressions of the *past* at the same time. They are the representation of the past and present. One cannot deny either the past or the present in them.... To ignore the impact of the present as some historians have done, is equally reductionist. Traditions must always be understood as reflecting both past and present in a single breath.(Vansina 1985, xii).

Oral history can therefore serve as a building block with which to speak of *malezile*.

Malezile

Malezile is an Nzema term that is used to describe strong, powerful, assertive women who seek their own liberation. *Malezile* means women and *zile* means standing firm. *Malezile* is also used to refer to women whose actions are feminist. The singular form of *malezile* is *yalezile*. Ndaarko speaks of *yalezile* and feminism interchangeably,

Feminism has always been there. We all came to meet it. Ehh Sometimes you are a feminist, but you don't know it oh. Nzema say *yalezile*! Fantes say *beseasima*! Asantes say Yaa Asantewaa! English say feminist! Hmmn sometimes you are a feminist but you don't know it. (M. A. N. Sennie-Tumie, personal communication, January 18, 2012)

Malezile, however, is understandable to Nzema women who have had no formal education or familiarity with the English language, or, for that matter, with the word *feminism*. Ndaarko describes herself as a *feminist* in English but as a *malezile* in Nzima. Synonyms for feminists exist in many African languages. For example, most Ghanaians speak the Asante-twi dialect either as a second or third language. Yaa Asantewaa, an Asante queen mother, led the Asante army to war against British rule in response to Sir Frederick Mitchell Hodgson's (the governor of the Gold Coast or present day Ghana) attempt to take the Golden Stool of the Asante.

Yaa Asantewaa is seen as a symbol and key figure for Ghanaian feminism. She rallied the Asante to war against the British (even though Asante customs do

not allow women to go to war) because she felt that the Asante men were not doing what they needed to do as men: to fight to protect the Golden Stool of the Asante (a symbolic royal stool which serves as a symbol of Asante sovereignty). This war was called the Yaa Asantewaa war because it was led by Yaa Asantewaa. It is very common to refer to a feminist as Yaa Asantewaa in the Asante region. Other Ghanaians, who are familiar with Asante history, may also refer to a feminist as a Yaa Asantewaa.

Chapter 3

My Daughters Will Be Men When They Need to Be

A Ghanaian Context

Ghana is located in West Africa, around the coastline of the Gulf of Guinea. It is bordered by Togo to east, Burkina Faso to the north, and Côte d'Ivoire to the west. Ghana is known as a developing country. There are more than 70 languages in Ghana, and most Ghanaians speak at least three languages. Ghana was a British colony until March 6, 1957, when it became the first sub-Saharan African country to gain independence from colonial rule.

The Akan

The Akan are believed to have migrated from the ancient Ghana Kingdom, “which existed from the fifth to thirteenth centuries several hundred of miles to the northwest of modern Ghana in the Sudanic zone of West Africa (Cooking, 2005, p.1). The Akan people make up 48% of Ghana’s population, making them the largest ethnic group in the country. They are located in Ivory Coast, Ghana, and parts of Togo. When an individual speaks of being Akan, she or he has origin in one of the following tribes: the Agona, Ahafo, Ahanta, Akuapem Akwamu, Akyem, Aowin, Asante (who make up the majority of Akan people), Assin, Brong, Chokosi, Denkyira, Evalue, Fante, Kwahu, Nzema, Sefwi, and Wassa. The Akan tribes in Ivory Coast are Baoule and Agni (same as Aowin in Ghana), Abbe, Abidji, Aboure, Abron (same as Brong in Ghana), Adjukru, Akye, Alladian, Attie, Avikam, Ebrie, Ehotile and Nzema (known as Appolo in Ivory coast).

As a result of Asante (the majority Akan group) invasion, more than 40% of Ghanaians speak a version of the Asante-Twi dialect. Akans are matrilineal, and each clan links its origin to a different ancestress. Akan creation stories begin with women, and lineage is acquired through the mother. Akans believe that a child gets his or her blood from the mother and the spirit through the father.

The Akan people also believe in reincarnation. One may die and return to the same clan he or she belonged to or to another clan. Akan believe that rivers, trees and lakes have souls. Rivers can therefore be worshipped. According to the Akan tradition, women are tradition bearers and are responsible for passing traditions on to their daughters. It is often believed, among the Akan, that a person who has no daughters is childless. In this case, a woman's daughter-in-law (if she is also Akan) occupies the position of a daughter rather than a daughter-in-law. Due to colonialism, the Akan people also practice syncretic forms of Christianity and Islam, where they have merged the traditional religion into their newly acquired religion. For example, most members of my maternal clan practice syncretic versions of Catholicism (majority), Anglicanism (also known as the Episcopalian) and Methodism. Many members of my paternal family also practice the Akan-African traditional religion.

Human Rights in the Akan Context

Historically, the concept of human rights has existed in many societies. Oral tradition confirms that the African people made provisions to protect the dignity and humanity of human life centuries before the International Declaration

of Human Rights was drafted. Certain Akan traditions reflect this ethic. For example, orphans were to be cared for by a volunteered member of the family or community member, who had to be free of any criminal background. This tradition prevented homelessness and ensured that all children were well cared for. No person was to be denied food, water or shelter; in many Akan households people would always set aside a portion of food and water for others, no matter how little they to eat and drink themselves. This provision protected the dignity and personhood of foreigners, the needy, and the poor. Uncles were also to see to the economic and physical stability of their mother's lineage rather than their nuclear family alone. This tradition saw to the personhood and progress of lineages as a whole as opposed to the progress of individual people or just the nuclear family unit. It also preserved the lineages of women, matrilineal cultures and matriarchy.

Civilians were not to be killed in times of war and battles were to be fought simply and only between militia. Criminal suspects were to be tried in court. Women were not to be raped or beaten. Women had the right to leave marriages if they felt unsafe or if their co-wives had died mysteriously. Women had grounds for divorce and both women and men were to attend divorce trials to determine alimony and divorce settlements. Women were to be given maternity leave after having children; during this maternity leave other women were to assume the new mother's responsibilities. Men were not to abuse their wives and were to treat their wives in the same manner in which they would want their sisters to be treated. The Akan also had a tribunal with a panel of judges,

composed of elders (both female and male) lawyers, carefully selected jury members and court members, who saw to the prosecution of human rights violators. This tribunal functioned as a criminal court. Though I do not argue that these laws were always obeyed, these traditions confirm the existence of a body of laws that applied the concept of human rights without necessarily naming them human rights.

The Nzema

The Nzema people are located in the southwestern part of Ghana. They are located on the coast and as such had frequent contact with European traders. Despite these European contacts, Nzemas are very traditional and have preserved their traditional beliefs through oral history. In Ghana, the Nzema people speak the Nzima Language, also known as Appollo in Ivory Coast. Nzema means “the people who do not know.” *Nze* means do not know and *ma* means the people. A folktale I remembered from my childhood confirms that the Nzema came to be known as the people who do not know because of the following story:

In ancient times, travelers would come from distant places of origin to Nzemaland. When a stranger came upon any Nzema person and asked for directions, the Nzema would refuse to answer or respond to the stranger with a blunt ‘I do not know.’ This would happen with each encounter between an Nzema and a foreigner. Over time, the Nzema people became known as the people who do not know.

The Nzima language was first written by European missionaries who attempted to convert Nzemas to Christianity through the reading of the bible. Although most Nzema practice Catholic, Anglican, or Methodist branches of Christianity, they practice the Akan-African traditional religion as well. Some practice syncretic

versions of Christianity or Islam, where the traditional religion is fused with the Christian religion. Most Nzema took to Catholicism because of its use of saints, rituals, and incense in worship. It is still common for traditional healers to attend mass. Protestantism, however, was not as compatible because of its monotheist nature. In Ghana, Nzema are often stereotyped as witches and wizards for their strong ties to the Akan-African traditional religion and use of magic. Nzema are also stereotyped as being mysterious and secretive.

The Nzema are also among the few Akan tribes that the Asante could not conquer. Also, unlike the languages spoken by most Akans, who speak a version of the Akan-Twi dialect, Nzima is not a version of Twi. Oral tradition accounts confirm that the Nzema King, Kaku Ackah, fought fiercely against the slave trade by refusing to sell slaves or to give over part of Nzemaland to the French, who created a border between Ghana and what is now known as the Ivory Coast. After the French and English division of Nzemaland, the French renamed the Nzema in Ivory Coast *Appolo*. Oral history accounts note that this name was given to the French Nzemas because the French noted that every night there appeared to be lights everywhere without the use of lanterns. This made the Nzemas in Ivory Coast appear further mysterious to them. Oral tradition state that the French claimed that the Nzema of Ivory coast were very hard to conquer and thus named them Apollonians after the Greek god Appolo.

Kaku Ackah resisted the creation of the border, European domination, and the Appolo name. Nzema oral history states that Kaku Ackah made every effort to keep Europeans out of Nzema land. Oral history accounts confirm that

Ackah was well known for his technique of capturing white people who entered Nzemaland. Oral tradition states that Kaku Ackah would take any white captive's head, rub it with ground pepper, and force the captive to climb a coconut tree (an Nzema cash crop), where he would shoot the captive. These torture tactics and many more led many Europeans to fear Nzemas and leave Nzema areas.

Because of the coastal location of the Nzema people, many Nzema are fishmongers and fishermen. Because Nzemaland contains huge deposits of gold, a lot of Nzema men work as goldsmiths and women traditionally sell gold and jewelry. During the colonial period, the Nzema were known to supply other kingdoms with bullets made by goldsmiths. Nzema women also sold the goldsmiths' jewelry. During colonial rule, however, the British prevented natives from selling gold.

The Nzema people, like most Akan groups, follow strict patterns of inheritance: daughters inherit all of a mother's property. A man's children do not inherit from their father; instead the eldest sister's son inherits an uncle's property. If the eldest sister has no sons, then the inheritance is given to the next eldest sister's son. If none of the sisters has a son, then the oldest daughter must serve as a son and inherit the property of her uncle.

Because Nzemas are matrilineal, lineage is through the mother. A child's tribe is always considered to be the same as the mother's. For example, if my father is from the Fante tribe (an Akan matrilineal tribe) and my mother is Nzema, I would be Nzema because I belong to my mother's lineage. It is very important to have daughters according to Nzema customs and women who have no

daughters are often perceived as childless. Male children are usually perceived as not being part of the family. Akan proverbs states: “A male child is not a child. He is not part of the family.” A male child’s children belong to his mother’s family if they are also matrilineal Akan. For this reason, it is common for most Nzema to desire daughters or attempt to have a daughter after having only sons. This is because a daughter’s children are part of the *abusia* (family), whereas a son’s children belong to the mother if she is also Akan. It is a taboo to marry your mother’s sister’s child, but marriage to your mother’s brother’s child is permitted, because your uncle’s child belongs to his wife’s *abusia*. I would, therefore be permitted to marry my uncle’s child, because we are not from the same *Abusia* family.

During custody hearings, Akan mothers are favored because the children are part of their *abusia*. Uncles (one’s mother’s brothers) are very important. Akan uncles are to take care of their sister’s children financially. Uncles are also very important and must be present to receive a woman’s dowry, which is presented to a woman’s *abusia* as a sign of the marriage. Uncles must also accompany their nephews (sisters’ sons) with a dowry when a nephew seeks a woman’s hand in marriage.

Because of their proximity to the Fante, most Nzema speak Fante as a second language and Twi as an additional language. It is common for most Nzema to speak three or four languages.

There are nine Akan clans, and each clan is believed to have originated from one common ancestress. Each clan is named differently, depending on the

Akan tribe. For example, the Oyoko clan, which is known as the royal clan of the Asante, is also called the Alonwonba clan in the Nzima language. Thus, if one member of the Alonwoba meets an individual from the Oyoko clan, both will see themselves as relatives or refer to themselves as a brother or sister, because each clan descends from one common ancestress or mother. As such, they share the same blood. Each clan has a symbol. For example, the symbol of the Alonwoba clan is the Falcon.

There are defined gender roles for both Nzema women and men. Men are the head of the households, but women have powerful roles in the household. Men must provide for the family and see to its stability. In times of war, men must protect the town and see to its security. Men must also fight any invaders. It is a father's responsibility to pay his children's tuition and provide money for all basic necessities. A father must be financially stable before marriage and must be able to provide for his wife or, if he is a polygamist, for his wives (if he is a polygamist).

Elders are revered in Nzema culture. They are respected and taken care of by their children when they are unable to take care of themselves. It is a child's duty to take care of his or her parent in old age. Failure to do so is frowned upon. People who do not take care (financially and physically) of their parents in old age are frowned upon. Nzema also believe that children will treat a parent as well the parent took care of his or her own parents. Elders are also revered because they are soon to be ancestresses or ancestors. In death, children take care of their deceased parents by pouring libations at the Kundum Festival, a festival

celebrated in October by the Nzema, Appollo, and Ahanta, who are also Akan tribes. During this festival, traditional Nzema dances are performed and every family pours libations for forebears who have had a positive impact on the family while living.

Nzema ancestors are believed to take care of the family. For example, my great-grandmother and my grandmother of seven generations are believed to oversee the progress of my family. As such, one can pray to them in times of need. Also, it is a blessing to dream and see a great-grandmother or grandmother in a dream. Nzema also believe in reincarnation and dreams.

To the Nzema, dreams are significant and can be used to transmit messages from ancestresses. For example, one may have a dream and go to a traditional priestess to find out the meaning. Dreams may also be used to tell the future. The Nzema people have many gods, and nobody knows the actual number of gods that exist. One of the most powerful Nzema gods is known as Bewule, who is believed to have pulled a Dutch ship from the ocean to Axim (Nzemaland), where it still currently resides.

Nzema have different notions of beauty than Westerners do. They revere darkness and see it as a sign of beauty. The Nzema view dark skin as beautiful and most Nzema women have several shades of jet black skin. For example, one compliment is *adubele kesi kesi*: she or he is very dark. Another is *oye bele nuku nuku*: his or her black is very dark. A person described with these phrases is perceived to be very beautiful or handsome by Nzema standards.

Nzema women may marry at the age of sixteen. Nzema parents desire to have several children. Young girls and women reign over the domestic and assist with daily chores. Women are also the primary tradition bearers and are expected to pass on oral history and traditions down to their daughters.

Gender in the Nzema Context

Akan customs allow women to be men if the men are not taking care of their responsibilities. Nzema women become men by taking on the roles preserved for men. An Nzema is born a male or female by biological distinction. However, gender is also constructed through the roles an individual takes up. For example, a woman can become a man by taking on the roles and duties of a man. For example, the term *obaa barima* refers to a woman who takes on the role of men. A woman may also be described as Yaa Asantewaa, after the heroine who took on the role of a man during the Yaa Asantewaa war. Similarly, men may be referred to as *kojo besea* if they take on the roles of women. *Kojo*, in this example, is a name given to a boy, and *besea* means woman in Fante.

This Oral History of the Alonwoba Clan of Esiama

My grandmother, Martha Akesi Ndaarko Sennie was born into the Alonwoba clan. The Alonwoba are a royal clan that left Mali in the ninth century because of the Arab invasion. They settled in Kumasi for two hundred years. They left Kumasi after a series of wars and split up into several groups. These groups scattered in several directions, arriving in Discov (an Nzema area), Cape-Coast (a Fante area), Takoradi (a Fante and Ahanta area), and Princess Town (an Nzema area).

The group that went to Princess Town was led by Abusia Panyin (head of the family) Ajevi. In the sixteenth century, Chief Canu, a descendent of Ajevi, signed a contract with the Germans that leased out Alowonba land to the Germans to build a fortress. This contract prevented Germans from capturing and selling women and children into slavery. It also required the Germans to return the fortress (that they had built on royal land) to the royal family when they left. However, the Germans broke the contract when they left by bombing the fortress. The Dutch, who took over from the Germans also started capturing and sold women and children into slavery. This led Chief Jun Canu to wage a 27-year war against the Dutch. The war ended when Chief Canu was captured by the Dutch and sold to the Bahamas. Ejuba (Ndaarko's grandmother of several generations and sister of Chief Canu), out of fear for the security of the rest of her the royal family, walked to Esiama to find a place of refuge for the members of her family. After securing a place for her family, she walked back to Princess Town to lead some of the royal clan members to Esiama.

In Esiama, Ejuba established a relationship between the residents of Esiama and the Alonwoba of Princess Town by marrying the chief of Esiama, with whom she was only able to have one child, a son named Paha. He married Nana Akeleba, who gave birth to seven children including Paha II, Ndede, and Awu (discussed in chapter 4). Ndede gave birth to Bamela Asua and Aba Blay (also discussed in chapter 4). Bamela Asua gave birth to Mary Atia Manza, who who gave birth to my grandmother Martha Akesi Sennie Tumi.

Martha Akesi Ndaarko Sennie-Tumi

Martha Akesi Ndaarko Sennie-Tumi, whom I call Ndaarko throughout this thesis, was named Martha after the biblical character Martha. Akesi, her day name, was given to her because she was born on Sunday. She later acquired the name Ndaarko, which means she who comes before twins, because her mother had twins after her. After marrying her husband, she gained the name Tumi. Ndaarko was born on April 21, 1942, to Slaha Sennie, a prominent magistrate and chief from Nkroful, and Mary Atia Manza Asefuah of the Alonwoba clan of Esiamia. Ndaarko is also a first cousin to Osagyefo (our savior) Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana. Ndaarko's father, Slaha Sennie, was an uncle to Kwame Nkrumah. As such, Slaha Sennie represented and stood in place of Kwame Nkrumah's father (who was deceased) at ceremonial events and functions. During one of these events, during which Slaha was called upon by Nkrumah to represent his deceased father at a national event, a coup d'état against the Nkrumah regime took place. Slaha Sennie was arrested and imprisoned due to his ties to Nkrumah. The circumstances surrounding Ndaarko's birth and early years were unique and suggest that she was bound for success in life. Ndaarko's mother, Atia Manza, divorced Slaha Sennie prior to Ndaarko's birth. Atia Manza, who was unaware of the pregnancy at the time, gave birth to Ndaarko nine months after the divorce. As a child, Ndaarko was usually sick. This prompted Atia Manza to seek the advice of an *okomfo* (traditional priestess), who revealed the reason for Ndaarko's frequent sickness: that Ndaarko required a blessing from her father if she wanted to be healed of her ailment. Atia Manza then went to her

uncles and asked them to escort her to Slaha Sennie. She made two trips with her uncles to beg Slaha Sennie to bless Ndaarko. Slaha Sennie refused to bless Ndaarko on each occasion. During the third trip to Slaha Sennie, Atia Manza's uncles were angered by Slaha and told Atia Manza that they would no longer beg Slaha to bless Ndaarko. Her uncles told Atia Manza that if Ndaarko lived then she was meant to live and that if she died then it was meant to be. Ndaarko's life has proven that she was meant to live.

Ndaarko went through significant hardships to acquire a formal education as a child. Her uncles and father did not want her to acquire formal education because they did not believe that women should attend school. Her mother, Mary Atia Asefuah, defied the advice of her uncles, and Ndaarko's father and made sure that Ndaarko received a formal education. Mary, Ndaarko's mother, had twins eight years after Ndaarko was born. Normally, the convention would have been for Ndaarko to stop school and assist her mother with the care of her brothers. By convention, brothers were to take care of the family. This made it even more necessary for Ndaarko to stop schooling and assist her mother in the care of her brothers, who were expected to take care of their sisters in the future. Mary Asefuah, Ndaarko's mother, refused to allow her daughter to stop schooling, despite the advice of relatives and friends. Contrary to Nzema norms, Ndaarko grew up and financially supported her brothers and their families, directly contrary to the expectation that they would support her and her children.

Ndaarko was the first woman from her lineage to receive a formal education. She completed business school, where she studied accounting, business

administration, and secretarial studies. She later went on to earn a degree in photography in London, England. As a woman studying photography, a male-dominated field, she recalls the significant hardships she faced. She notes that on one occasion, a man told her to stop studying photography because photographers were men, not women. This man went on to tell her that men sell bullets and women sell vegetables. Ndaarko responded to the man by saying that she would be a woman who sold vegetables and bullets. In 1962, she became the first photographer in Ghana to introduce the nation of Ghana to colored pictures. Her photo studio, Martha Photos, also became the first photo studio in West Africa to issue instant passport pictures.

At the age of 40, she divorced her husband. The property acquired throughout her marriage had been confiscated by her husband and his new wife. When she learned about this, she decided to sue her ex-husband (a powerful lawyer) for an equal share of the property that they had both acquired throughout their marriage. Ndaarko lived in Accra (the capital city of Ghana) as an adult and became the first woman from the village of Esiamia to pursue justice against an ex-husband in the Ghana court of law. Today, Ndaarko is well known throughout Ghana and has appeared on a GBC (Ghana Broadcasting Corporation) program, in which she was credited for her contribution to photography. Today Martha Photos is well known throughout Ghana and West Africa. Ndaarko identifies as a pan-Africanist who advocates for the unification of all Africans and people of African descent and a feminist or *Malezile*, who advocates for the liberation of women through defiance.

Chapter 4

Every Woman Needs a Map

“Feminism has always been there. We all came to meet it. Ehh, sometimes you are a feminist, but you don’t know it, oh. Nzema say *Yalezile!* Fantes say *beseasima!* Asantes say *Yaa Asantewaa!* English say *feminist!* Hmmn, sometimes you are a feminist but you don’t know it.”

—Martha Ndaarko Akesi Sennie-Tumi

“I took good care of my father in his old age. He was so proud of me. Before my father died, he asked me to beg my sister to forgive him for not allowing her to go to school. He apologized for not sending his daughters to school. He said that when he dies and comes back into the world he will have only one wife and send his daughters to school, hmmn! When my father comes back into the physical world he will be a feminist.”

—Martha Ndaarko Akesi Sennie-Tumi

“When people ask me rather bluntly, every now and then, whether I am a feminist, I not only answer yes, but I go on to insist that every woman and man should be a feminist—especially if they believe that Africans should take charge of African land, African wealth, African lives and the burden of African development.”

—Ama Ata Aidoo

Folklore includes but is not limited to myths, legends, jokes, proverbs, riddles, chants, charms, curses, insults, dances, metaphors, taunts, games, prayers and art. Folklore has been defined as

Informally learned, unofficial knowledge about the world, ourselves and our communities, our beliefs, our cultures and our traditions that is expressed creatively through words, music, customs and actions, behaviors and materials. It is also the dynamic process of creating, communicating and performing as we share that knowledge with other people (Sims & Stephens 2005, p.7)

The legend explaining why God sits in the sky, the folktale of Kweku Ananse’s wife, and the legend of Bermia (all of which are told in this chapter) are taken from the Nzema of Ghana and the Ivory Coast. There are variations of these tales throughout the African

continent. These stories are usually told by elder women to young children at story time, which usually takes place after dinner time. The African worldview places folklore at the center of culture and uses it to teach feminist concepts, instruct, tell stories and preserve traditions. Folklore can therefore reveal elements of women's activism within Africa and provide a medium through which we can analyze and articulate women's agency in relation to defiance. The stories below are told by Martha Akesi Ndaarko Tumi-Sennie.

The Legend of Why God Sits in the Sky

God once dwelled with mortals on earth. At that time, God was accessible to humans and they could see and touch her as they pleased. An old lady started pounding *fufu*, which involved the use of a mortar and a long pestle. Each time she raised her pestle to pound the *fufu*, she hit God and pushed her into the skies. The old lady continued to pound the *fufu* and shove God into the sky despite the warnings to stop. This exiled God into the heavens, making her only accessible through deities, spirits and lesser gods. This is why God resides in the sky(M. A. N. Sennie-Tumie, personal communication, January 18, 2012).

The story above is the Nzema variant of the story explaining why God is in the sky. The master narrative for Nzema women while pounding *fufu* (a dish made from pounded cassava and plantain) is to sit on a stool and place boiled cassava and plantain in a mortar while a man stands and pounds the cassava and plantain with a pestle. Pounding *fufu* is a physically exhausting job that is reserved for men. In this story, however, an older woman pounds *fufu*. This scenario is even more complex because the woman pounding the *fufu* is an elder. By Nzema custom, elders are physically exempted from laborious tasks such as pounding *fufu*. Their

meals are made for them and they are prevented from doing physically exhaustive work. The “older lady” defies these norms on several levels.

First of all, she steps outside her gender role both as a woman and an elder. In doing so, she not only illustrates the Nana Esi archetype of defiance but creates polytheism, a new order in the African worldview. Which brings me to the following question: Why does she defy the master narrative for elder women or pound *fufu*? It can be assumed from this story that the elder woman was pounding *fufu* (a meal often prepared by a younger woman and male) because a younger woman or man are absent and unwilling to pound the *fufu* for her. Therefore, it can also be assumed that lady in this story is forced to take on the roles of others because she has to.

Second, the “old lady” also defies convention by refusing to obey the almighty God, who is said to have told the old lady to stop pounding *fufu*. Her refusal to heed to God’s warnings serves as form of defiance against what the Nzema view as the most omnipotent power on earth. Her defiance creates a polytheistic religion that forces humans to reach God through lesser gods. Under this form of worship, God’s power is questioned and limited because “God” becomes one of several sources of power. In addition, this act of deviance forces God to share power, offering, and praise with several gods, who now have the power to assist humanity. This secures the humanity of the gods, who are now receiving worship and praise.

According to the Nzema, gods are like human beings. They are fed with libations and praised for their efforts. Failure to do so weakens the gods, who no

longer feel wanted. The form of defiance illustrated in this story ensures the existence of the gods, because humans who request favors from them must also take care of them by pouring libations, leaving offerings of food, and offering sacrifices. The elder woman therefore becomes an *okyeame* (spokesperson), a role Nana Esi took on as a priestess on earth and a deity in the spiritual world. Taking on the role of *okyeame* counters that which is the norm for women, because the role of spokesperson is reserved for men. Securing the role of *okyeame* allows the lady to speak for the gods because she serves as a link between both physical and spiritual worlds.

The old lady's act of defiance therefore becomes a revolutionary act that not only lays the foundation for the African traditional religion but also “exiles God into the heavens.” The use of the word *exile* in this story is potent, suggesting a final unquestionable ruling. To a people who rely upon the omnipotence of God’s power, the “*old lady*” becomes greater than God because she not only takes God’s authority from her but creates a void in the hierarchy that places God above all beings. With her nonverbal actions alone, *the old lady* communicates with God, who is a female, a characteristic also found in the folktale of Kweku Ananse’s wife, which I discuss below.

The Folktale of Kweku Ananse and *Nyame Obatanpa*

Kweku Ananse (the spider) was a farmer who grew yams. He ate and sold some of his yams for profit and did not want to share his yam with anybody. So he wanted a wife who did not have a mouth, because he did not want to share his yams. He prayed to God to give him a wife without a mouth. *Nyame Obatanpa* (God, the good woman) answered his prayers and gave him a wife without a mouth on her face. Kweku Ananse usually kept his yams in the

barn. He felt no need to check on his yams. So, one day he went to the barn to check on his yams and was stunned to find no yams. He immediately went to his wife to ask her about the yams. His wife raised up her arm and showed him that God, the good woman, had placed her mouth under her arm (M. A. N. Sennie-Tumie, personal communication, January 18, 2012).

Kweku Ananse is a household name in Ghana. He is often portrayed as a deceptive trickster who often outsmarts himself. His stories are usually told to children during story time and are used to teach morals and life lessons and to preserve oral traditions. The folktale of Ananse's wife is also told to men during traditional marriage ceremonies as way to encourage men to value women and treat them well. This story may be told to women in abusive relationships or young girls. It may also be told to women who are in an abusive relationship. In this story, Kweku Ananse functions as a metaphor for male supremacy. His desire to have a wife without a mouth serves as a form of violence against women because it denies his wife the ability to speak and a route with which to receive food and water, both basic necessities. The master narrative in this story would have been for Ananse's wife to have been suppressed through the absence of a mouth. Instead, his wife defies the norm through the help of God the good woman, who places Ananse's wife's mouth under her arm.

Nyame Obatanpa's actions are unconventional because of where she places Ananse's wife's mouth. Her unconventional placement of Ananse's wife's mouth is protective and protects the spider's wife from abuse. The story ends with Ananse's wife's hands upraised and Ananse having no yams. Ananse's wife, with the assistance of *God the good woman*, leaves Ananse speechless. The Akan

religion is polytheist yet acknowledges the existence of a supreme God, who is often referred to as *Nyame Obatanpa* (God the good woman) amongst the Fante and many of the Akans who reside on the coast of Ghana. God is referred to as a good woman if one wishes to ask God for something of significant importance or to call on God's feminine attributes. If an individual wishes to call on God's masculine attributes, she or he may refer to God as Nana Nyamele Kwame (among the Nzema) or as Nana Nyame (in Asante-Twi). Nana is a title that can also be used to refer to kings, queens or elders. *Nyamele* (God) means when received one is satisfied and *Kwame* refers to an Akan boy born on Sunday. If an individual wishes to call on God as a unisex being, he or she may refer to God as Nyamele in Nzema or Nyame in the Asante Twi dialect.

In this story, however, God is referred to as a good woman, thus calling on God's feminine attributes. This differs from that which is the norm in Western traditions, where God is typically viewed as masculine. The story may also suggest that there are many routes to activism. In this particular case, we observe a silent activism that utilizes nonverbal actions. This shows that African feminism is not always verbal and uses whatever means available. Telling this story to women becomes a means through which activism and advocacy are taught and confirms the role of the community mother (story teller) as an advocate for female liberation.

The Legend of Bermia

Bermia was a hunter who walked around with a large torch of fire. He lived in Nzulezu, (a village on stilts deeply placed in the Nzulezu river). The people of Nzulezu depended on the river for

fishing and daily sustenance. Bermia came to the river every night and threatened to burn the river. The people in the village would beg Bermia not to burn the river each time he threatened to do so. On one such night, Bermia came armed with a big stick of fire, threatening to burn the river. The people proceeded to beg and tell him not to burn the river. Amid this begging, an older lady came out and shouted: '*Bermia arki ye ve baa yera Nzulezu* (Bermia, we are now tired; burn Nzulezu). The people of Nzulezu were silent for a while and then started repeating after the older lady: '*Bermia arki y3 v3 baa yera Nzulezu,*' (Bermia, we are now tired, burn Nzulezu). They then started following Bermia and forcing him to burn the river. Bermia, stunned, shocked and confused, walked round and round the river the whole day. Eventually he put the torch in the river and the fire burned out (M. A. N. Sennie-Tumie, personal communication, January 20, 2012).

The legend of Bermia may be told to an individual who threatens to do the impossible. It may also be told to children at story time, terrorized residents, or women in abusive relationships who are being threatened by their husbands.

Bermia relies upon the existence of an impossible situation: fire burning water. Given the fact that a river cannot be burned by a stick of fire, Bermia is a hoaxer who simply threatens to do that which cannot be done. The threat of burning the river is a threat against humanity and the community's basis of survival.

The *older lady* in this scene exemplifies Nana Esi's role as a protector, nurturer, and mother. Through her speech or chant, "Bermia, we are now tired; burn the river," she is able to protect her children, who are the community at large. Her words also function as a beacon of reason because the residents are blind to the impossibility of Bermia's threat. In African traditions, older women are often viewed as wise and motherly. In this respect, she does not step outside her element, but she does exemplify the Nana Esi archetype of community mother and protector.

In addition, the older lady serves as spokesperson for the entire community, as did Nana Esi. In doing so, her chant serves as a form of advocacy that develops into a movement. The chant is repeated by the residents and used to defend themselves against Bermia. The chant therefore becomes a teaching lesson and a means through which to promote advocacy and human rights for the community.

The old lady also serves as peacemaker by bringing peace through her speech/chant to a community that has been threatened by Bermia. In this story, Bermia has been threatening the residents for a long time. Each time he threatens to burn the river, the residents (as noted in the story) beg him to desist. According to Akan customs, one must not beg with empty hands. If a person offends another person, the offender may ask for pardon by expressing remorse and offering gifts. Gifts may take the form of food, jewelry, liquor, cloth, and other valuable goods. In this regard, Bermia's threats impoverish the community, because they must beg him with their valuables. The *old lady's* act of spokeswomanship functions as a peacemaking endeavor because it brings peace to a community that has endured the mental and economic agonies of Bermia's threats. The woman's activism in this story also restores the personhood of the residents of the community given that they have been rescued from the psychological and economic effects of Bermia's threat.

This story, like the previous two, shows that those elder women serve powerful roles in liberation movements. In the next story, my grandmother, Ndaarko, tells us about how her auntie Kua Manza defied the Nzema norm. **“If You Could Not Give Kua Manza a Rectal Laxative, Then You Cannot Give Me One.”**

Kua Manza (Ndaarko's auntie) was very wealthy, acquiring most of her wealth through her trade of midwifery. She had many material possessions and had even financed the building of a concrete house. Kua Manza initiated a divorce against her husband, according to Nzema custom. Kua Manza and her husband were to bring all belongings acquired throughout the marriage and divide them equally. This also meant that her husband would receive half of her house. Kua Manza and her husband brought out all the belongings they had both acquired throughout the marriage. The judges in the villages had, however, developed a new custom of asking the woman to drink a certain liquid. If the woman died after drinking this liquid, then it was assumed that the woman either committed adultery during the marriage or had not brought in all the possessions acquired throughout the marriage. Kua Manza was presented a cup of the liquid to drink, and she refused to drink it, telling the elders, "Mi ne nu ba sele me" (I will not drink by mouth; I want you to give it to me through a syringe). As rumors of Kua Manza's defiance circulated throughout the village, every woman who was called to divorce grounds and asked to drink this liquid repeated the words of Kua Manza saying, "If you could not administer to Kua Manza, then you will not administer to me." The practice has since ended throughout Esiama and surrounding villages, and Kua Manza has become a household name in many surrounding towns. Over time, Kua Manza's defiant words have turned into a proverb: If you could not give Kua Manza a rectal laxative, then you cannot give me one (M. A. N. Sennie-Tumie, personal communication, February 16, 2012).

This incident is well known throughout the Nzema area and surrounding villages.

According to Ndaarko, Kua Manza's niece, the incident took place in the 1940s.

Kua Manza is also a household name especially in Esiama, her hometown. The famous words of defiance, "If you could not give Kua Manza a rectal laxative, then you cannot give me one," are also used as slogan and proverb in Esiama.

The master narrative for Kua Manza would have been for her to be quiet and drink the liquid that was being offered to her on the divorce grounds. Like most African customs, the dispensing of rectal laxatives is a role strictly reserved

for women. Through the use of an assigned gender role, Kua Manza puts a permanent void in a system that works against her. Her defiance comes in many forms.

First of all, she tells the male elders to administer her a rectal laxative, a role strictly reserved for women: suggesting this to male elders forces them to step outside their gender role. This insults them as revered elders, questions their authority and ridicules their elevated status as men.

In addition to this, the story notes that Kua Manza initiates a divorce. Even though women are allowed to initiate divorces in Nzema custom, woman-initiated divorces were rare during the 1940s, when this occurred. The story also tells us that Kua Manza owned a house, also a rarity amongst women during this period.

Kua Manza's action is heroic and revolutionary in that it begins a collective women movement against male supremacy because women refuse to drink the liquid offered at the divorce grounds that was killing them. Her actions also end a practice that is harmful to women.

Ndaarko also tells us how her grandmother, Bamela Asua, defied the norm during British colonial rule in the following interview:

Bamela Asua was born in 1881 and died in 1942. In those days the British controlled everything. Not only weren't Africans allowed to sell gold, liquor, velvet, or other valuable items, but women were not allowed to own property or control wealth. Bamela Asua sold velvet and gold successfully and acquired a lot of wealth from this trade. She was never caught when she was selling these items. She was one of the first women in Bebiane (the town in which she lived) to own a home. She even loaned Paha I the money that he used to become an agent for the United African Company. Bamela Asua also bought her husband a car in Bebiane. Cars were very expensive then. (M. A. N. Sennie-Tumie, personal communication, February 16, 2012).

In this story, the master narrative prohibits Africans from selling certain profitable goods. Bamela Asua defies this narrative by selling gold, liquor, velvet and other profitable items. In doing so, Bamela Asua creates a new narrative in a society that requires men to see to the financial and economic security of women. The master narrative in this scenario would have been for Paha II, her uncle, instead to lend Bamela Asua money to start a business or for Bamela Asua's husband to purchase a vehicle for her. However, we see a completely different narrative, because she lends money to her uncle and buys her husband a car.

In the next story, Ndaarko defies the norm by becoming her great-grandmother's son.

“I Felt Like Ndede’s Spirit Had Taken Over My Physical Body. I Was Not Myself. I Was Ndede’s Son That Day!”

Paha II had two sisters, Ndede and Awu. Awu was the youngest and Ndede was the oldest. [By Nzema custom] Ndede's sons were supposed to inherit Paha's wealth and see to the economic security of Akelaba's lineage. According to Nzema customs, because Ndede had no sons, Awu's oldest son [Winfil] inherited Paha II. Winfil bought a house with some of the money inherited and put Awu's lineage in the UAC house [the mansion inherited from Paha II]. Ndede's descendents slept in the huts and were excluded from the inheritance. Aba Blay used to cry about this because she remembers how hard it was for them and how wealthy Awu's side of the family became. When I was young, I always used to see my grand auntie [Aba Blay] crying. Aba Blay was Ndede's sister. When I was eight, I told Aba Blay not to cry because when I grow up I will take back what is ours and take her and my aunts out of the huts and into the mansion. I told them that I will take back what belonged to us.

When I was 32 years old, my grandmother, Aba Blay, was not alive, but my mother and auntie Nuba were. I called a meeting with the elders and my uncle. My uncle Winfil, Awu's son who inherited Paha's wealth, was still alive at that time. I told them that I wanted to meet with them in the chief's palace. I told all of Ndede's descendants to come and witness this ordeal.

When we got there, they did not recognize me. Before the meeting started, I called on my deceased great-grandmother Ndede by pouring a libation. I told her to wake up and listen! The panel of men sat there just staring at me. I stood up and told them I am here, not as Ndaarko, but that I stand here as Ndede's son. I said this several times very loudly and then told them that, as Ndede's son, I was there to take my share of Paha's inheritance for my great grandmother's lineage. Uncle Winfil was so shocked, and the elders said nothing. My uncle Winfil got up and said, "Now this girl is something; the spirit of her great-grandmother has taken over her body." My uncle Winfil was so shaken that he voluntarily gave the UAC house to Ndede's lineage and said that Awu's side will take the house that was built with the inheritance money.

I then went with my aunts and helped them pack up all their belongings and moved them into the house. They stayed in some of the rooms and rented some of the rooms for money. My grand-uncles, those who witnessed the event, said that I was possessed with Ndede's spirit because I was not myself that day (M. A. N. Sennie-Tumie, personal communication, February 20, 2012).

The master narrative for Nzema children is for them to be silent. Children are not to question authority and must accept the norms that are given to them by their elders. Nephews must also inherit their uncles. In this case, Ndede has no son. So, Awu's son becomes the rightful heir. However, Nzema customs state that Awu's son is to take care of the entire lineage, which includes both Ndede and Awu lineage. Winfil (Awu's son) does not take care of Ndede's lineage but rather takes care only of Awu's [his mothers] lineage. He also uses some of the inheritance money to build another house for Awu's lineage. This banishes

Ndede's descendants to the huts and even finances the education of Awu's descendants. Ndaarko's defiance takes many forms in this story. First of all, she defies that which is the norm for a child by questioning the authority of Winfil. She does this when she tells Aba Blay, her auntie, that she will "take back what is ours and take my and my aunts out of the huts and into the mansion."

Ndaarko stays faithful to her word when acts upon her words as an adult. In her defiance, she relies on spirituality by pouring libations to summon her great-grandmother's spirit with whom she gains strength.

In addition to this, Ndaarko steps outside her gender role and becomes a man when she stands before the panel of elders as Ndede's son, not as Ndede's great-granddaughter. Her act of defiance moves Ndede's descendants (who were relegated to the huts and poverty) from the margins to the center given that they can sleep in some of the rooms, as opposed to the huts which were very difficult to live in during the raining season. Ndaarko's actions also secure an income for Ndede's descendants, who gain some form of economic security through the rent acquired from the leasing of some of the rooms.

Nzema women do not break the shells of crabs and snails; they break the tortoise shell. (Nzema proverb)

During King Kaku Ackah's reign, the Asante [a dominant tribe] made numerous attempts to invade the Nzema. The Nzema women got together and decided to run off the invaders. They made fake guns out of wood. When the women, who consisted of both elders and young women, saw the Asante coming in from across the river, they all gathered in numbers and stood naked there with their fake guns around their necks. When the Asantes saw this, they were so scared to see a huge crowd of women gathered there with what appeared to be guns around their necks. They quickly turned around and never returned to Nzemaland with the intention of

conquering. This is why Nzemas are one of the few Akan tribes who do not speak Asante-Twi (M. A. N. Sennie-Tumie, personal communication, February 16, 2012).

This story contains several elements of defiance. According to Nzema custom, women do not shoot rifles, nor are they allowed to reveal their nakedness in public. Even though these women do not shoot or hold actual guns, they use pretense to deceive their enemies, who at this time happen to be the Asante. The Asante are also an Akan group whose customs prevent them from entering into combat with women. For the Asante as well, women do not reveal their nakedness in public. These women, however, combat this convention by standing naked.

Through collective action, the women in this story use their wit to fight the Asante nonverbally. We also see this type of defiance take place during the Liberian War.

Fighting Rebels One Elder at a Time

A group of rebels were known to terrorize a town in Liberia. There were mass murders and several rapes. A group of elder women decided to do something about this. When the rebels came back to terrorize the village, the elder women, naked, with nothing but their beads on their waists, chased them out of the village. The rebels left the village and never came back (M. A. N. Sennie-Tumie, personal communication, February 20, 2012).

This story is well known throughout West Africa, especially in places like Ghana, Ivory Coast and Guinea-Conakry, where most Liberian refugees resettled. In Liberian culture, as in most African cultures, it is taboo to see your mother's nakedness. Elder women usually wear clothing that does not reveal their bodies. The women in this story defy the norm because they are being terrorized and murdered within a system of violence that is not beneficial to them. They defy the

norm by chasing the rebels out of the town naked. This act puts an end to the daily violence in the village and puts a community's fears to rest by bringing peace to the residents.

The elder women exemplify the Nana Esi archetype of communal motherhood for an entire village, and through defiance they restore the humanity of the terrorized residents.

A Chicken Belongs in Town, Not in the Forest

When I was a child, we would go to the forest to find firewood to cook, like charcoal. We cook with charcoal. But on one occasion, I saw a chicken; it had been tied and placed next to food. The chicken was probably meant as an offering to a god or goddess, because it was placed next to a bowl of *oto* [pounded yam and palm oil] and the chicken was eating it (the *oto*). When I saw the chicken, I said, "Ahh! Why should a chicken sleep by itself in a forest? I will take the chicken. I will take the chicken home." So, I untied the chicken. Then my friends who went to look for firewood with me said, "Ahh Ndaarko! You are taking a god's chicken home? The god will do something to you." I told my friends that this is not a god's chicken, because a human being put this chicken here. A chicken does not live in the forest. Chickens live in the town. So I took the chicken home. I took care of the chicken, and I sold the chicken's eggs and used the proceeds to pay my tuition. The chicken lived for a long time (M. A. N. Sennie-Tumie, personal communication, January 15, 2012).

Gods are feared for their ability to punish or reward humans. Traditional priestesses are feared as well for their power and their connection to the gods. Ndaarko defies the norm by untying the chicken. She goes further to even question the authority of the person (who could have been a priest or priestess) who put the chicken there by stating that "a human being put it here." Traditional priestesses and priests are feared and revered for their power. They are also viewed in high regard because of their ability to intercede to the gods. As such,

they assume immortal roles. Her reference to the priestess or priest as a ‘human’ defies the belief that priestesses are immortal.

Over time, Ndaarko benefits from the chicken, who produces eggs that she sells. When asked if people would have eaten the eggs of the chicken if they knew of the chicken’s origin. Ndaarko responds with a loud “no.” Her response to this question proves that her actions differ from that which is viewed as the norm. We see this through her peers, who warn her not to take the *gods’ chicken*, which should be viewed as sacred and therefore deemed untouchable.

Ndaarko continues to defy the norm by attending a fellowship that is strictly reserved for men. During an interview, I asked her to tell me about why she decided to attend men’s fellowship. She responds to this question below.

“But! My girls! They will be men when they need to.”

—Martha Akesi Ndaarko Tumi

I started attending the men’s fellowship. I was going to be taking a prominent man to court. I made more money than him with my business. But he had power, and I was a woman. I just wanted to know how men think. The men in the fellowship became like brothers and uncles to me. They gave me advice and shared their pains with me. I learned a lot there. I became one of them. They discussed a lot of their problems. I got to know how they think. The priest did not like it. But in time they got used to it. I still go to the men’s fellowship. I get more from it. Women’s fellowship was not helpful. All I heard was women telling me not to take my husband to court. Some women also did not want to hear the truth. (M. A. N. Sennie-Tumie, personal communication, February 20, 2012).

Ndaarko gives several reasons for attending men’s fellowship. She states that she learns a lot in The Men’s Fellowship. However, in a society that has strict gender

roles, a woman who attends a men's fellowship is an anomaly. Ndaarko defies the norm by refusing to stay in a women's fellowship that she says is "not helpful." She also creates a new narrative for herself and for women who desire the flexibility of attending a fellowship of choice. When I asked Ndaarko what she meant when she said that "some women did not want to hear the truth," she responded by saying,

When a woman's husband left her, she came to church to pray for him to come back. The priest focused his whole sermon on praying for the woman's husband to come back. That is how he got us to come back. I told these women that instead of us praying for our husbands to come back, we needed to pray for strength to take care of the children. After all they left, we did not leave them. I also was against women refusing to take their share of property when their husbands left. The priest would tell us not to take our husbands to court. We should pray instead and forgive. God will take care of everything. Nonsense! Mary knows how women feel. She is a woman. But she only helps women who help themselves. God the good woman helped me. A lot of women did not want to be around me because I contradicted everything that they were being taught. (M. A. N. Sennie-Tumie, personal communication, February 12, 2012).

Ndaarko's response to this question gives us insight into the situation she was dealing with at the time. It also tells us what the master narrative was for divorced women, and how the church became an active agent in the repression of women. She defied the norm by resisting the authority of the priest, who tells women to adhere to the norm by not using the justice systems against their husbands. Ndaarko, however, questions the authority of the priest by creating new narratives and norms when she chooses to liberate herself from an impartial divorce settlement through the justice system.

Ndaarko also notes that she used anything available to her during her court battles with her husband. She states, “It was not easy at all. I was the first women from Esiamia to actually send my husband to court. I was definitely not the first woman in Accra (the capital city of Ghana) to take my husband, but it was rare. It is still is rare.”

Ndaarko also uses unconventional methods to defy the norm during her court hearings. The following story shows how Ndaarko and her mother, who was physically present with her during this hearing, used stereotypes to her advantage.

“I Spoke to Him Sternly with Four Eyes. Mine and My Mother’s”

We were going on and off to court for over ten years. I made sure I went to every court hearing with my mother. Oh, let her sleep well [rest in peace]. One time as we entered the court, I saw my husband laughing with the judge. I knew it was not going to be a fair hearing. So when we went to court, I told the judge that I did not want him to judge my case. He refused this. So my mother and I stared at him [the judge] throughout the hearing. We did not even blink. Every time I spoke or my lawyer spoke, he would overrule it. So I spoke to him sternly with four eyes. Mine and my mothers. Another time, the same thing happened with a different judge. The judge was my husband’s friend. So when I went, they told me to take the stand. I took the stand. Then I told the judge that I wanted an Nzima! translator. The judge was very upset about this. In Ghana, everybody has the right to a translator in the language of their choice. uncomfortable for him. After about five minutes of staring the judge got up and said that he could not judge this case (January 18, 2012).

It would have been conventional for Ndaarko to accept the judge’s refusal to grant her another judge. In her reluctance to accept the judge’s refusal, she uses stereotypes of the way Nzema women are perceived as to her advantage.

Nzema women are stereotyped as being witches. The stares of two Nzema women in a courtroom are fatal, because witches are perceived to have magical

powers to kill or cause harm. In this regard, the judge's life is threatened nonverbally. We also see Ndaarko utilizing the stereotype of Nzema women to her advantage when she says *Nzima* in exclamation. Her verbal and nonverbal actions lead her to victory because the judge abruptly heeds to her demands by refusing to judge the case.

Ndaarko's court case lasted a period of ten years and ended with a settlement which she describes below:

My husband cried during his last day of court. He asked me to forgive him and told me that this was not his doing. He told me that he just wanted the twenty-bedroom house in Esiama because of his family. He told me to take everything else. I got the house in Accra, the five-bedroom house in Esiama, and the gas station. But my husband had sold the gas station and everything else. He also had turned the five-bedroom house into a school for the children in Esiama, so I did not want to take it. By the end, my husband was so distraught that it was pitiful (March 12, 2012).

Ndaarko notes in the story that her husband asked her to forgive him and proposed a settlement, which allowed her to receive half of the property acquired during their marriage. She also speaks further about forgiveness in the following story.

Forgiveness

He was begging me for forgiveness on his dying bed. He also asked his brothers to beg me for forgiveness. I forgave him. I went to his funeral. At his funeral, a lot of people said that if he had not been so bad to me he would have been alive today. He had nothing when he died, but we [his children and Ndaarko] gave him a fitting burial. I forgave my husband. I will always love him. He has made me stronger. Every woman needs to learn how to forgive. Forgive, but do not be stupid. My mother would always tell her great- grandchildren a popular African pidgin English

proverb: first fool ea be fool, second fool ea no be fool!” (March, 26 2012).

In forgiveness, we see a very compassionate side of Ndaarko as seen in her other stories. The master narrative for this scenario would have been for her to hate her ex-husband, whom she refers to as her husband throughout all her stories, and not forgive him. Yet she admits her feelings for him in addition to acknowledging the strength she has gained throughout this process.

In her last interview (March 26, 2012) she states, “I have to forgive him, not because the Bible says to forgive. I forgive him because if I do not forgive him, then I have lost. I am happy I did not stand by and allow my husband to take all my property. Today, I live well. I am comfortable to go and come as I please. I have also motivated other women to seek their own justice. Women can now say, “She did it; so I can.” I put him through a lot, though, through this process. I am sure that when he returns to this world, he will never dare to divorce a woman and give her property to his new wife. No, when he comes back into this world again, he will not do this.”

Ndaarko’s last interview shows that she, like the other women in these stories, have laid the groundwork for other women who seek liberation through the court system. She takes pride in knowing that other women could possibly gain motivation from her actions. In doing so, she exemplifies the role of communal mother and spokesperson. As with all the stories within this thesis, Ndaarko’s stories have enabled me to answer my research questions, which I present in the next chapter. Ndaarko’s modes of resistance not only embody the

Nana Esi Archetype, but also reflect the type of African feminism that I speak of throughout this thesis.

Chapter 5

“I am a feminist, just a feminist, and I don’t want to be an African feminist, because being an African feminist requires you to be an African woman when the men don’t want to be African men.”

“I am a feminist in English and a *beseasima* in Fante and *yalezile* in Nzima.”

“But! My girls! They will be men when they need to.”

—Martha Akesi Ndaarko Tumi.

M-A-L-E-Z-I-L-E!

The stories told throughout this thesis have shown that feminist concepts abound throughout Ghanaian folktales and African women’s stories. Through the actions of *malezile*, we can say that African women defy master narratives when the system works against them by adopting nontraditional roles through whatever means available to them at the time of defiance. We also see through these stories that African women construct gender by taking on male roles that allow them to become men when they need be.

Malezile are not always vocal, yet they are willing to use whatever means necessary to resolve issues. For example, in “I spoke to him sternly with four eyes Mine and my Mother’s,” Ndaarko uses a stereotype about Nzema women to her advantage. We have also seen women use elements of the Nana Esi archetype to defy conventions with the help of spirituality made possible through ancestresses and Nyame Obatanpa; God the good woman. African feminism also replicates a system characterized by a sincere respect for elders and spirituality. In each of

these stories, African women liberated themselves, refused to be victims and created new narratives for themselves and the community.

When I began formally studying feminism, I wanted to find out what African women were saying about feminism. Based on my research, African women were critical of feminism on several levels. First of all, feminism as a term was non-African, and its Western theories did not apply to African women. The use of sisterhood in feminist discourse was also viewed hypocritically by African women, who see sisterhood as a hierarchy dominated by non-African women. After reviewing African critics of feminism, I went on to study the status of African feminism. I was overjoyed to discover that an African feminism existed in academia. However, what I found was that it typically consisted of tenured professors who have acquired privilege and status, African university graduates, African graduate students and students who have acquired education from some of the best schools that Africa, Europe, and America have to offer.

My problem with these exponents of African feminism, however, was that they did not always consider or voice the stories of women outside academia. Thus, a congregation of African feminists would typically consist of a congregation of African academics. Indeed, this congregation of academics did not reflect the feminism I grew up with, nor did it reflect African feminism as a whole. Through my research on African women and feminism, I also noticed a cycle of criticism about feminism (even though most of the critics admitted to growing up in a feminist culture) with very little said about alternative African feminist theories. I also noticed that most African feminists and African critics of

feminism were deterred from feminism because of a name that originates from a Latin root.

I, too, was raised in a type of feminism that was not called feminism; a feminism that rested completely outside academia; a feminism that relied on oral traditions, folklore, and stories; a feminism that referred to feminists as *malezile*. I was raised by my grandmother, who went through great strides to acquire a formal education, a great-grandmother who had no formal education at all, but dedicated her life to making sure that her female descendants received advanced degrees and a mother who told her daughters to reach for the sky. I was raised observing fishmongers, market-women, and women with no formal education resisting master narratives on a daily basis. The women I have spoken of are all *malezile*, and I can proudly say that I learned my first feminist concepts from them.

African feminists such as Abena Busia of Ghana and Nawal El Saadawi of Egypt speak of an African feminism, and I commend them for it. After all, we do need a space to speak of women's agency in Africa. Yet what we have seen through some of the discourse about African feminism is that women without formal education or outside academia are left voiceless. This does not mean that the academic African feminists must be silenced, as that would also be marginalizing. It does, however, force us to create an equal balance between both worlds of Africa, that of the formal academic arena and that of the nonformal arena. Thus, a congregation of African feminists should consist of market women, academics, fishmongers, traditionalists, writers and traditional orators alike. Only

then can we represent the feminism of Africa. We must remember that Western feminism can only continue to hijack feminist theories when we (African women) fail to use our own feminist theories, categories and exclude everyday African women such as *malezile*.

The *malezile* category allows us to address human rights because it shows how everyday women create new narratives for themselves by standing firm in search of justice. It also allows us to define ourselves, and we must use it as a space to resist, cognizant that doing so requires us to use our *own* theories and methodologies.

African feminist theory should mirror our own traditional native archetypes, which I have done in this thesis through the use of the Nana Esi archetype. I encourage other African women to use African archetypes and oral history to speak of the feminist activities of *malezile*. Doing so allows us to halt the *pity blessings* that pervade Western rhetoric. Through the *malezile* category we say that our mothers play powerful roles in their households, that our elders play active roles in African feminism, that everyday African women defy master narratives and create their own narratives through living resistance. The *malezile* category gives us a space to refute Western stereotypes of African women by speaking of everyday African women's realities. Through the Malezile category— we say: excuse me; we do not need your pity blessings!

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