
SHAKESPEARE IN THE BUSH: GENDER CONSTRUCTIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS OF *HAMLET* BY THE WEST AFRICAN TIV

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Abstract

This paper analyses how gender is constructed by the Tivs through their interpretation of *Hamlet* in comparison with how Shakespeare projects these characters. *Hamlet*, a tragic play by Shakespeare, presents a patriarchal system of governance with strong themes of betrayal, love, kinship, religion, and revenge. The lack of agency and autonomy of women, sexual objectification, and their plagues as victims of patriarchy portrayed in *Hamlet* is a vivid presentation of the fate of women in a patriarchal world. While these may seem universal, the contradictory interpretation of *Hamlet* by the Tivs in Nigeria demands an inquiry into how the people of Tiv construct and interpret gender in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. This paper, therefore, compares the Tiv's culture and gender values with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The paper argues that the Tiv's construction of gender contradicts Western conceptions of gruesome patriarchal performance in Africa as presented in Western literature. The analysis revealed that the Tiv's construction of gender gave more agency, power, and respect to women and differed significantly from how Shakespeare constructed gender in *Hamlet*. The masculinization of witchcraft and the demeaning of the male characters in *Hamlet* gave less honour and power to the male characters. Tiv's interpretations and gender constructions present a rather diverging representation of women in *Hamlet* based on

cultural negotiations and lived experiences; thereby, demonstrating how cultural dynamism shapes gender constructions.

Keywords: Gender, patriarchy, culture, Hamlet, Tiv.

Introduction

Cultural universality is a concept that has been well debated in anthropology and sociology. The argument that human beings are similar in anatomy and therefore share similar traits, elements, and patterns in culture have been well established by cultural universalists such as George Murdock and Claude Lévi-Strauss. However, the concept of cultural universality applies not only in anthropology but also in literature and literary works. Literary works such as plays often emanate from cultural conceptualizations that give a vivid portrayal of the structure, values, and norms in a given society. Thus literary works can be equated to cultural performance and Shakespeare's plays are no exceptions, including *Hamlet*. Sakar (2016) and Chedgzoy (2001) contend that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was a true reflection of Shakespeare's world and the Danish culture and life in the Renaissance period. Several years after the writing of *Hamlet*, Laura Bohannan, an American Anthropologist, believes that *Hamlet* has a universal interpretation irrespective of race, gender, ethnic group, or geographical location. She notes "human nature is pretty much the same the whole world over; at least the general plot and motivation of the greater tragedies would always be clear—everywhere" (Bohannan, 1966:1). Convinced of the principle of cultural universality, Bohannan is persuaded that *Hamlet* is indeed a hero who will be admired by all humans for

revenging injustice (death of his father) and displaying a highly intellectual and tenacious process of revenge.

As a tragic play, *Hamlet* presents patriarchy as a system performed in all social structures, and patriarchy was a strong determinant in love, marriage, kinship, governance, and economy. Women's lack of autonomy and the repression portrayed in *Hamlet* is a vivid presentation of the fate of women in a patriarchal world. But how universal is patriarchy? The universality of patriarchy was a major motivation for early feminist struggles including transnational feminism. Indi (2021) is of the view that patriarchy is a system and philosophical principle practiced inappropriately and universally in the world, where men occupy dominant positions and control important affairs while women submit and are mere passive agents in society. In early feminist struggles and works including the suffrage movements, the fight against patriarchy was universally fundamental. "The driving force behind feminism since its inception in the 16th century has been the elimination of societal norms and practices that militate against the entire development and wellbeing of women" (Olutayo and Yalley, 2019:1). African culture, in particular, has often been viewed and portrayed as heavily patriarchal in Western literature, including feminist works with strong projections of primitivity that subject African women to slavery (Moriah 2014, Etherington 2004, and Dachs 1973). It is no doubt that Bohannan projects the Tiv people as a bush, pagan and primitive in her essay thereby giving a demeaning projection of the African people and their culture to the reader. She notes, "To end an argument we could not conclude, my friend gave me a copy of *Hamlet* to study in the African bush: it would, he hoped,

lift my mind above its primitive surroundings” (Bohannan, 1966: 1). But, are the Tivs pagans with primitive ideologies? Bohannan's essay reveals prominent things about the Tiv culture which contest her conception of primitivity and paganism. The divergent interpretation given to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* by the West African Tivs not only reveals elements of cultural relativity but also portrays how their interpretations are closely linked to their own cultural experiences and practices. Particularly, their differing interpretations and perceptions of the male and female characters projected by Shakespeare in *Hamlet* demonstrate how the Tiv tribe in Nigeria constructs gender which is based on their cultural norms, values, and practices. Contrary to Western projections of the huge patriarchal elements in Africa, Bohannan's essay brings a divergent view of the position of women in Africa. This paper, therefore, analyses how gender is constructed by the Tivs through their interpretation of *Hamlet* and the roles that the men and women played in the tragic play, in comparison with how Shakespeare projects these characters in his play by discussing gender-specific themes that are presented in Bohannan's essay on ‘Shakespeare in the Bush’.

Background of the Tiv

The Tiv tribe is an ethnolinguistic subgroup of the Bantu language who migrated to Nigeria. The tribe is presently the fourth largest ethnic group in Nigeria with a population of over ten million spread across Nigeria's middle belt (Nigeria Population Commission, 2006). Geographically, their land spans Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa, Cross-River, and Taraba States. The Tivs are well known for their segmentary political and social organization. They are considered the most renowned society of segmentary

lineage in West Africa (Ihuah, 2016). The social and political organization of the Tivs was without a state formation. There were no chiefs nor administrative divisions among the Tivs and there was a lack of real authority figures in the Tiv's political structure system. "The clans are divided into sections in which there is one who is spoken of as the headman, but his position is, to a great extent, honorary, and unless popular or feared, has little authority in the section outside his cluster of villages" (Ahua,2019:2). Storytelling is a major component of Tiv culture, where families and communities gather to tell folktales and their history to the younger generation (Dzeka 2000). The traditional occupation of the Tivs is predominantly farming and hunting. Crop production in yam, groundnut, beans, millet, corn, and rice constitute a major component of their economy. Although the Tiv social organization is based on patrilineages where kinship is based on paternal descents, women were equally powerful and influential (Yecho, 2014). The hierarchical structure of the Tivs is heavily based on age rather than sex (Ihuah, 2016). Thus respect for old men and women is a defining concept of Tiv culture. Leadership is therefore based on age, influence, and wealth.

Bohannan's 'Shakespeare in the Bush'

In 'Shakespeare in the Bush', the American Anthropologist (Laura Bohannan) who was studying the Tiv culture in Nigeria, tells the story of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to the Tivs to prove that human nature is the same world over and that *Hamlet* only has one universally obvious interpretation. The inhabitants of Tiv lived in extended families and took pleasure in drumming, singing, dancing, and drinking beer brewed by their wives. Storytelling was a major part of their culture where they often

gathered in huts to tell stories. Bohannan, in her quest to go native, often joined the Tivs in their storytelling and other cultural performances. It was in one of these gatherings that she was asked to tell a story about her own country and culture. Before leaving Oxford for West Africa, she had argued with her friend on the universality of the interpretation of *Hamlet*. For Bohannan, this was an opportunity to tell the story of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to test this hypothesis. Convinced that the Tivs will understand, interpret and view the plot the same as she has, she tells the story in full confidence defending the culture, the logic, and heroism in *Hamlet* as portrayed by Shakespeare. However, her confidence was shattered by the completely conflicting interpretation given by the Tivs to the plot and how Shakespeare shaped the characters.

Gertrude in the Eyes of the Tivs

Gertrude, the most prominent female character in *Hamlet* is projected as a frail woman, betrayer, selfish, and highly weak. Shakespeare configures her as a woman who lacks morality and fidelity by marrying her husband's brother two months after his death. Hamlet expresses great dislike and disrespect for his mother by confronting and openly condemning her for getting married to Claudius. Hamlet bemoans:

But two months dead—nay, not so much, not two.
So excellent a king, that was, to this Hyperion to a
satyr; so loving to my mother That he might not
between the winds of heaven Visit her face too
roughly. Heaven and Earth. Must I remember?
why, she would hang on him. As if increase of
appetite had grown. By what it fed on. And yet,

within a month (Let me not think on 't; frailty, thy
name is woman!)
(Hamlet Act-1-Scene-2, 141-150)

Here, Hamlet shows his disgust for his mother's sexual life and blames her for her treacherous marriage. He condemns his mother for being in an incestuous marriage. Gertrude is not only demeaned by Hamlet, but also by his late husband's Ghost who sees her as an unfaithful woman who had betrayed his love for her. The Ghost presents himself as a chaste faithful man who was faithful to his marital vows until death and sees Gertrude as an unfaithful woman although the marital vow ends after the death of one partner. This projection of Gertrude is not alienated from the gender conceptualization of women in a patriarchal society where men (including the dead in *Hamlet*) dominated women in all sense and women had no agency but only to submit. Yalley et al, (2021) reveal that women's position in patriarchal societies is constantly subjected to male approval and acceptance including their bodies and sexuality. Like women in the Renaissance period, Gertrude has neither voice nor power to make decisions nor to take decisions concerning the use of her body. Rather, her choice was subject to men's approval, including her son Hamlet (Sakar, 2016).

In contrast to the demeaned characterization of Gertrude in *Hamlet*, the Tiv people greatly respected and commended her personality. The Tivs found Gertrude's decision to marry two months after the death of her late husband highly commendable. In the eyes of the Tivs, Gertrude took a perfect and rational decision by marrying so early. Her early marriage to her

husband's brother was seen as a chaste decision in fulfilling her role as a mother to Hamlet. During the narration of *Hamlet*, the Tivs noted:

“He did well. The younger brother marries the elder brother's widow and becomes the father of his children. Now, if your uncle, who married your widowed mother, is your father's full brother, then he will be a real father to you” (Bohannan, 1966:3)

From this account, Gertrude was viewed as a responsible mother who took a good decision to care for her son by immediately offering him a father figure to fill the gap of his dead father. This conforms to the African feminist concept of motherism where African women exhibit a model of femininity through motherhood and nurture (Achonolu, 1995).

Based on her imbibed patriarchal principles, Bohannan herself justifies the demeaning projections of Gertrude in *Hamlet* by defending the patriarchal culture of the West and objecting the Tiv's commendation of Gertrude. She declares:

I was too upset and thrown too far off-balance by having one of the most important elements of *Hamlet* knocked straight out of the picture by an audience convinced that Claudius and Gertrude had behaved in the best possible manner. Determined to save what I could of the mother motif, I took a deep breath and began again. There was no need for her to do so, and it is our custom for a widow not to go to her next husband until

she has mourned for two years (Bohannan, 1966:3)

The Tivs, however, condemned this cultural principle by questioning its relevance to women and placing the interest of Gertrude first: "Two years is too long. Who will hoe your farms for you while you have no husband?" (Bohannan, 1966:3). While this conceptualization is tied to their traditional occupation of farming, it nonetheless presents a cultural logic where women possess power and agency in things that pertain to them. From this analysis, there is a clear conflict between the conceptualization of marriage by Tivs and marriage in *Hamlet*. The concept of marriage in *Hamlet* rested solely in the interest of the men and their pleasure; thereby, being dominated by male wishes. In the account of the Ghost of Hamlet's father, he discloses "O wicked wit and gifts, that have the power so to seduce!--won to his shameful lust, The will of my most seeming virtuous queen" (Hamlet Act-1-Scene-5, 44-46). The concepts of 'power' and 'lust' were therefore key principles in marriage and they belonged to the men. This is contrary to the Tiv's concept of marriage. Among the Tivs, we see a switch in power where women assume full power in making decisions about marriage for their gain. The men are needed to work on the farms for the women. Thus, there is a change in power positions in marriage with women being leveraged with power and autonomy. Ihuah (2016:105) contends that among the Tivs, "the wife is the epicenter of the householder, the measure of all things for the husband and the epicenter of the community. She is neither marginalized nor oppressed and exploited in social, political, economic and religious spheres."

The Concept of Witchcraft and Masculinity

Bohannan's essay reveals a unique theme of witchcraft which is a very prominent practice in the Tiv society. The theme of witchcraft as interpreted and portrayed in the essay is very essential in Tiv's interpretation of *Hamlet*. Their interpretation of the misfortunes and tragedy in *Hamlet* was nothing more than the manipulations of witches. Witchcraft was presented as wicked, mean, destructive, and a diabolical phenomenon. What is more striking is how the concept of witchcraft was masculinized by the Tivs. First, the concept of Ghosts was absent in their religious beliefs and therefore did not exist in their subconsciousness. The Ghost of the dead king was therefore interpreted as an omen sent by a witch to destroy people. They noted: "Impossible! Of course, it wasn't the dead chief. It was an omen sent by a witch (Bohannan, 1966:2). Furthermore, the Tivs alludes to Hamlet's madness to witches. They contend "Why, should anyone bewitch Hamlet on that account? Yes, only witchcraft can make anyone mad" (Bohannan, 1966: 6). In these two accounts, the witches are presented as agents of misfortunes. The witches, who are presented as being destructive and the instigators of misfortunes, are revealed as masculine personalities. Bohannan's audience emphasizes thus, "only his relatives in the male line could bewitch him'. Barring relatives not mentioned by Shakespeare, it had to be Claudius who was attempting to harm him" (Bohannan, 1966:6).

The Tivs again blame Laertes for killing Ophelia by witchcraft, directly blaming men. They reiterate:

Only witches can make people drown. Water itself can't hurt anything. It is merely something one drinks and bathes in. Laertes killed his sister by witchcraft, drowning her so he could secretly sell her body to the witches (Bohannon, 1966:8).

With these interpretations and the conceptualization of witchcraft, the Tivs directly or indirectly blame men for the misfortunes in *Hamlet*. Contrary to Shakespeare, who projects men as heroes, powerful and honourable, the Tivs condemn men by relegating their personalities to witchcraft. Although Shakespeare does not introduce the concept of witchcraft in his play, historical studies reveal that the concept of witchcraft was very present in medieval and early modern Europe, and the concept was feminized. In medieval and early modern Europe, accused witches were usually women who were believed to have used magic to cause harm and misfortune to members of their community (Bailey, 2002). Similarly, Parkins (2006:3,4) also reveals that:

Welsh people had a profound belief in witches, witchcraft, and the supernatural; the belief was deeply ingrained and the witch, as far as the Welsh people were concerned, was always a woman, as popular culture dictated that only women could be witches.

Thus in critical gender analysis, the Western concept of witchcraft was highly patriarchal by demeaning female personalities which was the direct opposite of the Tiv concept, revealing their construction of the female gender in their culture.

Demeaned Male Personalities

The presentation of the male characters by Shakespeare in *Hamlet* was in rather sharp contrast with the female characters. The male characters including the Ghost (the dead man) were shaped with power, honour, loyalty, strength, wisdom, and intelligence personalities, typical of patriarchal principles (Yalley and Olutayo, 2020). Prince Hamlet is presented as the great hero who plots revenge for his father's death and achieves it at the expense of his own life. As an admired hero, Hamlet is decorated with the virtues of loyalty to his father, brave in confronting his mother on her marriage, intelligence and very wise in executing a deserved retribution. These attributes are the driving forces that appeal the audience to Hamlet's personality in the play, including Bohannan. The Tivs, however, had a different view of Hamlet's personality. They found his personality weak and his actions highly irrational. The Tiv's interpretation of the basis for Hamlet's revenge, which was based on inconclusive allegations by a spirit that did not exist, was highly problematic and nonfactual. They queried:

You mean it actually was an omen, and he knew witches sometimes send false ones. Hamlet was a fool not to go to one skilled in reading omens and divining the truth in the first place. A man-who-sees-the-truth could have told him how his father died, if he really had been poisoned, and if there was witchcraft in it; then Hamlet could have called the elders to settle the matter (Bohannan, 1966:6)

Hamlet's character was humiliated and viewed as a person who lacked common sense. He was considered a 'fool'. This personality did not appeal to the Tivs to warrant Hamlet's heroism. The Tivs were not blindly consumed into commending

any male character based on sex. This is because masculinity in the Tiv culture was not based on sex but rather based on bravery, wisdom, respect, and honorable character (Ahua, 2019). Discussion on Tiv masculinity and classical masculinity. Hamlet exhibited none of these traits based on his decisions and his disrespect to his mother. The Tiv proverb "manliness is not about having a scrotum" reveals that masculinity is not based on sex and thus women can be men if they possess masculine traits, thus revealing gender neutrality in the conceptualization of manliness.

Polonius, another powerful, noble, and loyal character who receives commendation from Claudius was demeaned by the Tivs. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Polonius emphasizes his loyalty and wise counsel in all matters including his assertion of love is the cause of Hamlet's madness. He presents himself as a successful and wise counselor whose counsel and service to the royal family have been nothing but perfection. The Tivs, however, conceived Polonius as a 'fool' and condemned his decision of halting the love affair between Ophelia and Hamlet. A Tiv elder retorts: "a chief's son would give his mistress's father enough presents and patronage to more than make up the difference. Polonius sounds like a fool to me" (Bohannan, 1966:5). Although they did not condemn his selfish interest in keeping Ophelia pure for another man, they rationally expressed the view that he had more to gain with Hamlet than any other man. This selfish male interest conformed to the Tiv's culture of 'bride price' which was paid to the father of the bride. Thus, indicating a common patriarchal culture of monetization of the female child for male interests.

Polonius was also perceived as highly foolish for causing his death. In their reaction to the account of the murder of Polonius, the Tivs looked at each other in supreme disgust and declared “That Polonius truly was a fool and a man who knew nothing! What child would not know enough to shout, It's me! ” (Bohannan, 1966:7).

They questioned his intelligence and found it below a ‘child’s reasoning. Such a personality undoubtedly fell below the Tiv’s expectation of manliness, thus once more condemning an important character in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Other minor male characters such as the Ghost, received no commendation from the Tivs. The Ghost who was presented as a loyal husband and great king who deserves justice was considered nothing but a mere omen manipulated by witches to cause misfortunes.

Elevated Feminine Personhood

The Tivs’ construction of the two major female characters (Gertrude and Ophelia) in *Hamlet* was in contrast with how they constructed the male characters. Their keen interest in women and genealogical questions that revolved around women was a clear indication of the important role of women in their society. Shakespeare, however, characterizes Gertrude and Ophelia in the interest of men and deprived them of every honour and right (Dane, 1998). Shakespeare presented these characters mainly to develop the male characters in the play. Gertrude and Ophelia are just passive and submissive characters who are shaped explicitly by their relationship with males. Shakespeare's characterization of women in *Hamlet* illustrates the consequences that patriarchy has upon a woman. “*Hamlet* presents the dramatization of the

helplessness of the feminine qualities in the context of a Danish patriarchal society" (Sarkar, 2018:64). The Tivs wanted to know more about the women because, unlike Shakespeare who gave passive personalities to women, their position was key in determining what was morally justifiable or unjustifiable.

The people interrogated Bohannan's essay by asking "Now, if your uncle, who married your widowed mother, is your father's full brother, then he will be a real father to you. Did Hamlet's father and uncle have one mother?" (Bohannan, 1966:3).

Their quest to know Claudius and King Hamlet's mother was an indication of the important position of women in the Tiv kinship system. "Womanhood is central to Tiv ontology and motherhood represented the principle of the fecundity of the family" (Ihuah, 2016:111). Having the same mother determined one's kinship position and whether one was considered a full brother was dependent on having the same mother, not a father. Therefore, this recognizes women's role and power in the kinship process. In this case, Claudius' right to marry Gertrude was on the condition of being born to the same mother. The Tivs criticize Shakespeare for disregarding these important genealogies. Bohannan (1966:3) revealed, "The old man told me severely that these genealogical details made all the difference and that when I got home I must ask the elders about it." The Tiv's condemnation of Hamlet's attitude to Gertrude was another illustration of their construction of women in their society. Bohannan narrates "Hamlet started to scold his mother for what she had done. There was a shocked murmur from everyone. 'A man should never scold his mother.'" (Bohannan, 1966:6, 7)

This African tribe finds no justification for a man to scold his mother and it is considered taboo. This is based on a cultural value that accords divine respect to motherhood, thus elevating the status of women in the Tiv society when compared with the Danish society. Motherhood is holism and superficially powerful in most African cultures including the Tiv (Akorede, 2011). Hamlet's action was not only peculiar to his personality but was a trait found in all the male characters who had interactions with the female characters in Shakespeare's play. Laertes and Polonius similarly exhibit extensive control over Ophelia including her love life. Ophelia is a victim of a male-dominated culture who suffers from the absence of a female figure who would traditionally play the role of motherhood in her life. "Motherless and completely circumscribed by the men around her, Ophelia has been shaped to conform to external demands, to reflect others' desires" (Dane, 1998:406). This domination is particularly common in patriarchal circumstances

Patriarchy

Although the Tiv's construction of gender was contrary to how Shakespeare constructed gender in *Hamlet*, there were elements of patriarchal practices in Bohannan's essay which revealed patriarchy as a key concept in Tiv culture. Bohannan's essay was heavily dominated by male voices – from old men. Although men, women, and children sat on their hillocks and drank beer while telling stories, the men dominated the conversations. Only two female voices appeared in the essay. O'Barr and Bowman (1980) contend that in patriarchal systems interactions between males and females are male-dominated because of unequal hierarchical statuses and gender roles held in society. Women's speech is

therefore considered less important while men's speech, became an implicit tool of patriarchal power through conscious and less conscious gender-role training where they learned to dominate a conversation through interruptions, talk time, and so on. (Spender, 1985, Tannen, 1990). This was clearly exhibited in Bohannan's essay where the men constantly dominated, interrupted, and also controlled women's conversations. Similarly, Shakespearian *Hamlet* is dominated by male characters. Moreover, the concept of polygamy was a clear instance of patriarchy in the Tiv narratives. They declare: "But a chief must have many wives! How else can he brew beer and prepare food for all his guests? It was better, for a chief to have many wives and sons who would help him hoe his farms and feed his people; That is the way it is done, so that is how we do it" (Bohannan 1966:5). This demonstrates a cultural link to their interpretations. Although the concept of bride price was not explicitly presented in *Hamlet*, the idea of male economic interest in marriage was a notion behind Polonius and Laertes's interference in Ophelia's love life. Laertes instructs Ophelia to guard her 'chaste treasure' — not necessarily because Laertes deems it chaste on moral grounds but rather because her virginity will determine the type of marriage Ophelia will get, which will also determine the class that Laertes will belong to.

Conclusion

This paper examined the gender constructions in Bohannan's Shakespeare in the Bush based on the interpretations of the Tiv ethnic group in Nigeria in comparison with how Shakespeare shapes women in his tragic play, *Hamlet*. Particularly, the paper aimed to contest Western misconceptions about the heavily

patriarchal nature of the African culture to contribute to the discourse on gender in Africa. The analyses revealed that the Tiv's construction of gender gave more agency, power, and respect to women and differed significantly from how Shakespeare constructed gender in *Hamlet*. Particularly the Tiv's commendation of Gertrude's personality and actions conformed with the African concept of motherism where women received honour for their mothering and nurturing attributes. In a similar vein, the less condemnation of Ophelia and the critical inquiry into maternal genealogies revealed a significant position of women in the Tiv culture. Shakespeare was criticized for the lack of attention to women in *Hamlet*. Women were therefore less oppressed in the Tiv culture than in the Western culture as represented in *Hamlet*. The analysis also revealed a stark condemnation of the male characters in *Hamlet*. The masculinization of witchcraft was a dominant theme that depicted how the Tivs viewed the male characters and constructed them. Although few elements of patriarchy are evident in both stories, the analysis of *Hamlet* by the Tivs contradicts Western ideologies of gruesome patriarchal performance in Africa as presented in Western Literature. Indeed, the African woman is empowered within her circles and possesses great power and agency. At the end of the narration, Bohannan, who was shaped by Western ideologies confesses 'Hamlet no longer seemed quite the same story to me' (Bohannan, 1966:9). Her misconceptions about the bush tribe were contested by Tivs and this demonstrates how culture also influences human perceptions and ideologies, including how gender is constructed and performed. What is more striking is the fact that the Tivs themselves believed their interpretation was universal. They concluded: "We believe you

when you say your marriage customs are different, or your clothes and weapons. But people are the same everywhere" (Bohannon, 1966:9). This demonstrates that there is a strong tendency for humans to think they are universal in all senses. Perhaps one can say in gender analysis that this may be the universal patriarchy manifested in different cultures but performed on different levels and degrees, thus revealing a striking balance and difference in patriarchal performance in African and Western cultures.

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