

Women in pre-colonial Francophone African drama: A reading of Jean Pliya's *Kondo, le requin*

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Received: 24/09/21 **Accepted:** 07/03/22 **Published:** 31/10/22

Résumé

La conception générale de la femme africaine, en particulier celle d'Afrique précoloniale, est qu'elle est marginalisée, dominée par les hommes. Elle est considérée comme une bête de somme, ne vivant que pour effectuer un travail de forçat et n'ayant que peu ou pas de voix dans la société. Elle est également considérée comme rien de moins qu'une esclave, soumise à un mariage précoce et forcé, opprimée et privée de ses droits. Cet article entend désabuser l'esprit des chercheurs de ces perspectives négatives et minimalistes en mettant en relief le portrait d'une femme africaine en Afrique précoloniale tel que présenté par quelques dramaturges historiques comme Jean Pliya avec son *Kondo, le requin*. Utilisant les théories postcoloniales et féministes pour interpréter ces textes, on peut dire que Jean Pliya présente un contre-discours et un récit qui représente la femme africaine comme une guerrière forte et un facteur déterminant dans l'intronisation des rois.

Mots-clés : femme africaine précoloniale, théâtre africain francophone, Jean Pliya, contre-discours, *Kondo, le requin*

Abstract

The general conception about the African woman especially in the pre-colonial Africa is that she is marginalized, dominated by the male folks, seen as a beast of burden, living only to carry out a work of a convict and

having little or no voice in the society. She is also seen as nothing less than a slave, subject to early and forced marriage, oppressed, and deprived of her rights. This paper intends to disabuse the minds of scholars of these negative and minimalist points of view by bringing into light the portrait of an African woman in pre-colonial Africa as presented by some historical playwrights such as Jean Pliya with his *Kondo le requin*. Using post-colonial and feminist theories to interpret these texts, it can be said that Jean Pliya presents a counter-discourse and narrative that represents the African woman as a strong warrior and a determining factor in enthroning a king.

Keywords: Pre-colonial African woman, francophone African drama, Jean Pliya, counter-discourse, *Kondo, le requin*

Introduction

As an integral part of every human society, women play different roles ranging from the biological to the socio-economic. However, when some intellectuals write about the African woman, they paint a disturbing image of an uneducated, relegated, oppressed and poor black woman, living under very miserable conditions and being marginalized by her husband and by society. Often emanating from the *tabula rasa* principle of colonial discourse, such representations are part of Eurocentric stereotypes that have constructed the rest from the West. However, this is a wrong assumption as African women are more than how the outside world sees them. In one of her Technology, Entertainment, and Design (TED) talks, Adichie (2018) warns against the danger of a single story. To her, the story of Africa is told from the Western point of view in their literature: “The single story of Africa ultimately comes, I think, from western Literature” (Adichie, 2018, p. 3). From Adiche’s postulation, it can be inferred that the Eurocentric view of an African woman is a product of the effect of a single story. For her part, Mohanty (1984, p. 334) describes this as the “assumption of the West”:

Clearly Western feminist discourse and political practice is neither singular nor homogeneous in its goals, interests, or analyses. However, it is possible to trace a coherence

of effects resulting from the implicit assumption of “the West” (in all its complexities and contradictions) as the primary referent in theory and praxis.

In the light of the foregoing, this paper seeks to provide the other side of the story on women in pre-colonial Francophone African drama, with illustrations mainly drawn from Pliya’s *Kondo, le requin* (1981).

Redefinition of the pre-colonial African woman

Contrary to the wrong assumptions and negative perception of an African woman especially in the pre-colonial era, in many historical literary works by famous francophone authors, she is presented as a strong, loving, and caring person who willingly sacrifices her comfort for that of her children and community. Mention can be made of Nokan’s *Abraha Pokou ou une grande africaine* (1970), Niane’s *Sikasso ou la dernière citadelle* (1971) and Pliya’s *Kondo le requin* (1981). A simple literal definition of an African woman is a woman born and bred in Africa, a woman usually of a dark skin with thick curly hair. However, this definition is rather shallow as it limits the African woman to only the color of her skin and her place of birth. The above definition is further limited because its inability to describe the African woman in terms of her hard-working status, dedication, resilience, and contribution to the development of the family and society at large. The definition also fails to account for the inter-mixture of ethnicities and races as not all African women have dark skin and not all of them reside in the continent.

A more comprehensive attempt at defining African woman is presented by *Opera News* (2021) for whom an African woman is

beautiful, powerful, unique, feminine and authentic. She is phenomenally resilient, passionate in the pursuit of her dreams and inspirational in her drive to succeed;

she is multidimensional seamlessly moving between the traditional and modern, the village and the city, the home and the office. A true African woman is simply limitless.

Speaking from an Afropolitan perspective, Alpha (2015) contends,

It is now widely accepted that for many people around the world, physical location and formal legal citizenship may not be the most salient forms of social, political or economic affiliation. As the process of globalization continues to expand, more and more people find themselves in one place, while their lives are structured and oriented by connections to one or several other places. Some of these ‘places’ are other nation states, such as an ancestral country of origin”

Following the above Afropolitan insights offered by Abebe, let us therefore redefine the term “African Woman’ by referencing not only her gender but also her nature. An African woman is a woman from the African continent or from another continent but who has been assimilated into the African culture and society which is demonstrated by the ability to respect, care, love, and fight for what she believes in. She is committed to work for the survival of her loved ones. She is seen as the beauty of the land as sung by Senghor in his ode to motherhood in “Black Woman”:

Clothed with your colour which is life,
with your form which is beauty!
In your shadow I have grown up; the
gentleness of your hands was laid over my eyes.
And now, high up on the sun-baked
pass, at the heart of summer, at the heart of noon,
I come upon you, my Promised Land,

And your beauty strikes me to the heart
like the flash of an eagle.

Mariama Bâ and various African women writers have denounced this idealistic image of the African woman which does not correspond to the reality. With the agency of poetry, black poets claim to re-write the black history, falsified by the West, explore the black culture and past, and redefine the sensitive values of the cosmos. By celebrating the beauty of Africa and the enchanting charm of the black woman, the poets of negritude display what Mabana calls a prophetic mission and a mystical vision of/in the new world (Ajah, 2012, p.8).

In francophone African theatre, the African woman is not exactly what many Westerners think she is: embodiment of serfdom, oppressed or enslaved. Rather, she spontaneously accepts responsibilities, with her free consent, because most African societies have always placed women on a pedestal. Moreover, the succession to the throne in many pre-colonial African kingdoms was based on the matrilineal lineage. Accordingly, in francophone African drama, most playwrights who use female characters often depict the indispensability of the African woman in the African society. The African woman is represented as energetic, bold, strong willed, always determined to win a cause, committed to her beliefs and duties, outstandingly industrious, faithful to her family, considerably selfless, a defender of justice and ready to make sacrifices. She is equally very hospitable and non-demanding but prudent. She is known to be loyal to what she believes in and dutifully protects it. Her respectful and caring nature is often misinterpreted for weakness and for being oppressed but a true African woman hardly views her respect to her society or to her husband as a sign of oppression. On the contrary, she sees it as a sign of her dignity which is often reciprocated by the respect accorded to her by the society. In the play selected for this study, Pliya's *Kondo, le requin*, we shall study the African woman under multiple

dimensions using the post-colonial and feminist theories for the analysis. It develops one of the salient arguments of Kouagou (2018) that, contrary to the widely held view that African pre-colonial African women were weak, in Pliya's historical theatrical work, women played key roles as strong humans and compassionate beings in Dahomean society before its conquest by the French invader.

Post-colonial theory and feminism: Liberating silenced voices

Post-colonial theory is based on concepts of otherness and resistance “to ‘colonial’ power and its discourses that continue to shape various cultures” (Tyagi, 2014, p.45). On the other hand, feminist theory, in general, is about the equal rights of men and women politically, economically, and socially. In an eclectic manner, these two theories will be used to analyze Pliya's *Kondo, le requin* with the view of bringing to light the place of the African woman in pre-colonial francophone African drama. Post-colonial study and feminist theory have points of intersection and common preoccupations; both intend to recuperate lost voices, to reinstitute the battered images of the colonized subject and to project the existential essence of the colonized figure. These tendencies culminate in what is today referred to as “post-colonial feminism” which is concerned with “the representation of women in once colonized countries and in western locations” and it “exerts a pressure on mainstream post-colonial theory in its constant iteration of the necessity to consider gender issues” (Tyagi, 2014, pp. 45-46). It rejects the tenets of mainstream feminism because “it is fallacious to hope post-colonial females to be valued, appreciated and justified by the Western hands” (Mishra, 2013, p.129) With these theories, it is possible to posit that the representation of the African woman as relegated to the background, oppressed and voiceless in many literatures and critical works constitutes the fallacy of hasty

generalization. As will be demonstrated in this article, some African dramatic works show otherwise.

Kondo, le requin and post-colonial theory

According to Al-Saidi (2014), post-colonial theory deals with the reading and writing of literature in previously or currently colonized countries and explores the ways in which colonization has affected colonized people. Thus, post-colonial theory necessarily sheds light on *Kondo, le requin*, a play written on the invasion of colonizers in Dahomey, as colonizers came with the intention of distorting Dahomean culture and beliefs through the imposition of the culture of the western world on the people of Dahomey, now known as the Republic of Benin. Post-colonial theory further enhances our knowledge about the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized. When a people, who already have strong cultural beliefs and traditions are invaded by foreigners to inscribe inferiority upon the former's traditions, there certainly will be resistance. This was the case presented by Pliya in *Kondo le requin*, where the crown prince Kondo (who later became King Gbêhanzin) led a staunch resistance against the colonial master Bayol and his team from France. This confrontation later led to the war that culminated in the seizure of Dahomey by French troops, in the name of the Whiteman's burden and the "civilizing mission" of European imperialists.

The work demonstrates attempts by the colonized people to articulate their identity and reclaim their past in the face of that past's inevitable otherness. It is basically the study of the cultural legacy of colonization and imperialism with much focus on the human consequences of the control and exploitation of the colonized people. The colonized opposed the colonizers to recuperate and maintain the freedom of culture and identity. Pliya in his text *Kondo, le requin* depicts the resistance of the Dahomey people in so many ways. Just before the death of his

father the king, Kondo boldly asserts before the Frenchman Bayol:

Vous manifestez une prétention imaginable en considérant Koutonou comme propriété de la France. N'étaient la maladie de mon vénérable père et ses recommandations expresses de vous ménager, je vous renverrais tout de suite d'Abomey. (Pliya, 1981, p.17)

You express an imaginable pretension by considering Koutonou as property of France. Were it not the illness of my venerable father and his express recommendations to spare you, I would have sent you out of Abomey immediately (*My translation)

By this play, Pliya is trying to reconstitute and reconstruct the identity of the colonized in the articulation of the violation of the rule of Dahomey by the invasion of French colonizers who came to Dahomey under the pretense of trade and evangelization. Once again, Kondo, who prides himself on his descendance from panthers and also calls himself "le requin"(the shark), asseverates:

Vous avez abusé de notre bonne foi. Est-ce pour nous déposséder que votre président nous a envoyé ces cadeaux ridicules ? votre président, comme vous dites, ne vaut sûrement pas un roitelet de nos contrées puisqu'il ignore les bons usages... (Pliya, 1981, p.17)

You have abused our good faith. Is it for us to dispossess our rights that your president has sent us these ridiculous gifts? Your president, as you say, is surely not worth a wren of our countries since he ignores good practices ... (My translation)

Pliya's dramatic text is committed to post-colonial discursive reclamation as it questions the essence of Eurocentric colonial hegemony. The action of "déposséder" is enhanced by the "cadeaux ridicules" that the foreigners send to the indigenous people whose land and culture will definitely suffer from the European colonization of Africa. The dramatist traces the post-independence problem to Europe's colonial experiment in other lands that facilitated systemic subjugation and oppression of the colonized, including female subjects who suffered double colonization: sexist and political.

Feminism and women's domestic role

One of the legacies of colonization is the double subjugation of women to men and the imposition of subservient cultural, social, and economic roles on women. This position has, however, been rejected by many theorists. Notable among these are feminist theorists. The proponents of feminism seek to upturn the present structure of male-dominated societies with the intent of creating equality and equity between males and females in the society. Feminism has been categorized into the following: cultural, ecofeminism, libertarian feminism as well as material, moderate, gender, radical, Amazon, and separatist feminism. This paper will, however, rely on cultural and Amazon feminism together with motherism. To these will be added the womanist variant of feminism theorized by Walker (1983) to underline the roles of the Black woman in society.

The womanist variant of feminism acknowledges the abilities and contributions of black women while cultural feminism holds that although there are fundamental personality and biological differences between men and women, women should be celebrated for their peculiarity, especially with regard to kindness and care giving. The theory holds that these special abilities or differences possessed by women tend to make them better than their male counterparts in terms of providing leadership, care, support, and affection. Pliya appears

to corroborate the womanist feminist theory in his depiction of the roles of his female characters mainly as mothers, passionate companions, encouragers and as care givers in his play *Kondo, le requin*. Confronted with pain and oppression, an African woman is calm and encourages her wards to move on despite all odds. The caring nature of the African woman cannot be ignored. Some schools of thought may misunderstand it for weakness or for subjectivity, but this is the true nature of a typical African woman with a compassionate heart not only to her children but also to her husband. Pliya demonstrates this in *Kondo, le requin* when Djikada and Etchiomi, the two queens of Gbêhanzin, were caring for their husband who just had returned from the warfront and needed some water:

Etchiomi va apporter de l'eau, s'agenouille, en verse un peu dans sa main, l'avale, puis présente le bol au roi qui boit. Djikada lui essuie la bouche, lui allonge les jambes, éponge la sueur à son front. Le roi semble rêveur. (Pliya, 1981, p. 46)

Etchiomi brings some water, kneels down to pour a little into his hand, she drinks it, then presents the bowl to the king who drinks. Djikada wipes his mouth, straightens his legs, and sponges the sweat on his forehead. The king seems dreamy. (My translation)

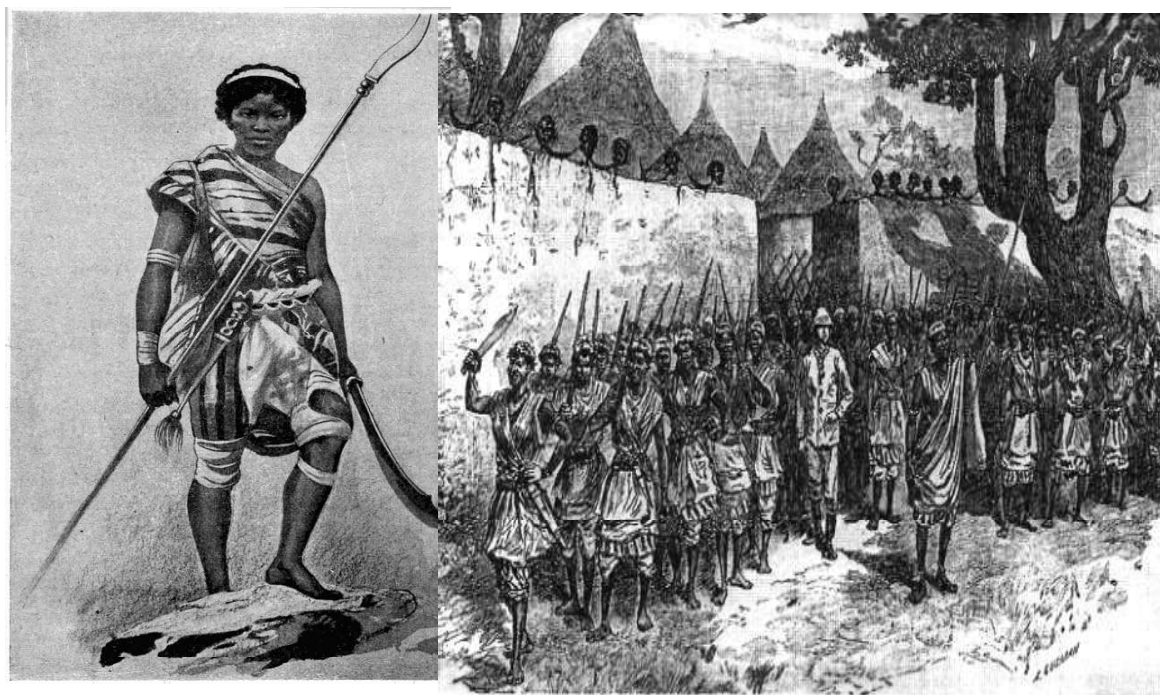
Not only do they nurture princes and future kings, they also offer sensual love, advice, and moral support to the king. In line with cultural feminism, Pliya celebrates the tender and supportive nature of the African woman in the dispensation of care and comfort to those around her. The Afrocentric feminist theory, according to Acholonu (1995, p. 3), is anchored on the matrix of motherhood which forms the basis of the African race and the central focus of African art, literature, culture, psychology oral traditions and empirical philosophy. From her

motherist perspective, Achonolu (1995, p. 3) represents the African woman as “the spiritual base of every family, community and nation”. This is openly displayed in several works written by Blacks in the continent and the diaspora. Thus, the mother figure is celebrated in Senghor’s poem, “Black woman,” and Laye’s *African child* with its famous nostalgic introduction “To my mother.” Such celebrations are also seen in some short stories, novels, and drama pieces like *Kondo, le requin* where the playwright does not restrict his admiration for the African woman but brings it to light through the words of no less a person than King Gbêhanzin:

Je ne méprise pas les femmes. Je les crois capables d’actes de bravoure et aussi de concevoir des idées justes sur les affaires du royaume. Je me souviens encore de l’héroïsme des quarante reines qui se firent enterrer vivantes avec mon glorieux père, parées de bijoux, sereines, sublimes. (Pliya, 1981, pp.21-22)

I do not despise women. I believe them capable of bravery and also to conceive just ideas about the affairs of the kingdom. I still remember the heroism of the forty queens who were buried alive with my glorious father, adorned with jewels, serene, sublime. (My translation)

Another variant of feminism is the Amazon feminism theory. This theory seeks to establish equality between males and females. Unlike the theory of cultural feminism which aims at establishing superiority of women over men, Amazon feminism opposes gender discrimination, role stereotypes and biases against women. Amazon feminism is opposed to assumptions that men are superior to women or that women are passive, weak and physically helpless while men are stronger. Rather, the proponents of the Amazon theory perceive all women to be equal to men.



Élisée Reclus - Extrait de «L'Homme et la Terre»,96

In traditional francophone Africa, there were female warriors who dedicated their lives to the defense of their land and were as strong as their male counterparts. These women renounced motherhood and swore celibacy so as not to be distracted in any form in their duties as warriors. These women were known as Amazons who were fighters and defenders of the land. They went to war just like men to defend the African territory from being invaded by foreigners and foreign cultures. As valiant as they were, the women warriors of Dahomey offered strong resistance between 1889 and 1894 to the invading forces and were only defeated by the superior technology of the French. This important all-female contingent of warriors was supposedly established by an ancestor of King Gbêhanzin, King Agadja of Dahomey. They were known in Fon as *Agodjie*, *Ahozi* or *Minon*. Paquette (2021) considers them to be “the only documented female army in modern history.” Their profile and exploits are not only confirmed by the Amazon feminist theory which projects women as physically capable as men but are also validated by Jean Pliya in his historical drama which is the focal point of this study. Pliya refers to them as Amazons. In the

second act during the enthronization of the new king, the chief female soldier comes up and declares to the newly crowned king:

Gahou femme : (se prosterne) Père de l'univers !
Nous sommes l'armée des buffles, les farouches
amazones, plus rudes au combat que les hommes.
Quand nous brandirons nos fusils pour montrer à
l'assaut des cités ennemis, les hommes n'auront plus
qu'à cultiver les champs de manioc... Nous avons
renoncé à la maternité et fait vœu de chasteté, mais
nous sommes liés à la vie, à la mort, à notre coutelas.
(Pliya, 1981, pp.26-27)

Female Commander: (prostrates) Father of the
universe! We are the army of buffaloes, fierce
amazons, rougher in combat than men. When we
wield our rifles to show the assault of the enemy
cities, the men will only have to cultivate the fields
of cassava ... We gave up maternity and vow of
chastity, but we are bound to life, to death, to our
cutlass (My translation)

According to Boakye (2018), the Dahomey warriors as the Amazons were also called were very brave and skillful in combat and the use of weapons. Their main goal was to outshine men in every ramification of life hence they took to celibacy to concentrate on their skills and assignments of defending the land. It was observed that because of the level of their dedication and commitment to the cause of the land, the king had more confidence in their loyalty and victory than in their male counterparts. This was especially so since the European soldiers, perceiving them as young women and ignorant of their skills, always hesitated to engage them in combat.

One could say that the Dahomey women warriors

were well depicted in the Black Panther film. which is about Prince T'Challa who emerges as the new king of Wakanda, an apparently poor African country. Upon the death of his father, Wakanda, although poor secretly extracts from its subsoil an all-powerful mineral, vibranium. However, this resource with miraculous virtues is coveted by two adventurers, the white arms salesman Ulysses Klaue and the black revolutionary Erik Killmonger, who also wants to take over the throne from Prince T'Challa. Under the identity of the mysterious Black Panther, the young King fights these two enemies, with the help of a CIA agent and members of the Dora Milaje, the female special forces of Wakanda.

Such also are Kpossou femme, captain of the Minon/ Amazons, and Gahou des femmes, general of the female warriors, and the Amazon Naga, portrayed in Pliya's play. Such also are the wives of King Gbêhanzin who participate actively in cabinet meetings and make very useful contributions to deliberations on the welfare and future of the kingdom of Dahomey. Historical figures of resistance and care, the female characters in Pliya's play, whether as commoners or aristocrats, demonstrate agency, resilience, and resourcefulness. The queens are also portrayed as lovers, caregivers, and most importantly determinants of what a child would be in future as they his/her first teachers in life. Appropriately, this multiple-award winning play on the historical resistance to colonial hegemony is dedicated by the author to the memory of his wife, Estelle, grand-daughter of the legendary king Gbêhanzin. In consequence, the resistance and Pliya's artistic representation of same reflect the tenor of post-colonial writing, as enunciated by Tyagi (2014), Al-Saidi (2014), and Adichie (2018).

Pre-colonial African woman as a leader and a strong/caring human

Charles Nokan in his play titled *Abraha Pokou ou une grande africaine* presents the story of a legend of the Baoulés in

Côte d'Ivoire. Queen Abraha Pokou single-handedly motivated her people to fight for liberation from oppression even when she has to lose her only child for the survival of the people. History has it that the story of the exodus of some people from the Ashanti in 17th century Ghana to present-day Côte d'Ivoire is the subject of a wonderful legend, that of Queen Pokou. Of Akan origin, the Baoulé ethnic group of Ivory Coast was founded by her at the center of the country, at the junction of the savannah and the forest area. Similarly, the Amazons and other female characters in Pliya's historical play are motivated by patriotism and a high sense of duty to dedicate and sacrifice themselves to the noble cause of the land.

One could go on and on with the discourse on the strength and respect accorded to the African woman even in the traditional African society as demonstrated by various African writers who see the meekness of the African woman not as a sign of weakness but of care, respect and dignity. Having portrayed with various theories that a typical pre-colonial African woman was well represented and respected in the pre-colonial African society, there is need therefore for scholars in African studies to look in-depth into history taking into cognizance various African countries, particularly in the pre-colonial Africa before leaping to any conclusion that pre-colonial African woman was marginalized. As a matter of fact, if there was any marginalization of the African woman in African history, it was during the colonial era upon the inception of colonial doctrines where slave masters (who definitely were westerners) treated women as sex objects meant for their sexual satisfaction. Over the years, several scholars especially in the western world misrepresent the African woman in their critical works. This may be because of the misconception and the presumptuous points of view impressed on them by either Africans themselves or western tourists/ writers who do not reside in Africa. These misconceptions are created by people who hardly understand and appreciate her culture but who depend on the information.

As rightly observed by Kouagou (2018), the portrayal of the Amazons in *Kondo, le requin* demolishes the prejudice of the African woman as weak. Fiercely, they resist colonial domination at the cost of their lives and demonstrate exemplary heroism. For all their ferocity, the Amazons of Dahomey were also compassionate beings. Paquette (2018) reveals:

Researchers have spent decades combing through European and West African archives to craft a portrait (of the Dahomey women warriors) from the jottings of French officers, British traders and Italian missionaries.

Yet a crucial piece of the Amazon legacy has been lost to the eraser of time and colonial rule: Their humanity.

Significantly, Nanlèhoundé Houédanou, a respondent of Paquette (2018), stresses: “My Amazon was gentle. She was known for protecting children.” Clearly, military prowess and compassion were not mutually exclusive for the Amazons of Dahomey. Similarly, the queens in *Kondo, le requin* are at once powerful, formidable, and gentle. The portrait of women in the play then underlines the need to avoid the perils of a one-dimensional narrative. The post-colonial, motherist, womanist, and Amazon feminist dimensions to the play are thus brought to the fore. In many ways, the play is a counter-discourse.

This is a call then to African literary scholars not to be lured by a single story (Adichie 2018). Rather, they should look at a story from different angles in order to have a truer and diversified picture of a given situation or phenomenon before proposing theories that might be detrimental to a people and to homes. Intellectuals are meant to be builders and not agents of cultural destruction.

Conclusion and recommendations

The deployment of various theories (post-colonial, womanist, motherist and Amazon feminist) helps to reveal the

multi-dimensional presence of the pre-colonial African woman in Pliya's *Kondo, le requin* as a strong but caring human with a strong say and stake in the affairs of her kingdom. This is a far cry from the negative conception of the African woman as a subservient, miserable, and marginalized creature before the advent of colonialism.

In view of the discussion, arguments and discoveries presented in this study, the following recommendations are suggested to help writers and readers in Francophone African drama to contribute meaningfully and correctly to the place of women in pre-colonial Africa.

- Africans in the diaspora and foreign authors need to collaborate with resident Africans before publishing their works to avoid misrepresentations of women in the African continent.
- Women in Africa are struggling to rise and occupy their positions once held in pre-colonial Africa in order to bring their skills and abilities to the fore in charting progress for Africa. However, patriarchy is much stronger now than ever. It is therefore important for African literary scholars to showcase the achievements of these women and present them as role models to the young generation.
- There is an urgent need for scholars, writers both Western and Africans to reject the single story of the African woman being portrayed by the West. According to Adichie (2018, p. 6) “when we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise.”

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