

ISSN : 2454-2423

Glocal Colloquies

An International Journal
of World Literatures and Cultures

Vol. 4

October 2018

A Peer-Reviewed Refereed Research Journal

Shattering the Colonial Myth of the African Woman: Ifi Amadiume's *Male daughters, female Husbands*

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Abstract: The master narrative assessed the African woman by European patriarchal standards. From polygenetic sub-human status to monogenetic primal state of zero ratiocination, from being the perpetually available vessel of biological release for over-worked colonial anthropologist-administrators to an effective tool for neo-colonial black democrat/dictator empire-building, the black woman remains black, ravaged, mutilated, raped and grossly violated. She has been consumed by racism, colonialism, patriarchy and literally by racist colonial patriarchal power discourses.

Ifi Amadiume's portrayal of tribal Igbo women of pre-colonial south-east Nigeria seeks to uproot the triple incisive exploitative structure that seeks to erase the black woman from history. Her Igbo women are articulate, politically conscious, economically self-sufficient individuals, with powerful female genealogies, immersed in independent professions. The Igbo flexibility of gender construction allowed, through the cultural institutes of 'female husband' and 'male daughter,' ambitious Igbo women to assume the position of males, the gender associated with power, authority and affluence. Three very powerful, very vocal, all-women organizations, with the right to demonstrate, if necessary strike, provided socio-familial as also politico-economic support to the members. Thus Amadiume makes an urgent attempt to relocate the Igbo woman in the correct historical perspective.

Key Words: Africa, Tribe, Women, Igbo, Colonialism, Patriarchy

The colonizer, demi-god anthropologist-administrator, attempted the impossible — writing a new history for the colonized. Colonial discourse self-assumed the right to re (present) all and any 'other (ed)'

culture. This 'representing' doubled as 're-ordering', making the conquered 'other' "more manageable comprehensible for imperial consumption." (Loomba 101) The colonial text codified this absolute violence perpetrated by one culture upon another, highlighting the amazing assumption that an intrusive yet uncomprehending, white, Christian, European gaze, could interpret any non-European, pagan, dark-skinned, "primitive" culture. And the epitome of colonial arrogance seemed manifest in the overt assumption that its interpretation of an alien culture was the only valid one.

Denied individuation, reduced to subhuman status, colonial discourse blatantly homogenized Africans as primitive collective beings. Such despicable beings, accommodated at the very bottom of the race hierarchy, were naturally assumed to reside in an unspeakable society, without ethics or morality. In such societies as Sander L. Gilman sarcastically observes, "prostitution" was assumed to be the "rule" and neither "adultery" nor "virginity" was supposed to have any "meaning": "...the poverty of their mental universe can be seen in the fact that they have but one word for 'girl, woman, or wife.'" (qtd. in Jr 248) For the male European colonizer-administrator, the colony, to use Anne McClintock's term, transformed into the "pornotropics" — a fertile terrain for his sexually-obsessed yet Christianity-restricted imagination to run riot. (qtd. in Loomba 154)

Such master narratives of misreading and misinterpretation naturally assigned the status of the double negative, the 'other's other' to the African woman. (Bhattacharji 3) From polygenetic sub-human status to monogenetic primal state of zero ratiocination, from being the perpetually available vessel of biological release for over-worked colonial anthropologist-administrators to an effective tool for neo-colonial black democrat/dictator empire-building, the black woman remained black, ravaged, mutilated, raped and grossly violated. She was consumed by racism, colonialism, patriarchy and literally by racist colonial patriarchal power discourses.

Noted Nigerian anthropologist, Ifi Amadiume's portrayal of tribal Igbo women of south-east Nigeria in her seminal work *Male daughters, female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (1987), challenges this colonial myth of the African woman: "To early anthropologists, evolutionists ... 'primitive' women stood at the lowest end of the scale ... no better than beasts and slaves, while the Victorian lady stood at the apex." (2)

Amadiume's traditional tribal Igbo society, as all societies the world over, was gendered, with a definite bias towards the aggressive, successful male. Inherently polygamous, this patriarchy glorified marriage and defined motherhood by the procreation of male progeny. Nevertheless, powerful Goddesses dominated this patriarchy and women occupied positions of equality in politico-economic as also socio-cultural spheres. Gender complementarity formed the guiding principle of the Igbo cultural milieu. Amadiume shows Igbo women to be articulate, politically conscious, economically self-sufficient individuals, with powerful female genealogies, immersed in independent professions.

Women in Religion

Powerful Mother Goddesses dominate patriarchies world over. Igbo patriarchy, too, was dominated by powerful Goddesses most of whom desired neither husbands nor consorts. The single Goddess with a husband, Idemmiri, had one who deferred to her in all matters. Women enjoyed the privilege of exclusive festivals such as '*nmu-oku*', wherein a mother invited her daughters to the traditional feast celebrating her personal god '*ime chi*.' (Adimora-Ezeigbo 51) Children in the Igbo cultural milieu were often named *Nneka* meaning 'mother is supreme.' A woman was always buried in her motherland with her kinsmen. Igbo believed that when life was sweet, a man stayed in his fatherland but in the time of suffering, he found refuge and consolation in his motherland. (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 122)

Women in Politics

The tribal Igbo society was a vibrant democratic meritocracy where all matters were decided through social consensus. Women had a powerful voice in all matters — social, economic and political. Igbo patriarchy accorded positions of immense power to women of exceptional caliber. 'Top women representatives' or *Oluada* though a minority, were members of *Obufo*, 'the inner council', the most powerful political and social body in this meritocracy. The *Oluada* made their presence felt: "*Oluada* refused to cooperate with any power ... that planned to undermine the culture, the traditional judicial system and the economic well-being of Umuga." (Adimora-Ezeigbo 9)

Women in Economy

Surprisingly, the patriarchal and polygamous Igbo cosmos allowed women extensive freedom. Women enjoyed the luxury and privacy of their own huts. Women were very independent economically. Active mostly as farmers and petty traders, those with greater business acumen

sometimes even functioned as “long-distance traders.” (Adimora-Ezeigbo 38) Amadiume cites the words of a traditional ruler: “It was the job of the women to go to the market, produce food and feed their husbands. Women played the lion’s part in the economy of the town even up till the present century.” (qtd. in Amadiume 38) These enterprising and industrious women were efficient in work, time and money management. Unlike most middle class working women of Asia, especially in India today, who earn undoubtedly, but have no control over their income and hence no economic independence in the real sense, these tribal African women managed their own income.

In the Igbo socio-economic order, women, especially wives, occupied the central place in the subsistence agrarian economy, while men gained authority through ritual specialization and ritual control. The Igbo creation myths as also the religio-cultural and gender ideologies were supportive to this socio-economic order with its neat sexual division of labour and gender division of crops. In the myths Nri, the son of the first man Eri, in extreme hunger prayed to Chukwu, the Creator God. The Great God ordered Nri to cut off the heads of his son and daughter and plant them. From the son’s head sprang Yam, the Igbo staple, a must in all Igbo rituals and ceremonies. From the head of the daughter sprang cocoyam, a subsidiary crop managed by women. (Amadiume 28) Thus the growth of yam, the staple crop, remained the prerogative of men, while the growth of certain other crops like cocoyam, cassava, melons, beans, etc were assigned to women. In the family meal, yam, the staple crop and meat was provided by the male member, the head of the family, while the woman was expected to provide the vegetables as well as fish and eggs on rare occasions.

Most women had their own market stalls and sold everything from agricultural produce to pottery to mats to baskets. An Igbo woman always purchased her own luxuries. Markets were also cleaned, policed and maintained by these women. The presiding deity of each market was also a woman. Cash exchange and control remained a prerogative of women. These professional women were naturally very independent in domestic, social and political spheres.

Women in Creative Professions

Igbo women were involved in very creative professions. Adimora-Ezeigbo shows women as poet-raconteurs, chanters and storytellers. Such women, the repository of ancient tribal lore, the authentic recorders and portrayers of history, were widely respected as cultural custodians.

Igbo patriarchy with its undoubted stress on marriage and motherhood, surprisingly allowed a breathing space for single women. Such women could maintain their single status in style. Chieme, the chanter par excellence is: "*Oluada* who showed the world that a woman's reputation does not depend on a husband." (Adimora-Ezeigbo 85) Conversely in colonial and neo-colonial Nigerian society professional women are clubbed together and labeled as "prostitutes." (Stratton 17) Perhaps it should be highlighted that prostitution as a phenomenon was non-existent in traditional patriarchal Igboland: "Harlotry, as a profession, was unknown to the Ibo country prior to the impact of western influences." (Basden 239)

Women were also involved in handicrafts, drawing and painting. Hairdressing remained an exclusive and expensive art of Igbo women. Even professional beauticians were not unknown.

Women as "Male Daughters"

The flexible Igbo gender system through the cultural institution of the "male daughter" could confer male status (rights and privileges of a son) to both married and unmarried daughters. To procreate male progeny for the father's lineage, the daughter of a man without a male heir could opt to stay in her patrilineage, refuse marriage and normative family life, choose a mate of her liking and perpetrate the family tree. Though the daughter exercised her right to choice, perhaps this custom was a subterfuge of patriarchy to bastion its foundations with the steel of uninterrupted male progeny. Amadiume cites the case of "Nwajiuba" being recalled from her "marital home" to be conferred "the status of a son" to enable her to "inherit her father's property." This custom of replacement was termed "*nhayikwa* or *nhanye*." (32)

Adimora-Ezeigbo speaks of a similar custom, "Nluikwa", perhaps designed to perpetuate the patriarchal cult. Aziagba, the unmarried daughter of Obiatu chooses to remain at home and perpetuate her patrilineage: "She was willing to *remain* at *home* with us to produce male children for her father. After ... the *nluikwa ceremony*, she chose Okoroji as a mate." (Adimora-Ezeigbo 33)

Certain women, while retaining female status also enjoyed enormous power and prestige. Amadiume extends the Igbo cultural canvas to denote a lineage having a founding ancestress. Ochom is the founding ancestress of the Amadunu patrilineage at Nnobi: "...an example of a daughter who was allowed to remain at home and have children by informal lovers." (52) Ochom was not a male daughter but a

daughter who retained her female status; her progeny through lovers perpetuated her patrilineage.

Women as “Female Husbands”

A unique ideological concept nurturing the Igbo cultural matrix was the flexibility of gender construction. Gender was separate from biological sex; women could become sons as also husbands to wives and consequently males. The male gender being associated with power, authority and affluence, women taking advantage of such unique cultural institutions as “Male Daughters” and “Female Husbands” sought to become males, not men. Such male positioning enabled ambitious, resourceful women to enhance their political power as also their socio-economic status: “... a flexible gender system ... meant ... certain women could occupy roles and positions usually monopolized by men, and thereby exercise considerable power and authority over both men and women.” (Amadiume 40) The amazing cultural institution of “female husband” enabled enterprising, resourceful, independent Igbo women to acquire wives; thereby expanding their business empire and amassing huge wealth, titles and enormous social prestige. As Amadiume puts it:

As men increased their labour force, wealth and prestige through the accumulation of wives, so also did women through the institution of ‘female husbands.’ ... When a woman paid money to acquire another woman ... the woman who was bought had the status and customary rights of a wife, with respect to the woman who bought her, who was referred to as her husband, and the ‘female husband’ had the same rights as a man over his wife. (46-47)

That an absolute patriarchy could tolerate the flourishing of such matrilineages in its midst deserves attention. Amadiume cites the very interesting case of the legendary “female husband” “Nwambata Aku” of her hometown Nnobi: “She is said to have had about 24 wives... the qualities attributed to her were hard work and perseverance. She was ... a clever woman, who knew how to utilize her money.” (47) Igbo husbands appreciated and actively supported resourceful successful wives: “The more expert a woman proves herself to be, the more is she appreciated by her husband. Ability in this direction (trading) is always a desideratum in a man’s choice of a wife.” (Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* 90) Contemporary Can-Euro-America and India reveal a converse phenomenon. Very often the supposedly educated, liberal husbands

cannot tolerate their wives to be more successful than them in social and professional spheres.

Amadiume depicts rivalry between very successful wealthy women and their husbands, so much so that "extremely powerful and assertive women were able to dominate their husbands." (45) Amadiume shows this institution allowing resourceful women to overshadow their equally successful husbands to the extent that "the men were no longer known by their own names, but by reference to their role as husband." (48) Such women were not stigmatized and society did not rectify these denotations unless the man concerned also happened to be exceptionally powerful and sought societal redress. Such women naturally overshadowed co-wives and even usurped the position and privileges of senior co-wives. (49)

Luce Irigaray reveals the feminine to be totally erased from language, even in feminist discourses: "Man seems to have wanted... to give the universe his own gender...anything believed to have value belongs to men and is marked by their gender...he gives his own gender to God, to the sun..." (31) In French, the feminine finds some mention, at least with many women, in the third person. In English even in writings of women, the third person or the neutral is always "he." Surprisingly in the Igbo language this differentiation between the genders did not exist. The Igbo language with its stress on the neuter participle and lack of distinction between masculine and feminine gender created no linguistic barrier to women occupying male positions in the socio-politic power matrix.

Women and Titles

The Igbo patriarchy had an elaborate system of titles for men. Beginning with the inexpensive titles "Chi", "Ifejioku" and "Ekwu", signaling a boy's growth to maturity, the next four titles, "Ozo", "Idemili", "Omalo" and "Erulu" with a legendary fifth "Eze", highlighted an Igbo man's gradual climb up the Igbo hegemonic ladder. (Wren 87) Surprisingly for the acquisition of the high title "Ozo" an Igbo man had to invoke Idemili, the daughter of God. To placate this goddess, the aspiring man needed to be accompanied by his daughter in the customary rituals. (Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah* 94-95)

Amadiume denotes the Igbo cultural phenomenon of rewarding industrious and resourceful women with socio-politic prestige and economic affluence in the form of unique female titles. Such titles were both voluntary and involuntary. Very rich women sacrificed cows and

gained the voluntary title "Ogbuefi". A woman could also be chosen for the involuntary title of "Ekwe".

Amadiume mentions that "Ekwe", the title bestowed by Goddess Idemili, though involuntary, in reality "had a strong association with a woman's economic abilities and charismatic attributes, real or potential." (42) "*Idi uchu*" or perseverance and industriousness and "*Ite uba*" or the pot of prosperity were the gifts women inherited from the powerful Goddess Idemili. (Amadiume 27) Idemili bestowed the title "Ekwe" on her chosen women – articulate women of charismatic personality – socially and economically well placed as a result of their own hard work and unparalleled enterprise. The most senior Ekwe titled woman, Agba Ekwe, possessed vetoing rights in the town assembly. Though the power of the Ozo titled man could be challenged, the position of the Agba Ekwe was never disputed. That the office of the Agba Ekwe was neither banned nor usurped by Igbo patriarchy deserves attention. G. T. Basden, the early 20th century missionary, cites the "president" of the "Women's Committee" being installed with "regal ceremony" and "symbolic crowning" and being conferred the title of "Omu" (Queen). To Basden this title remains "a courtesy title" for "the 'Omu' is never the wife of a king." He fails to realize that this title appreciating undaunted womanhood did not need to be the appendage of a masculine title. (*Niger Ibos* 210)

Praise titles, praise songs and praise chants celebrating different aspects of womanhood formed an amazing Igbo cultural feature: "Chieme began to chant in praise of the girls." (Adimora-Ezeigbo 64)

Women and Age-grades

Igbo culture nurtured an amazing cultural phenomenon, the 'age grade.' Moving beyond political, social and economic compartmentalization, children born within stipulated one-year periods belonged to particular age groups, groups demarcated along gender lines. (Basden, *Among The Ibos Of Nigeria* 72) To quote from Maduka's essay "Age Grade Factor in Igbo Tradition of Politics": "Age grade system as a social leveller brings to equilibrium all classes of people, position and wealth..." (64) The bonds of solidarity were forged from very childhood with each age grade growing up together with specific social and cultural obligations. In later life the age grades also assumed political, social and economic power together. Fostering a spirit of togetherness through active socialization, creating a mark of cultural identity, age grades went on to become tools

for producing effective leadership and powerful political pressure groups. Age grades also served as remarkable community welfare organizations.

Perhaps such powerful bonds among women might have been responsible for the creation of all-women organizations at the grass root level. Perhaps this solidarity among women forged from very childhood also made the concept of polygamous marriage acceptable to most Igbo women. Jealousy and rivalry inevitably existed among the wives of the same man. Huge differences in age between men and their junior wives made understanding and communication between spouses difficult. Nevertheless nurturing and caring sisterly bonds between co-wives seemed more the rule than the exception, thereby questioning the monogamous, Christian, western concept of marriage as the only valid system of human relationships.

Bride Price, Marriage, Divorce, Re-marriage, *Nkusi*

Marriage being the most important institution of the Igbo cultural cosmos, the settling of the "bride-price" became an elaborate ritual: "...Akueke's bride-price was finally settled at twenty bags of cowries." (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 66) The ritual *Uri* initiated the would-be- bride's long familiarization visit to her in-laws place. The bride's father hosted an elaborate feast the day the final installment of the bride price was paid; the palm wine for the celebration was sponsored by the groom. "Bride-price" can thus perhaps be seen as a latent means of meeting lavish marriage expenditures.

The final Igbo marriage rite was the confession rite *Isa-ifi*. The 'Association of Daughters' questioned the bride-to-be, in the presence of the clan head, about her sexual integrity from the day of her engagement: "How many men have lain with you since my brother first expressed the desire to marry you?" (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 120) Perhaps the vestal status of a bride was not a pre-requisite for marriage in the Igbo cultural ethos though virginity remained highly prized. In spite of public humiliation, pre-marital loss of virginity did not result in annulment of marriage. One needs to remember that the European obsession with female chastity compelled both unwed and married women to succumb to the ignominious chastity belt, the grossest infringement on human rights, in utter violation of the essence of a woman, undreamt of in "wild", "barbaric", "uncivilized", "black" Africa.

The much-maligned custom of "bride price" allowed married women to exercise choice. One needs to commend any society which respects the sacred right to choice of an individual, and especially so a non-

European society, blatantly defined and measured by western value systems and judged to be grossly patriarchal, which recognizes the right to choice of a woman.

Perhaps the custom of "bride price" can also be interpreted as a cultural infrastructure designed to act as a safety valve allowing women the path of return/divorce. Emecheta shows the return of "bride price" by Nnu Ego's father as a proud step to provide his daughter an alternative from a difficult marriage: "It was with pride that Nwokocho Agbadi returned the twenty bags of cowries to his former son-in-law and he even added a live goat as a token of insult." (39) Igbo patriarchy also provided women with the chance of re-marriage.

In Igbo patriarchy *Nkusi* or the levirate system of marriage prevailed; the younger brother or sometimes the eldest son of a deceased man could inherit his wives. The concerned wife however exercised some choice; if she happened to be exceptionally talented or beautiful, her radius of choice could be extended to include any male member of the clan. In Igbo patriarchy where land rights were communal in nature and clan owned, this inheriting of wives, reflected their status as economic assets in a society largely dependent on labour intensive subsistence agricultural practices. It could also be a subterfuge of patriarchy whereby these wives would continue to perpetuate the male lineage.

Igbo widows were expected to wear sackcloth and sit in the ashes of the hearth for four market weeks, a total of sixteen days. After a year of harsh traditions however the widow was entitled to an independent life style. She was allowed to remarry according to the *Nkushi* tradition. She could however choose to remain a widow and retain her single status.

Wife Battering and Redressal

Wife battering in Igbo patriarchy had sound redressals; battered women could approach the reconciliatory law courts as envisaged in the revered masked ancestral spirits, the *Egwugwu* or the all-women organizations. In *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, Achebe shows the *Egwugwu* trying to arbitrate disturbed marriage relations, to uphold harmonious family structures while simultaneously bestowing justice to the aggrieved party. In colonial and post colonial Nigeria however, women accept their battering in silence. Interestingly, domestic violence in so-called civilized, present day Western societies seems to have crossed all limits.

Re-learning the Past: Igbo Women's Organizations

Many patriarchal African tribal societies surprise with their unerring focus on gender complementarity. In tribal Igbo society, very powerful, very vocal, all women organizations manifesting amazingly strong female bonds existed. What better instance of female solidarity in Africa when the present day much clichéd phrase "women's lib" was unheard of in Can-Euro-America? These bodies acted as instruments of social consensus providing socio-familial as also politico-economic support to the members. An all-women body would naturally understand the problems of women better.

Amadiume highlights the power wielded by women in the central political structure. Officiating in both male and female capacities, through three all women organizations, Association of Wives, Association of Daughters and the Women's Council, each having the right to demonstrate, if necessary strike; Igbo women in traditional society commanded huge respect.

Association of Daughters

The very powerful Association of Patrilineage Daughters, the *Umu okpu*, looked after the interests of daughters as opposed to wives, inculcating the vital role of ritual specialists: "...dealing with confessions of infidelity or adultery by wives, and cleansing the patrilineage of pollutions and abominations..." (Amadiume 16) The Igbo flexibility of gender construction allowed this organization to be a male policing force curbing excessive power of the patrilineage wives.

Amadiume mentions the remarkable wedding gift the *nkwu ana* or palm tree pointed out by father to daughter which ensured the continuation of the father-daughter relationship even after the daughter leaves the patrilineage for her marital home.

Adimora-Ezeigbo also mentions *Umuada*, or the Association of Daughters "the watchdog of the community, the guardian of tradition" catering to physical, emotional, intellectual, as also economic, social and familial well being of women. (Adimora-Ezeigbo 37)

Association of Wives

The central position of wives in the Igbo subsistence economy made them a powerful presence. Patrilineage wives also exerted immense control over marriage and fertility rituals. Amadiume mentions *Inyom di* or the Association of Patrilineage Wives as monitoring the interests of wives. This Association organized innovative strikes: "... demands usually included the repair of dangerous roads, sanctions on those who

maltreated their wives, and on youths who harassed young girls... if lineage men proved stubborn, wives went on strike ... they would refuse to cook for or have sexual intercourse with their husbands." (65)

Adimora-Ezeigbo also speaks of *Alutaradi* or the Association of Wives as cross checking and controlling the excesses of a patriarchal cult: "... we organized the women against Egwuagu when he unjustly drove his wife away ... We descended on him like a swarm of bees, with the full intent to sting sense into him. We turned ourselves into human litter, occupying every available space in his large ngwuru. A day later, he indicated his willingness to talk with his in-laws." (52)

The Women's Council

Amadiume also shows the existence of a Women's Council in her hometown Nnobi, *Inyom Nnobi*, which stood for all women. The representatives to this council, articulate women of charismatic personality, dared speak fearlessly on behalf of the women they represented. This institution "dealt exclusively with matters concerning women." (66) The Igbo power hierarchy could take no decision on women related issues without its consent. Its extensive range of duties included reviewing the amount of "bride price" at periodic intervals. The strikes organized by the Women's Council were equally successful and notorious: "The strongest weapon the Council had and used against the men was the right to order mass strikes and demonstrations by all women. ... Nothing short of the fulfillment of their demands would bring them back; but, by all indications, their demands were never unreasonable." (Amadiume 67)

The existence of such powerful women's organizations involved in protecting women from the atrocities of bad husbands, in-laws, sometimes boycotting, sometimes ostracizing such families, helping members at times of distress both morally and economically, lending support for familial activities when members needed to travel or trade or immerse in urgent political or other matters – was and is unimaginable in Can-Euro-America.

Even Basden, the missionary-anthropologist in *The Niger Ibos*, categorically mentions that each Igbo village had a "Women's Committee or Club". He mentions that this Committee "legislates for the women independently of the men", it "cannot be ignored or lightly treated" and in cases involving both men and women it is asked to tender an "opinion" or "a suggestion of procedure" to reach "an acceptable settlement". This Committee formed of "influential women" is cited as

wielding “considerable power” especially in “women’s affairs and market control”. (*Niger Ibos* 209-210) The existence of such women’s organizations shatters the myth of Euro-America being the progenitor of women’s lib.

Militant Igbo Women and “The Women’s War”

The militant nature of Igbo women resulted in mass demonstrations, both peaceful and if necessary violent and caught the colonial British government off guard. Sporadic angry riots by protesting women finally led to open war with the colonial British government in 1929, the war famed in Nigerian history as the Women’s War of 1929. The white colonial government was stunned: “...the women were rebellious and rioting all over the place, with a militancy unfamiliar to White men.” (Amadiume 13) As early as 1939, Leith-Ross in *African Women*, a colonial study of the southern Igbo provinces, had questioned the stereotypical negative image of the African woman. A Victorian puritan, Leith-Ross disapproved of the money making zeal of Igbo women but could not help appreciating their common sense, their amazing energy and their charismatic leadership qualities: “...this rare and invaluable force, thousands upon thousands of ambitious, go-ahead, courageous, self-reliant, hardworking, independent women ...” (qtd. in Amadiume 14) Hence her suggestion to the colonial British government of Nigeria was a potent warning against inviting the enmity of these vibrant women.

The concept of organized female protest against exploitative power structures was thus not a new phenomenon in Igboland. “Militant feminism” as Amadiume categorically points out although “a comparatively new phenomenon” and “the monopoly of an elitist few” in the Western world remained a “constant reality for women in traditional Igbo societies.” (10)

The colonial government in unholy connivance with colonized men successfully eroded these women friendly cultural institutions and traditions. In the colonial state the Igbo woman lost her traditional politico-public as also socio-economic power positions. Unfortunately this legacy thrives in the present day post-colonial nation state of Nigeria.

Amadiume attempts to unearth the self empowered position enjoyed by the Igbo woman in the traditional tribal milieu. Her urgent attempt to relocate the Igbo woman in the correct historical perspective involves re-writing indigenous histories, appropriating pre-colonial symbols and mythologies, and amplifying where possible, the voices of women themselves. Her unearthing of indigenous roots for women’s

movements challenges the powerful assumption that women's activism in the post colonial world could only be inspired by its western counterparts. It is time contemporary nation states realized that such moves to recover aspects of the pre-colonial past are indeed urgent. It is only through the unearthing and re-establishment of such gender friendly, grass-root cultural institutions and traditions could one create a more equitable, more just world order.

ENDNOTES

This article forms a part of my ongoing comparative study on two tribal communities, the Igbos of South East Nigeria and the Lepchas of North East India. My publications in this field of study are enumerated as under:

- Bhattacharji, Shreya. "Foregrounding the Margin: Traditional Value Systems of Lepchas of India and Igbos of Nigeria". *Performing Identities: Celebrating Indigeneity in the Arts*. Ed. G. N. Devy et al. India and UK: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015.
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