Power and Powerlessness of Women in West African Orality

edited by
Raoul Granqvist & Nnadozie Inyama

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Raoul Granqvist & Nnadozie Inyama (eds.)

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Introduction

The idea of a book of essays on West African women's oral literature was first mooted at the Chinua Achebe symposium in February 1990, at Nsukka, Nigeria. Many of the papers dwelt on the image and role of women in contemporary African literature with, of course, particular attention to their inscriptions in Achebe's fiction. We felt, however, that the images of women as they have been presented by both African men and women writers and critics would benefit from being complemented, fragmented and tested and that a useful, albeit complex, site for this inquiry could be West African oral representations of the female.

It is quite evident that such female socio-cultural bonds and experiences have been overlooked by the literary institutions. This book is an attempt to problematize this culture-specific field of gender studies. We are aware that the scholarship contained in this book (with two male editors and an overwhelming majority of male contributors) is unabashedly male oriented: consequently the whole project must also be viewed in a self-reflexive (-critical) light. However, limitations of perspective do not necessarily damn the views, nor the book project. Provocatively, we claim that they might even enlarge it.

We have focussed on a small region of the African continent; most of the material dealt with comes from the Igbo people, one of Nigeria's major ethnic groups. But substantial broad references are also made to sources and literatures from beyond the area.

One striking point which a number of essays highlight, and which seems to contradict, emphatically, the conventionally accepted folklore-male image of woman as a threat or a mystery, is the aspect of moderation and balance that informs her world. Folklore embodies the perennial debate and conflict about male-female existence or relationships, but also the quest for peace, harmony and joy—and separation or gender exclusion. Obviously some segments of masculinity betray man's nebulous fear and anxiety in the face of the power he has often associated with his female partner and from which he has sought to distance himself. It is as if he experienced himself overwhelmed and consumed by confident and aggressive femaleness, when this very quality has the potential of improving both his lot and that of society.
In the introductory essay Chukwuma Azuonye examines two major categories of Igbo oral narratives, *akuko-ifọ* and *akulu-ala*, the former comprising tales of the imaginary world, the latter tales of the realistic world. But what is striking is that two diametrically opposed images of womanbeing emerge from these tales: *akuko-ala* being informed by female centrality and *akuko-ifọ* by the idea of female powerlessness. In his analysis of this paradox, Azuonye offers different answers; one parameter of explanation involves the imposition of western colonialism on gender relations so differently organized. What happened was, according to Azuonye, that "the images of male power which the colonial regime offered thus appear to have fallen into the hands of male-chauvinist propagandists in Igbo culture as instruments for a radical transformation of age-old archetypes governing gender relations."

The following three chapters, by Christine Ohale, Afam N. Ebeogu and Ambrose Monye, work from the field collections of extant folk songs and poetry. Outside analyses of the technicalities of composition, they reveal that much of the satirical songs about women are produced by women and that these songs are aimed at the regulation and stabilization of female conduct. Folk songs inform us also that women are more powerful and effective in the preservation of conventional order and morality than is generally perceived. On the other hand, a great deal of the "restrictions" of female freedom are initiated by the women themselves through their satirical songs. In Ebeogu's analysis, child-birth songs become more than mere celebratory lyrics; through them women declare their integrity and superiority to the males as upholders of society.

Chidi Okonkwo contests in his essay the notion of negative stereotyping as the dominant image of women in the folktales from the West African sub-region. The predominance of this notion he attributes to a critical failure to analyse folk tales in proper detail. Basing his study on Herskovits' *Dahomean Narrative*, he asserts that "the portrayal of women in traditional ... African folklore is more balanced and complex than is generally recognized." He goes on to say that "the relationship between men and women is not exactly that between superior and inferior, master and slave, or that between proprietor and chattel, though there is something of these in it. It is primarily a love-hate relationship between two partners, one of whom is recognized as superior
... in certain areas of life." But the ultimate conclusion he draws from his study is that the true image of women in West African folklore (especially in the folktale genre) "encodes all the prejudices and denigrations which women are subjected to, but also highlight women's peculiar strengths and virtues. ... Ironically god-like in her totality, she is not just a destroyer: she is also a maker, a creator."

Damian U. Opata arrives substantially at a similar conclusion through his analysis of an Igbo proverb. Once again, the tense ambiguity in Igbo perception of womanhood is stressed: the woman is at the same time both a creative source and above all an object of dread.

Nnadozie Inyama's concluding article looks at the uses and adaptations which contemporary West African writers have made of a well-known cautionary tale. He concludes that the non-conforming girl of the folktale is used by these writers to express a variety of points of view which may even be relevant, he suggests, for a feminist argumentation.

Raoul Granqvist / Nnadozie Inyama
Chukwuma Azuonye

POWER, MARGINALITY AND WOMANBEING IN IGBO ORAL NARRATIVES

Introduction

It seems appropriate to begin with a brief note on the word, "woman-being," which appears in the title of this paper. The word was coined by the organizers of the 17th annual conference of the African Literature Association held in New Orleans in March, 1991, and it figured prominently in the phrasing of the theme of the conference – "Nwanyibu: Womanbeing in African Literature." In their notes on this theme, the organizers described "womanbeing" as a rough English rendering of the Igbo catch phrase, nwanyibu, a phrase which literally translates into either "woman is [something]" or "woman is carrying [something]," depending on where the diacritical marks are placed. And, in its full form, Nwanyibuife, the phrase is an Igbo proverb-name which calls to mind the major female character in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) and all she stands for from a feminist point of view. Looking back now at the issues tabled and discussed at the conference, it seems to me that the African Literature Association could not have chosen a more appropriate source, in African languages and cultures, for the catch phrase of its theme. So great indeed is the diversity of folk images of women, and the complexity of gender relations, in the social life and culture of the twenty million Igbo people of south-eastern Nigeria that, one can say, without any exaggeration, that we can find

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1 This paper was originally presented at a public lecture delivered at the Livingston College, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, U.S.A., under the auspices of the Livingston College, Livingston Student Center, Rutgers International Programs, Africana Studies Department and Douglas College, on April 20, 1992. I am grateful to Dr Joyce Penfield for creating the forum for this presentation.

2 With a subscript dot on the final vowel /bu/, Nwaanyibuife means 'woman is [something],' while without any dot, it means 'woman is carrying [something].'
in that culture just about anything there is to be said about women as
human beings and social actants.

In 1929, Igbo women organized and successfully carried through a
revolt against the British colonial government which led to the com-
missioning, by that regime, of two studies of Igbo women's organiza-
tions, namely Sylvia Leith-Ross's *African Women: A Study of the Igbo
of South-Eastern Nigeria* (1939) and Margaret Green's *Igbo Village
Affairs* (1947). In his preface to the first of these studies (Leith-Ross,
1939), the then colonial governor-general of Nigeria, Lord Frederick
Lugard, was forced to make the following observations about the Igbo
woman:

She is ambitious, self-reliant, hard-working and independent ... she
claims full equality with the opposite sex and would seem indeed
to be the dominant partner. The women's councils3 (approved and
trusted by men) enact laws for the protection of crops and enforce
them by suitable penalties – including ridicule.

Yet, from a more superficial observation, it is quite easy to see the
exact opposite: an overriding male-chauvinist and patriarchal society
in which women appear to be dominated by their menfolk and confined
to subservient rôles as part of a cartel of "slave wives" in a
predominantly polygamous environment. The paradox is indeed
striking, and nowhere else, in Igbo traditional arts, is it more eloquently
portrayed than in Igbo oral narratives.

There are two major categories of narrative in the Igbo oral tradi-
tion. These are *akuko-ifo* and *akuko-ala*. *Akuko-ala* comprises tales of
the order of myths, legends and personal narratives which are told as
true accounts of past events, while *akuko-ifo* comprises tales of the
imaginary world, including animal tales, tales of the human world,
tales of the spirit world and tales of the undivided world of humans.

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3 A typical example of such women's council is the *Omu* society among the Igbo
west of the Niger (see Okonjo, 1987), which, under its powerful queen-mother con-
stitutes an alternative government for women's affairs, at a higher level of social
organization, in communities in which it exists. At a lower level of social organiza-
tion, every Igbo community has a women's council, called *Umuada* (daughters of
the land), comprising all married women, including those married outside the
community. This council wields enormous powers in matters affecting the
enforcement of customary laws, especially those connected with marriages,
funerals and man-woman relationships.
spirits, animals, deities and personified forces of nature, which are told
for entertainment and instructive purposes. Since the turn of the cen-
tury, many collections of both categories of tales have been made and
studied from a wide range of perspectives (see References below). I
have myself been involved in the collection and study of various types
of akuko-ala, especially their crystallization into verse forms such as
the epic (see Azuonye, 1983, 1990 and 1992). But, more recently, I have
been preoccupied with gathering materials for a type- and motif-index
of Igbo folktales. One of the most fascinating aspects of the series of
thematic studies which have emanated from this larger project is the
paradoxical view which the tales, taken together, present in their
representations of reality. Almost invariably, two diametrically opposed
images of the same subjects are presented which, at first sight, might
appear ambivalent and even mutually contradictory. But these
generally fall into place when closely examined in the light of relevant
cross-bearings from ethnography, archaeology, linguistics and history.
The present paper is concerned with one such paradox, namely the dual
image of womanbeing which the tales present. While akuko-ala is
overwhelmingly informed by the idea of dominant female power and
centrality in all aspects of Igbo life and culture, akuko-ifọ is informed by
the idea of female powerlessness and marginality. This paradox clearly
calls for interpretation. In attempting such an interpretation in this
paper, the images and motifs presented in the tales will be discussed in
the light of known facts of Igbo life, culture and history, and due
account will be taken of the significance of the use of akuko-ala (tales
told as true) as the main vehicle for images of female power and
centrality and akuko-ifo (tales of the imagination) as the main vehicle
for images of female powerlessness and marginality.

**Power, centrality and womanbeing in Akuko-ala**

The term akuko-ala comprises two words – akuko (tale) and ala (earth
or land). Primarily, therefore, akuko-ala means "tales of the earth" or
"tales of the land." It is, however, worth noting that the meanings and
implications of ala, in this term, go well beyond its primary denota-
tions. In addition to referring to the physical earth and to land as an
econom ic pr op er ty (i.e. as resid entia l e state o r fa rm land ), it embraces a
whole range of key ideas in traditional Igbo politics, law, world view
and religion. First of all, it embraces the idea of a contiguous territory
or country occupied by a community or nation, in much the same way
as the word "land" is used in most languages as a synonym for "father-
land," "motherland," "homeland" or "nation." Secondly, it embraces the
idea of the earth goddess, Ala, which, at the higher metaphysical level,
symbolizes and personifies the pattern of eternal relationships per-
ceived by the Igbo to exist between human beings and the earth from
which they are believed to have sprung, from which they draw their
sustenance, in which dwell generations of their ancestors, and to
which, in the Igbo view of human existence as an everlasting cycle of
birth and rebirth (Azuonye, 1989), they are expected to return on death.
In her connections with birth, fertility, sustenance and death as a
gateway to the land of spirits whence individuals are believed to be
reborn, life after life, to continue the eternal cycle of existence, the Igbo
earth goddess, Ala, like her counterparts in many other mythological
traditions, is represented as a woman. She is not only the mother-
goddess that nurtures all creation, she is also seen as the source and
custodian of the sacred laws of communal co-existence known as
omenaala (lit. that which is done in the land or on the earth) or iwuala
(lit. laws of the earth) which hold human beings together in society and
regulate their relationships with the higher supernatural powers. Thus,
in the idea of omenaala, the meaning of Ala is extended to, and
combines, key metaphysical ideas in the culture with the concepts of
natural law and the social contract. Any breach of these sacred rules of
human co-existence, known as nso-ala (what the earth abhors) or
mmeru-ala (profanation of the earth), is believed to be visited by the
divine justice of the almighty goddess, Ala.

It seems clear, from the foregoing, that at least four distinct catego-
ries of akuko-ala can be distinguished in the Igbo oral tradition. The
first comprises tales about the physical earth, i.e. the earth as a geolo-
gical or geographical phenomenon. These tales are usually concerned
with the separation of the earth from the sky, the origins of the
physical features of the earth, such as hills, rivers and other
geomorphological features, and the origins and ordering of human and
plant life. The second comprises tales about land as a political and
economic heritage. Among these are accounts of the origins, migrations and settlement of the founders of various communities or nations on the piece of land claimed by their ancestors. This corpus invariably includes tales about boundary and land disputes and other issues connected with contested space. Similar accounts pertaining to smaller social formations, down to the family, are also regarded as akuko-ala. The third comprises tales about heroes as the defenders of the territorial integrity of the land and of the security and honor of its inhabitants. Finally, we have tales about the earth goddess herself and about the origins and other matters connected with the customs and laws of the land believed to be superintended by her.

Although, I have earlier defined the various types of akuko-ala with reference to myth and legend, I hesitate to use these terms, because no type can be unequivocally described as myth or legend in the western sense of these words. However, strictly for comparative purposes, tales about ala as the physical earth and as omenaala (the customs of the land) may be said to belong largely to the order of creation and local myths respectively while tales about ala as political and economic inheritance – the fatherland or landed property – can be said to belong largely to the order of ancestral and heroic legends respectively.

Now to the tales themselves, beginning with the mythical types. I have already referred to the power and centrality accorded to the earth-goddess, Ala, in Igbo mythology and iconography. Needless to say, the idea of an all-powerful mother-goddess that nurtures all creation is a fairly universal and archetypal motif; but akuko-ala seems to go beyond this universal archetype. Recent revaluations of the dominant motifs of Igbo oral narratives (Echeruo, 1979; Arazu, 1982; Nwoga, 1984; and Azuonye, 1987), have turned up evidence to show that Ala, in the Igbo pantheon, is not just one of numerous major deities, but, in fact, the supreme God of Igbo religion. The evidence before us suggests that, prior to the emergence of the male, sky-dwelling God, Chukwu, currently regarded as the supreme God of the Igbo, especially in Christian theological discourse and worship, the power and supremacy of Ala was considered to be absolute.

It is, of course, difficult – in any post-colonial discourse – to reach out with any degree of certainty to the true realities of patterns of culture which have been so grossly disturbed and transformed for many dec-
ades by an alien over-culture. But, looking at various tales which refer
to the earth-goddess, Ala, and the male sky-god, Chukwu, one can see
a clear pattern in their respective recession and evolution as supreme
deities. The primeval supremacy of Ala is suggested by two myths
which are widespread throughout Igboland. One celebrates the triumph
of the sky (Igwe) over the earth (Ala) while the other recounts the
struggle over seniority which is believed to have prevailed before the
triumph of the male principle over the pre-existent female principle (see
Azuonye, 1987). This triumph is represented, in various tales, as
resulting in the emergence of the idea of igwe-ka-ala (Sky-that-is-
greater-than-the-earth) in Igbo religion. It would appear that, prior to
this point in the evolution of Igbo mythology, the idea of a supreme
deity called Chukwu was either absent or still evolving. As suggested in
the title of Nwoga’s (1984) monograph on these patterns of cultural
evolution, Chukwu, is in fact a “stranger” – or more appropriately "a
newcomer" – to the earlier Igbo religious system of thought which was
dominated by a strongly matrifocal conception of the supreme deity.
The strong matriarchal foundations of Igbo culture have been ably
demonstrated by Amadìume (1987 and 1988). Today, the Igbo culture
area is a complex of patriarchies punctuated here and there by a few
resilient matriarchies (e.g. Ohafia, in Nsugbe, 1974) and double-descent
social formations (e.g. Afikpo, in Ottenberg, 1968); but, the
ethnohistorical data before us point to an earlier period when the
society was presumably almost uniformly matriarchal, when, as
hypothesized by Nsugbe (1974) with reference to the surviving
matriarchy of the formerly warlike Ohafia Igbo, men spent so much
time in the bush gathering, hunting and fighting that women were left
in absolute control of farming and all organizational matters in the
community.

The emergence, in central Igboland, of the Nri Kingdom and he-
geomony at the turn of the present millennium (Onwuejeogwu, 1981),
seems to be associated with what Echeruo (1979) describes as "the crisis
in our social institutions" which is deemed to have brought about the
current transformation. Looking skyward, possibly under the influence
of Niger-Benue confluence traditions, including perhaps Islam (see
Azuonye, 1987), the Nri created the male sky-god, Chukwu, combining
the idea of igwe-ka-ala (sky-that-is-greater-than-the-earth) with the
Igbo idea of a divine power of life, \textit{chi}, associated with cosmic light and energy and which is believed to be immanent in all living things as their personal gods. Thus, the idea of \textit{Chi-ukwu} (great or supreme \textit{chi}) which the Nri created seems to be a logical extension of the philosophy of \textit{chi}, and it seems to have caught on, given the remarkable success of the completely new mythological pattern that issued from it. Indeed, the history of the Nri, which is fairly well-documented, is one dominated by the efforts of the \textit{Eze-Nri} (the Priest-Kings of the Nri) and their missionary cohorts who travelled far and wide throughout Igboland and beyond to propagate this new supreme deity. But, the emergent idea of a male supreme god would not have succeeded had the Nri not recognized and appropriated traditional ideas associated with the power and centrality of the earth-goddess its creation. They cleverly created a happy marriage of earth and sky, in a dual construction of a male godhead, \textit{Chukwu}, which as a symbol of both the feminine principles of "fertility" and "creativity" in the universe, seems to exist to promote the will, and to function with the power, of the earth-goddess. As explained by Onwuejeogwu (1983: 4):

\begin{quote}
Chukwu (from \textit{chi} ukwu) is the creator of all things, with four manifestations of his existence. First, \textit{Chukwu} is \textit{Anyanwu}, in a symbolic meaning of "the sun"; as the sun's light is everywhere so is Chukwu's presence everywhere manifested; as the sun, so is \textit{Chukwu} all powerful, and as the sun's light reveals things so is \textit{Chukwu} the source of knowledge. Secondly, \textit{Chukwu} is \textit{Agbala}, the fertility of the earth and the beings that inhabit it. Thirdly, \textit{Chukwu} is \textit{okike}, creator of everything visible and invisible and of the laws that govern them. These laws are neither good nor bad, but simply enable things to work. Good and evil are the products of invisible beings or forces, \textit{alusi}. \textit{Alusi}, the invisible creations of \textit{Chukwu}, are the "beings" or "forces" that manipulate the hidden laws to shower good or evil onto the visible world of man.
\end{quote}

With the decline of the power of the Nri, between the 16th and 19th centuries, the emergence of the new priestocratic oligarchy of the slave-dealing Aro of Arochukwu, who live in the extreme south-eastern corner of the Cross River area of Igboland, a new citadel of the male supreme God, \textit{Chukwu}, was found. The new \textit{Chukwu} of the Aro was however not so new. It was a crude appropriation of the humane and enlightened idea of \textit{Chukwu} created by the great Nri civilization for
what is essentially a blood-thirsty and terrorist war-god, *Ibritam*, which the Ibibio part of the mixed Igbo-Ibibio-Ekoi ancestors of the Aro are said to have brought with them during their immigration into what came to be known as Arochukwu⁴ (see Dike and Ekejiuba, 1978). But the Aro failed to understand the secret of the success of the Nri idea of Chukwu. They failed to incorporate the idea of *Ala* into the construction of the new godhead and so had to rely more on terrorist tactics and deception to win votaries for the god than on faith and trust as in the case of the Nri. Not surprisingly, the great *Chukwu* of the Aro quickly came into disrepute.

By the time of the arrival of the Christian missionaries in Igboland, in the middle of the 19th century, neither the Nri nor the Aro versions of Chukwu had gained sufficient foothold to completely displace the earth-goddess in power and supremacy. Indeed, the earliest Christian missionaries and European ethnographers in the Igbo area report that most members of the indigenous population questioned by them about the existence of a supreme god of the kind favored by Judaeo-Christian theology, denied the existence of any such entity. *Ala* was still supreme in most parts of the society. But, sure enough, the myth of Chukwu was afloat and the name was soon seized upon and adopted by the Christian missionaries as the name for their own God. Thus, today, Chukwu reigns in the church as the Igbo equivalent of Jehovah and is acknowledged as supreme God in the oral tradition into which the idea was fed back from its Christian appropriation. But a careful analysis of Igbo tales will reveal strident voices of dissent.

Many tales which I have examined in detail elsewhere (Azuonye, 1987), represent *Chukwu* either as a stupid ogre or a capricious monster. That these tales refer to the *Chukwu* of the Aro oracle is made plain in some tales in which Arochukwu is specifically mentioned (e.g. the first tale in Ogbalu, 1966). And there are proverbs which persist in asserting the supremacy of the earth goddess. According to one such proverb, a wellerism, recorded by a Catholic priest, Raymond Arazu (1984), *Chukwu si na okika ana ka ya anahu eme ya ihere, "Chukwu

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⁴ The precise meaning of this name is obscure. If, as is probably the case, the word *Aro* (more correctly *Aru*) means 'spear,' then *Aru Chukwu* can be glossed as 'The Spear of God,' a gloss which, it is significant to note, recalls the title of Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* (Heinemann, 1964) in which an Igbo community, like the Aro, creates its own common oracular deity as a symbol of its unity and power.
said that the supremacy of Ala over him does not make him ashamed of himself." And, in some ritual invocations recorded by another catholic priest, Anthony Echigbe (1987), Ala is still today invoked before Chukwu, in various parts of Igbo land, a liturgical convention which indicates seniority. In short, the mythic unconscious recognition of the supremacy of the earth goddess has not quite disappeared from the Igbo psyche despite several centuries of Nri, Aro and currently Christian missionary propaganda in favor of her male counterpart. The persistence of this mythic unconscious recognition of the inalienable power and supremacy of Ala seems to be tied up with the wholesale survival of a whole range of female forces to which – in relation to their male counterparts – Igbo mythology ascribes absolute or co-equal power.

The first of these powerful female forces will be found in Igbo creation mythology. The Igbo creator is a twin-deity, Chi na Eke, which comprises a male principle, Chi (divine power of life) and a female principle, Eke (divine power of creation). Although the name of this deity has now been expropriated by Christianity and re-interpreted as Chi na-eke (the Chi that creates), its original meaning has survived in traditional rites and invocations in which its duality is eloquently proclaimed and sometimes expatiated upon. The male aspect, Chi, is associated with cosmic light represented by the light of the sun (Anyaanwu) which is commonly worshipped separately as a male-deity, Anyaanwu. The female aspect, Agbala, is – as earlier observed – associated with the earth’s fertility and is, of course, even more commonly than the former worshipped separately as the earth deity, Ala. Thus, in ritual invocations, one comes across the name, Anyaanwu-na-Agbala. This is one of the key Igbo mythical formulations of the co-equality and co-evality of the male and female principles of life. The life-giving power of Chi is nothing without the creating power of Eke, nor would Eke create anything without the light-giving power of chi. There is perhaps a biological basis for this mythological conception of reality. The sperm is the life-bearing power which emanates from the male while the ovum is the life-forming mass which emanates from the female. Both must be together and act together before life can be formed. But such reductionism tends to remove the spark and mystery from mythological images. Nevertheless, the logic seems clear enough
and has clear implications for an understanding of what I see as an ingrained feminist consciousness in Igbo culture.

If it takes the two forces of gender to create life in the verifiable facts of experience – the phenomenal – then, it must take the combined efforts of the male and female essences of the divine to create life in the absolute metaphysical sense. Igbo mythology, therefore, has nothing comparable to an Eve created from the rib of an Adam as "a help meet for him," nor any concept of an original sin emanating "from man's first disobedience" provoked by an ingrained female evil which has to be expiated eternally through eternal female suffering and subjugation. Rather, believing that male and female beings have been called into this world by a twin-deity equally composed of male and female forces, and believing that gender is complementary, Igbo culture has evolved a system in which men and women are neither equal nor unequal but in which, like the twin-deity, Chi na Eke, they constitute equal and counterbalanced forces standing in complementary relationship to one another and playing complementary roles in social affairs, with each supreme in hers or his own domain.

It is not clear which came first, but this duality in the conception of gender relations is reflected in traditional Igbo thought in which, as many writers have observed, reality is perceived in terms of the parallelism of equal and opposite forces (see Aniakor, 1988, for a fuller discussion). This dualism is summed up in the proverb, Ife kwulu, ife akwudebe ya, "Wherever something stands, something else stands beside it." By insisting on things standing side by side, this philosophy precludes the idea of hierarchies or chains of beings of the kind found in feudal or other types of class societies. Rather, everything is seen as coming in counterbalanced pairs of equal and opposite forces. For instance, society is seen as oha-na-eze, "the people and the king." Neither the people nor the king is deemed to be superior or supreme over the other. As stated in a proverbial palindrome, oha nwe eze, eze nwe oha, "the people own the king and the king owns the people". Similarly, the people themselves are seen as comprising counterbalanced pairs of equal and opposite forces of gender – nwoke-na-nwaanyi, "male(ness) and female(ness)" – with no suggestion of supremacy in either of the two components. Given this outlook, it is by no means surprising that pre-colonial Igbo society maintained a dual organization which still
persists to some degree even today, in which, through their exclusive societies, men control their own affairs, while, through their own exclusive societies headed by queen-mothers, eze-nwaanyi, women control their own affairs.\textsuperscript{5} But, the question may be posed: Why then is the Igbo society, today, not only patrilocal but visibly patriarchal and even male-chauvinist? This is the paradox that faces us in this paper.

So far I have been concerned with tales of the order of myth in the Igbo corpus of akuko-ala. Let us now go to tales of the order of legend in this corpus. We have identified two categories of such tales—tales about the origins of communities (ancestral legends) and tales about the heroes of the land (heroic legends).\textsuperscript{6}

Much of the evidence marshalled by Ifi Amadiume, in her \textit{Afrikan Matriarchal Foundations: The Igbo Case} (1987), has to do with the rôle of certain ancestral goddesses, like Idemili, in the foundation of various Igbo communities and the consequent predominance of rituals and festivals in honor of such ancestresses in the people’s culture. The Idemili legend, discussed at length in Amadiume’s books (1987 and 1988) and featured in Achebe’s \textit{Things Fall Apart} (1958), \textit{Arrow of God} (1964) and \textit{Anthills of the Savannah} (1987), is by no means, an isolated example. There are many other similar legends elsewhere in Igbo culture. A notable example is the legend of Iguedo (see Ekwealor, 1989) which attributes the origins of seven autonomous communities in the Anambra Local Government Area of Anambra State to the great Ancestress, Iguedo. Today, these seven communities are collectively known as Umu-Iguedo after this great mother-goddess. Where the origins of communities are not directly traced to an ancestress, a crucial rôle may be assigned to a woman in the course of the long journey from the original homeland to the new settlement. In the ancestral legend of the Abam group of communities (Azuonye, forthcoming), a woman, Ucha, is said to be responsible for the group’s departure from

\textsuperscript{5} Much has been written about men’s secret societies in south-eastern Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa. The exclusive women’s societies seem to be similarly constituted and to wield parallel powers and need to be studied as such before they completely disappear.

\textsuperscript{6} These tales are not exclusively heroic. They are probably better described as superman legends because they are concerned with supermen—heroes and villains—whose share identical superhuman traits and whose lives conform to the same archetypal pattern but whose actions affect the community differently, the former for better and the latter for worse.
Ibeku, where they had sojourned for sometime after their original movement from Benin through Andoni (Idoni). The group ultimately split into two – one settling midway, under the leadership of a man called Onyerhuubi, to form the Abam community while the other continues under the original leader of the group, Atita Ata Akpoo, to form the Ohafia community. Onyerhuubi's wife had given birth on the way, after which the woman expresses the desire that they settle in the area. The splitting of the group into Abam and Ohafia is attributed to a husband's respect for his wife's desire that they settle at a place where she had given birth. This legend is often cited as an explanation of the persistence of matriarchy among the Abam.

It is however in *akuko-ala* of the order of heroic legends that the freedom and power of action of women are most unambiguously portrayed. In Igbo heroic legends, women are assigned rôles of extraordinary activism and visibility ranging from direct participation in battles to the power to operate from the background as the supernatural props of their wayfaring sons. In general, these superhuman women are presented as holding the destinies of their husbands and sons in their calculating or loving hands.

One of the most remarkable features of the 18th century Igbo society presented by Olaudah Equiano in his autobiography (1789: 16-17) is the prominent rôle played by Igbo women warriors. According to Equiano:

Even our women are warriors, and march out boldly to fight along with men. Our whole district is a kind of militia. On a given signal, such as the firing of a gun at night, they all rise in arms and rush upon the enemy ... I was once a witness to a battle in our common. We had all been at work in it one day as usual, when our people were suddenly attacked. I climbed a tree at a distance, from which I beheld the fight. There were many women as well as men on both sides; among others, my mother was there and armed with a broad sword.

This testimony has elicited from historians and ethnographers a complex of responses ranging from cautious acceptance (Jones, 1967, in Afigbo, 1981) to outright rejection (Afigbo, 1981). According to Jones (1967: 66),
there are many recorded cases ... of Isuama Ibo villages which were smaller than their neighbors and which made up for their deficient man-power by encouraging their womenfolk to fight alongside their husbands in defence of their farmlands. This may have been more general in the eighteenth century and in Equiano’s area.

But Afigbo (1981: 157) is unconvinced, and writes:

There are enough documentary and oral records on Igbo warfare in the 19th century and early part of this century, but neither has any reference to women taking an active part in bloody wars occurred, except probably the one referred to [above] but not discussed in detail by Jones. Surely, Mr Jones's rationalization will not serve.

Afigbo's reason's for rejecting what he calls "Mr Jones's rationalization" is two-fold. First of all, he argues "if the kind of militarization of society described in Equiano really existed in the 18th century, it should have been possible to observe its effects in subsequent centuries." Secondly, he refers to an Igbo dichotomy between ogu okpiiri (war of clubs) and ogu egbe na mma (war of guns and matchets), and observes that "it is more likely that it is in the former type of fight that women could play a part." But, lacking access to them, Afigbo did not take into account the large corpus of oral legends and traditional epic narratives which have since been collected and which go a long way in upholding Equiano's observations. Let me illustrate by taking a sampling of legends from the oral epic tradition of the Ohafia Igbo of the Cross River area.7

The most popular of the epics which celebrate the doings of female warriors is the epic of Nne Mgbaafo. When the heroine's husband goes to war in Ibibioland and fails to return, Nne Mgbaafo dresses up like a male warrior and goes to the enemy territory to search for him. She boldly confronts the enemy, demanding death for herself or the release of her husband. The enemy decides to taunt her by asking her to go and search among the headless bodies of slain warriors with which the battleground is strewn. They watch with amazement as Nne Mgbaafo fearlessly turns over one headless body after another, looking for a scar on her husband's thigh by which she would have recognized him. Her

7 The summaries of the plots of the epics given here have been taken from Azuonye (1992).
courage impresses the enemy and searching among the war captives whom they are keeping for eventual sale into slavery, they discover her husband, Ndukwe Eme and release him to her. In other versions of the tale, Nne Mgbaafo discovers the headless body of her husband and single-handedly buries him and sacrifices the body of a man, whom she captures in the next village, on his grave.

Related to the epic of Nne Mgbaafo is the epic of Inyan Olugu. The heroine's husband is a coward and never-do-well in a heroic society in which social acceptability and respectability hinge on the winning of a human head in battle. Those who accomplish this feat are honored as *ufiem* (heroes) while those who do not are despised as *ujo* (cowards). The *ujo* was not only despised by his age-mates and by even children and slaves, he and all members of his family, especially his wife, were also subjected to excruciating deprivations. He was not allowed to take any titles, or to wear the prestigious *okara* cloth reserved for the lords of the land, and he was not allowed to own barns of yams; if he did, his age mates would from time to time raid the barn and confiscate all his yams in a ritual punishment known as *iri-ji-ujo* (eating the coward's yams). An *ujo* was not supposed to marry; but if he did, his wife would be subjected to constant humiliation by his fellow women. Should she put on any beautiful dress or cosmetics, her fellow women would arrest her and strip her naked publicly. This was so because the wife of an *ujo* was expected always to wear her hair short like a woman mourning for her husband, who, in the eyes of the heroic society, was as good as dead because of his uselessness to his people. Inyan Olugu is unable to bear this cycle of humiliations any longer, and so she decides to prod her husband into action. She challenges him to go and cut palm fruits for her on a piece of land then being contested with Ibibio neighbors. When her husband, who had been nick-named Itenta Ogbulopia (i.e. Small-pot, killer in fiddling), hesitates, the heroine packs away all her cooking utensils and sentences him to a term of starvation until he proved his manhood. Itenta is driven to go about begging for food, but when he realizes that he is now left with only two potentially fatal options – dying either shamefully of hunger or heroically in action – he decides to follow the bidding of his wife. As he climbs up the palm tree, the Ibibio enemy arrive at the scene, but from an ambush, Inyan Olugu fires at them killing five of them and sending the rest into flight. She
beheads the five dead men and gives their heads to her husbands who comes home with them to a victory dance for heroes. For her valor and resourcefulness, Inyan Olugu earns the praise-name, *ogbu-etuwui-di-ya* (She-that-killed-and-gave-the-honor-to-her-husband).

Among the epics in which women are given decisive rôles in the development of the plots are the epics of *Amoogu* and *Egbele*. In *Amoogu*, an unlikely hero performs a feat which enables his people, the Ohafia, to vanquish a small community of pot-makers who had subjected them to so much humiliation in the past. From an oracle, the Ohafia people had been told that they cannot vanquish Aliike until they are able to kill their short-armed dwarf who is so charged with charms that once he stands in front of his warriors his confers invincibility on them, and only a gun charged by a man sitting naked in a nest of soldier-ants can kill this invulnerable dwarf. All the great warriors of the land come forward and try, but fail. The hero, Amoogu, alone is able to accomplish this great feat. But his accomplishment arouses jealousy in the hearts of his comrades-in-arms and they conspire and kill him. At the end of the epic, Amoogu's mother acts as the instrument through which the dead hero's spirit takes his revenge on his assassins.

In other epics, the origins of customs and rituals are attributed to women. In the epic of *Egbele*, Nne Ucha Aruodo has lost her first three sons in battle and desperately tries to prevent her last born son, Egbele, from going to the wars and even turns him into a transvestite for a while. But, when the realities are made plain to Egbele by his uncle, Nna Ugoenyi, he is forced to pull off his female habits and accompany him to a battle where he succeeds in winning a head and taking a live captive. On hearing of the return of her son, Nne Ucha Aruodo bursts into a song of joy as she and her husband join their son's victory dance in the village square. At the end of one of the versions of this epic, the bard pauses to stress the fact that "it was from a woman's hands that the singing of war songs originated":

That is how the singing of war songs began.
It began from the hands of great mother Ucha Aruodo.
It was from a woman's hand that the singing of war songs began.
It was meant to be sung in their voice, so stop hearing your voice in it!  

But in the course of time it was taken away from them.

Today, the people of Abam perform the war dance;  
Today, the people of Ohafia Udumezhiema perform the war dance,  
But remember that it came from great mother Ucha Aruodo!  
(from Azuonye, forthcoming: Part V)

As mentioned above, Ohafia is one of the communities in Igboland in which very strong matrilineal structures still survive (Nsugbe, 1974). It is essentially a double-descent society, but the matrilineal ties are more strongly emphasized than the patrilineal ones. Thus, we find that, in every day religious rites, ancestral figures and heroes are invoked by associative epithets which refer to both their patriclans and their matriclans or to both their fathers and their mothers. But in this poetic declamation of double-descent ethos, in Ohafia Igbo oral epics, it is easy to see that greater emphasis is placed on matrilineal or maternal links, for when a hero is to be invoked by only one associative epithet, epithets which refer to his matriclan or to his mother are preferred.

But female activism and heroism is not confined to the legends and epics of warlike and matrilineal societies like Ohafia. In the monumental epics of the Anambra Igbo which take several days to perform (see Ezinando, 1978; Azuonye, 1990; Azuonye and Udechukwu, 1984; and Udechukwu, 1984), the heroes, though generally gargantuan and imbued with inborn magical powers, are portrayed as being so dependent on their witch grandmothers that they operate more or less like puppets whose strings are in the hands of those almighty grandmothers.

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8 It may be remarked here that the singer of this version of the tale of Egbele is Kaalu Igirigiri, the leading bard of the 1970's (d. 1980), whose soprano singing voice has the mellowness of a robust female voice. In interviews recorded by him in the field, Kaalu Igirigiri frequently eulogizes what he describes as the 'sweetness,' 'clarity' and 'audibility' of this kind of voice, offering it as the best type of voice for the singing of heroic tales (see Azuonye, 1990).

9 There are similar traditions attributing the origins many other traditional performances, now taken over and dominated by men, to women. For example, one myth has it that masking (now a male-dominated performance from which women are excluded), was originated by women from whom it was taken over by men when they began to use it to perpetrate evil doings in the society.
Other legends and epics, from other parts of Igboland, focus on women like Omu Okwei in Osomari on the Niger (Ekejiuba, 1960) and Ihejilemebi of Mbaise (see Nwoga, Ezinwanyi, 1986) who distinguish themselves in politics, trade and the professions or bestride the narrow world of puny males in other ways.

But, by far the most widespread body of legends on female power in Igbo culture refers to the pan-African figure of the mermaid and other female spirits of the same type. In many respects, the Igbo mermaid or, more appropriately, water-woman – nne mmiri or nwaanyi bi na mmiri – represents a collective anima: a dominating female image, which is both feared and desired by men. Representing female beauty in its ideal form, the water-woman also symbolizes the power of womankind to dominate and direct the passions, hopes, aspirations and achievements of man. Love and marriage involving the water-woman and a man is usually linked with material prosperity coupled with tragic circumstances, for union with this archetype of pristine female power presents the man with three options – wealth, longevity and children – out of which he must choose no more than two. To choose wealth and longevity is to be denied the joys of fatherhood; to choose wealth and children is to be denied the life needed to enjoy such prosperity; and to choose children and longevity is to be denied the means of bringing up the children.

The earliest Igbo romance to be written and published in the Roman script introduced by the Christian Missions in the Nineteenth Century (Ala Bingo, by D.N. Achara, Longman, 1933), presents one variant of this myth. Drawing extensively from the myth of the water-woman, Ala Bingo is the story of the humanization of Eze-Ogara-Oru-N'Afo-Lota-N'Afo,10 a mythical king who is represented as having "power over all living things" and whose movements between his earthly and heavenly domains are said to be responsible for the coming and going of the dry and rainy seasons. During his sojourns on earth, with dry season on his heels, he dwells in a territory called Ala Bingo (the land of Bingo) which no human being can reach except in an unconscious

10 The name literally means 'The King that goes to work in a year and returns in the year'; but since his departure from his heavenly home to go to work in his earthly home and his return from his earthly home to his heavenly home are the cause of the rainy and dry seasons, the name may be properly glossed as 'The King of the Seasons.'
state. To reach the land of Bingo, a person wandering in the bush must be struck by a wanderleaf called *akwukwo-nju-ohia*, which will put him in a state of the unconscious and keep him wandering aimlessly until he inevitably arrives at the great kingdom where the all-powerful king reigns in unimaginable splendor and prosperity. But, in spite of his power and wealth, the king is in great anguish. He desires something which neither his power nor wealth can procure for him, namely the company of a woman. In the course of time, a chance sighting of a beautiful water-woman at the river where he normally takes his bath every morning fills him with an insatiable desire to capture and marry this woman. The rest of the story portrays the gradual reduction of the power and mythical distance of the king as he languishes over the water-woman, stooping to seek help even from the lowliest of his subjects, including an outcast servant afflicted with leprosy. At the end of the story, the great king who had been powerful over all living things is reduced to an ordinary man—a father and husband battling with the problem of succession to his kingdom by his two gargantuan sons from the water-woman—*Ogu* (War) and *Mgba* (Wrestling).

**Powerlessness, marginality and womanbeing in Akuko-ifo**

Like *Akuko-ala*, the term, *Akuko-ifo*, combines the word *akuko* (tale) with another term, *ifo*, which specifies the character of the genre. The etymology of *ifo* is rather uncertain, but it would appear, from its popular usage as well as from its verb-root—*fo*, to be connected with the idea of "breaking into light," "unfolding from darkness" or "the revelation of something hidden" as in the word for daybreak (*chi ofufo*, "breaking into daylight"). What seems indisputable, however, are its connections with the idea of didactic or moralizing constructs of the imagination as in cognate words in other Kwa languages, such as

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11 A student of mine at the University of Ibadan, the late Mr Albert Dike (1980), suggested that the root may be the homonymous verb, *-fo* (to feel relaxed after work or after a lot of hassle), in which case *Akuko-ifo* can be glossed as 'tales for relaxation.' But such a derivation would not account for the form, *Akuko-Iro*, in some dialects, since the verb *-ro* is not used in any dialect for relaxation.
12 Bordinat and Thomas (1975) seem to be alluding to this sense of the word, *ifo*, in the title of their collection of *Akuko-Ifo*, The Revealer of Secrets.
Akuko-ifo is thus conceived by the Igbo as a body of imaginary tales through which the deeper aspects of the nature and meaning of human existence and the relationships between human beings in society are unfolded or revealed. Akuko-ifo is not about far-fetched fantasies but about the real human world (the family, the community and the great kingdom) and about other realms of existence—the spirit world (ala mmuo) and the undivided universe (elu na ala) which fall within the cosmological scheme of the Igbo in which life is seen as an eternal journey from the human world to the spirit world and from the spirit back to the human world. It not only mirrors the realities of these four domains of the Igbo world, it is also essentially a body of ideological constructs in which reality is deliberately recreated for various dynamic influences on the direction of growth of society. The epitome of this ideological dimension of Akuko-ifo are animal tales, which are essentially allegories of history, mirroring the various stages of cultural evolution and using its allegorical animal characters to reveal the communally-preferred directions for future social growth.

Against this background, the images of womanbeing featured in Akuko-ifo can be viewed as representing the realities of gender relations and at the same time presenting gender relations as the dominant powers of the day would have it. We find cognate motifs in folksongs, dramatic performances (especially masquerade plays), and in proverbs and other gnomic genres such as tongue-twisters and riddles. In these categories of Igbo oral discourse, women appear in a negative light as completely unable to control their passions and as embodying a whole range of vices and foibles (stupidity, lack of discretion, inability to keep secrets, an extraordinary penchant for envy and willingness to sacrifice their own best interests in pursuit of the little sweet things of life). This set of images includes the figures of the hated wife, the jealous co-wife, the pregnant woman who pawns her unborn child as bride to a smelly spotted beast in exchange for some sweet fruits which she desires to eat, the proud beautiful girl who rejects all suitors and ends up marrying a monster, the foolish wife who leaks her husband's secret to spite him and brings ruin to her family, and many others. As a consequence

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13 The Yoruba Aro and its dialectal variant, Alo, are connected to Ifo through its Niger Igbo dialectal variant Iro, just as the Niger Igbo dialectal term for Akuko-Ala, namely ita, is cognate with the Yoruba term for 'tales told as true,' namely illan.
of this moral and spiritual powerlessness, women, as represented in Igbo folktales, are not only denied access to power and authority in the society but effectively oppressed, deprived and marginalized in many different ways.

The cruel step-mother of universal folktale tradition turns up everywhere in Igbo folktales working to death, the poor orphan left to her care. Oblivious of the superior power of the forces of retribution, she abuses to the extreme the little power left in her hands only to suffer without any succor in the end. In the polygamous home, which constitutes the setting of a great majority of tales, co-wives appear forever locked in virulent rivalry with one another over their husband's favors. There is usually a hated wife, for whom her husband builds an isolated hut far away from the main house, close to the place of sacrifice, on the outskirts of the village; but she would bear the husband's (usually king's) only male issue and heir and in the end ascend the throne as the favorite wife. Usually, the favored wives, consumed with pride and greed, overreach themselves in their claims and anticipations and are put to shame and, in some cases, to death.

For the Igbo story-teller, womanbeing seems to be a symbol of vanity and stupidity. One proverb that sums up this image says that "if a woman in given a new garment, she would set out to attend the funeral of the living" – merely to show off the fineries. But, that is the more innocuous type of folly and vanity ascribed by the tales to womanbeing. In tale after tale, the Igbo story-teller seems to see womanbeing as a destabilizing factor in both family and communal life. Sibling and other forms of rivalry within the family seem to be most virulent among sisters than among male relatives. In the tale of the Ugly and the Beautiful Sisters (Ogbalu, n.d.), the older ugly sister, consumed with envy over the finer natural attributes of her younger and more beautiful sister, lays out snare after snare to destroy her but, in the end, succeeds in destroying herself. In the story of The Two Separated Sisters, popularly known as "The Bowl No Longer Knows Its Lid" (Nwanze, 1986: 71-72; see also Egudu, 1973; and Abrahams, 1983: 145), war, slave-raids or some other crisis creates the situation in which kidnappers seize two disobedient sisters who, contrary to parental advice pound food aloud and allow smoke to escape through the thatched roof, thus betraying their presence in the house to the villains. The elder sister gets married
in a faraway land where she is sold into slavery but is later freed to be married by her former master. The younger sister passes from one cruel hand to another until she is at last recruited by her elder sister as a housemaid. There, she meets the greatest misfortune of her life. Unrecognized by her elder sister, she is abused, starved and treated with the most miserable cruelty until a lament in which she daily recounts her earlier life reveals her identity through the good offices of an attentive, eavesdropping old woman neighbor. But, in some versions of the tale, there is no place for such a happy ending. Thoughtless and careless about the wider consequences of her cruelty, as women in the world of Akuko-ifó are supposed to be, the older sister actually works her unrecognized sister to death before the truth about their relationship dawns on her.

In other tales, the Igbo story-teller sees the woman as a being who brings disaster on herself and on people around her by the rashness and thoughtlessness of her actions. Thus, the figure of the pregnant woman is commonly associated in the tales with unbridled appetite and fulsome voracity. Tales about the pregnant woman are thus generally cautionary. The pregnant woman’s uncontrollable desire to eat anything that comes her way is usually represented in the tales as resulting in the woman pawning her unborn child and even her own life for the object of her desire. At best, she loses her honor to a trickster who poses as a god-sent helper. Usually, the object of desire is a little sweet thing, such as a fruit. In other cases, it is a rare type of meat or the eggs of a dangerous animal. Often the desire for the object stems from the woman’s own volition; but in some other cases, it is prescribed by a doctor as a recipe for painless pregnancy or safe delivery.

By far the most popular variant of this tale is one in which the pregnant woman pawns her unborn daughter in marriage to a small, smelly and spotted rodent. Passing by a spot where animals are sharing some sweet berries, the pregnant woman stops to beg for some of the fruits. But all the animals refuse to give her any, except the small, smelly and spotted animal who wrests a promise from her that if her unborn child is a female, she would give her to the beast in marriage. The child turns out to be an extremely beautiful girl, so beautiful that suitors come from all the four corners of the earth to seek her hands in marriage. Here, the key motifs are conflated with those of the tale of the Proud
Beautiful Girl who foolishly rejects all suitors and ends up marrying a monster. But, in this case, it is not the ill-fated girl that rejects the worthier suitors but her mother who feels bound by her oath to the small, spotted animal.

In another version of the tale, the woman is seduced by a trickster who poses as a god-sent helper (Edafia, 1983). Sighting some very ripe plums atop a tree on her way but far beyond her reach, a pregnant woman is overcome by a desire to eat some of the plums and lingers under the tree asking all passersby for assistance. Help comes from a trickster, who, climbing the tree, hides two eggs between his laps. After plucking the plums for the pregnant woman, he presses hard on the eggs, smashing the shells and squeezing out its contents. The woman is alarmed, and calls his attention to the mess between his laps, whereupon the man cries out aloud, claiming to have crushed his testicles in attempting to help the woman. In the ensuing moment of desperation, the woman attempts to arrest the squirting out of what she naively believed to be her helper's squashed testicles by means of hot fomentation. In the process, she finds herself rousing the man and yielding sexually to him in an apparent bid to confirm the efficacy of her remedy. In a similar act of deceptive seduction (see Edafia, 1983), rain-drenched tortoise, sheltered by the fireside of a pregnant woman, manages to climb into her belly from where he speaks to her husband on his return. The embarrassed husband turns round to kill his pregnant wife.

In all these examples, we are faced with faint echoes of the universal motif of the irrepressible feminine appetite that brings disaster to the world; but here, the disaster falls squarely on the woman herself. Her myopic folly and lack of discretion in the pursuit of the little sweet things of life results in manifold loss.

Even where she desires and succeeds with much persistence in obtaining the great things of life, Akuko-ifó presents the woman as lacking the self-control needed to protect and preserve her own best interests. The figure of the barren woman who is prepared to do anything to beget a child but ends up losing the child as a result of an act of indiscretion looms large in the Igbo folktale tradition. In most variants of this tale-type, the barren woman desires a child, any child, and pledges herself to doing anything under the sun to be deserving of the
honor and self-fulfillment of becoming a mother. She grows so obsessed with this desire that she transfers her burning mother love to everything that comes her way. This effusive outpouring of mother love ultimately produces a magical effect: it turns an animal or vegetable matter (plant, leaf or twig) into a child but with the proviso that its non-human origins should never be mentioned. But so degenerate is the woman that even such a dearly begotten object of value is allowed to slip away. The woman leaves the child in the care of a cruel slave who causes the child to disappear by taunting her about her animal or vegetable origins when she demands food in the absence of her mother. In the earliest extant version of the tale, recorded by Thomas (1913-14, Vol. 3), feminine indiscretion, in betraying the fact of the non-human origins of the child to the cruel slave, is specifically blamed for the tragic loss.

In another variant of the tale, the barren woman adopts a pet animal and lavishes mother love on it. In one such variant which may be entitled "Cock More Precious Than Child" (Ifezulike, 1980), when the mother love has grown to a considerably high level, the woman begets a child of her own who she loves with equal tenderness. But then comes a dilemma. The beloved only child feels a strong desire to eat the much-beloved cock threatening that she would die if her desire is denied. Without any second thought at all about it, the woman allows the only child to die than to lose her precious cock. As in other tales, reflection, for the woman, comes only after the tragic act of thoughtlessness.

By far the most popular of the numerous Igbo tales about women is the tale of the proud beautiful girl who rejects all suitors and ends up marrying a monster. What we have here are Igbo oicotypes of a universal tale-type in which is stressed the traditional Igbo custom of contracting marriages as a relationship between two extended families rather than simply as a relationship between a woman and a man. In this tale, the heroine (who is sometimes described as a rebel), flaunts convention to her own detriment. Shunning parental advice, and ignoring the customary requirement that members of her extended family should investigate the background of her spouse, she hastily accepts the hand of a suitor who she mistakenly thinks is a rich, handsome and well-dressed man ("The Complete Gentleman" in Amos Tutuola's *Palmwine Drinkard*) and goes home immediately with him, without
waiting for the settlement of the bride price and bride wealth. But, in the end, the rebel girl discovers that her "complete gentleman" is actually a gnome with borrowed human parts and rich apparels. The ending of the story varies from version to version. In some versions, the rebel girl perishes in the domain of her monstrous husband while in others she manages to escape to face the rejection or acceptance of her parents. In the later case, she turns a new leaf and henceforth learns to abide by the age-old customs which she had foolishly rejected.

The antifeminist stance in this tale – namely, that women must abide by the time-honored customs of their clan which limits their freedom of choice in their own best interest – figures in a large number of other tales and finds an almost hyperbolical expression in the Igbo oicotypes of the universal story of the taming of the shrew (Ogbalu, 1973). A shrewish wife refuses to address her husband with due respects and assumes the unprecedented freedom of calling him "Onye nuu" ("that one," or "that person"). But one day, as she and her husband are crossing a shallow stream, which under normal circumstances could be crossed easily without a bridge, she finds herself unable to advance and, instead, to be sinking into the bottom of the river. She makes her misfortune known through a song of lament in which she persists in addressing her husband as "onye nuu." But her husband refuses to go to her succor, and so do all passersby and bystanders; other people who rush to the scene on hearing her lament, including her parents, brothers, sisters and other close relatives, turn back on witnessing her unmitigated shrewish behavior even in the midst of her misfortune. It is not until the water reaches the nape of her neck that she realizes that she must no longer be so presumptive in addressing her lord and master! On seizing the moment and addressing her husband correctly, in more respectful and endearing terms, she is instantly thrown up by the stream into the protective arms of her anxious husband. Here again, the antifeminist moral is clear. Under no circumstances should a woman claim any level of equality or even chumminess with a man. The elemental forces and even the woman's closest relatives will join hands in punishing her for any such outrage. The tale seems to say: It is a man's world, and the sooner this fact is recognized and accepted by every woman, the better for womanbeing and for society at large.
In all the vicarious representations of womanbeing in Akuko-Ifo, only the figure of the old woman comes out with any positive significances. In general, the old woman figures in the tales as a personification of the conscience. She is ever present at the cross-roads or at the threshold to the land of spirits, washed down by the flood or carrying a heavy load or languishing under the weight of one misfortune or another. The quest-hero must recognize the need to go to her rescue and to address her politely no matter how rude and uncooperative she might prove to be, failing which he must undergo a long series of excruciating ordeals in the land of spirits through which alone his evil nature can be purged. By the same token, the old woman neighbor frequently features as the revealer of secrets. Sitting alone in her home, when everyone else has gone to work, she overhears secrets and reveals them for the good of the community. Through the accumulation of such tender and positive images, Akuko-Ifo has, over the generations, distilled the motif of the old woman as an embodiment of mysterious powers which can save the community in times of crisis, a motif which has filtered into Akuko-Ifo where it now constitutes the core of the myth of Agadi-nwanyi – an old woman buried at the boundary with an enemy territory, from where she rises to keep the enemy at check and give succor to the clan. In Akuko-Ala, the motif of the mysterious and protective powers of the old woman has no doubt developed in line with the positive power which that genre ascribes to womanbeing, but in Akuko-Ala, the old woman's power seems to stem, either by negative capability, from her frailty which calls for sympathy, or by her having been effectively de-gendered or transformed into a man by age and experience, in which case she is presented as deserving of the same kind of respect usually reserved for men.

Summary and conclusions

Clearly, there is dualism, paradox, ambivalence and even contradiction in the representations of womanbeing in the Igbo oral narratives examined in this paper. Both feminism and feminity rooted in what appears to be an age-old matriarchal foundation, seem deeply

14 See Achebe's Things Fall Apart for allusions to this myth.
entrenched in these cultural representations and yet seem oddly enough to co-exist harmoniously with the equally entrenched forces of male-chauvinism and patriarchy. The question before us now is to attempt to interpret the meaning and significance of these contrasting delineations of gender positions and relations in Igbo culture and to compare and contrast them with images and situations from other cultures in Africa and elsewhere.

I have elsewhere (Azuonye, 1987) made a preliminary attempt at comprehending these relations by assuming a diachronic-evolutionary framework in which, what appears to be a complicated juxtaposition of mutually contradictory, ambivalent, dual or paradoxical sets of images, can be seen in terms of the traumas arising from the succession of the hypothetical matriarchal foundation of the Igbo society by an uncompromising patriarchy bent on dismantling all traces of the powerfully assertive primeval dominance of the woman. Against this background, the images of powerlessness and marginality found in akuko-ifo would appear to be ideological constructs for the assertion of the claims of the latter-day patriarchy, and this would explain the predominance of such put-down images in the genre of imaginative fiction, addressed primarily to the young as an instrument for enculturation,\(^\text{15}\) rather than in akuko-ala, the genre traditionally recognized as a veritable record of ethnohistorical realities, but which is more concerned with political, legal and related matters from the point of view of communal self-interest. But there are other factors to be taken more centrally into account in attempting to comprehend the paradox in the representation of female power in the traditions of a society in which women in ordinary life do not readily exhibit such power. One is to relate it to the dualism in Igbo culture, which upholds the possibility that the culture idealizes gender relations in terms of the balance of equal and opposite forces, with each sex playing certain powerful rôles in the society determined not in terms of equality or inequality as it exists in western cultures but in terms of what may be described as gender capacitance, as some of the evidence considered in this paper seem to suggest.

\(^{15}\) Ikonne (1982) sees the tales as 'a device to brainwash young boys and girls, in an attempt to make them believe ... that the woman is inferior ... and incapable of managing her own life.'
The other possible parameter for resolving the paradox we have examined is to see the contrasts in terms of contradictions arising from the traumatic imposition of western values through colonialism on a culture in which gender relations were differently organized. This would involve separating the images into sets in accordance to whether they point to a pre-colonial, colonial or post-colonial ambience. Clearly, differences are bound to exist if such a separation proves possible. In many respects, the representations of dominant female power in akukoala have strong parallels in real life. They have been repeatedly re-enacted in historical events such as the so-called "Women's War" of 1929, already referred to, in which contemporary Igbo women, like their 18th century forbears (in Equiano, 1789), revolted against the British colonial regime, forcing it to make concessions along lines determined by their own self-interest as an organized social force. It is this traditional feminist consciousness that seems to have been subverted, as argued by Amadiume (1988) by the colonial experience and the subsequent superimposition of western antifeminism on Igbo culture. It would appear that, generally-speaking, the British colonial intervention, with its strongly patriarchal power base, penetrated and began its radical transformation of Igbo culture at a time when the incipient patriarchal order was becoming increasingly articulate in creating powerful structures of the imagination for the eradication of what has been established to be the powerful matriarchal foundations of Igbo culture (Amadiume, 1987 and 1988). The images of male power which the colonial regime offered thus appear to have readily fallen into the hands of male-chauvinist propagandists in Igbo culture as instruments for a radical transformation of age-old archetypes governing gender relations. In the ensuing politics of visibility, in which the structures of colonialism, appear to have aided and abetted the entrenchment of an ethos of male domination, the colonialist became the all-powerful male symbol against which all gender relations were recreated. The intersection of racial power stereotypes arising from the colonial experience with those of male power stereotypes at this point of Igbo cultural development needs to be thoroughly examined and carefully interpreted. In the celebrated Mbari festival sculptures of the Owerri Igbo, for example (see Cole, 1982), symbols of "whiteness" and "maleness" seem to be predominant, suggesting a curious rejection of
negritude in the atmosphere of fulsome colonial mentality fostered by the environment of white colonial domination in which they were created. The most personable characters – the divine, the venerable, the heroic and the powerful – are represented as white males in supercilious poses whose wives invariably sit by them looking as distant and unthreatening as the wives of the white colonial administrators. Black women are rare in these ritual images, but where they feature, they are portrayed in the most negative of images: as shamelessly obscene and even curiously animalistic in their exercise of their freedoms. It is difficult, at this stage, to provide any simple interpretation of these transformations of traditional images, but so pervasive are they that they call for detailed analysis and interpretation.

Finally, there is the challenge of considering the images of gender relations in terms of age-old universals embodied in the motifs of various tale-types found across the world. My present project at the University of Pennsylvania (the compilation of a type and motif index of Igbo folktales) points strongly the possibility. Folklorist rightly argue that the types and motifs of the folktale mirror the commonalties of the realities of human and trans-human existence, and perhaps images and paradoxes that may strike us as unique to one culture may well signify cross-currents in experience which for some cultures may need to be completely rediscovered while in others they need to be better understood than they are at the present.
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WOMEN IN IGBO SATIRICAL SONG

Themes of satires

Satire spawns a variety of themes. In Igbo society, satire features in burial ceremonies, traditional festivals, moonlight night plays and in private daily occupations, to mention but a few. There are poems which satirize unrestrained sexual freedom among young girls, co-wives' rivalry and gossips, thieves, the oppressive foster-mother, bad mothers-in-law/daughters-in-law, troublemakers, etc. But predominant and recurrent among the themes is the theme of sexual immorality.

Illegal sex and the possible pregnancy that may result from it invite satire. Such satires are generally composed by young girls against members of their age group and sometimes by married women. The song below is a satire on a young girl who indulged in the sexual act with much abandon, but was terrified when she discovered she was pregnant:

\[\text{Nwagbogho i na nwa ebe akwa}\\\text{I na nwa ebe akwa}\\\text{I di nura mgbe ana akugi bongo}\\\text{N'onu ikpu}\\\]

Young woman, are you now crying?  
Are you now crying?  
Were you asleep  
When they were playing bongo music  
On the threshold of your vagina.

The reference to "bongo" music – a popular music at the time of composition of the satire – is a direct allusion to the alacrity and recklessness with which she indulged in and enjoyed the sexual act. In Igbo traditional society, no word is considered too dirty for satiric expression. Such things as certain parts of the body which in western socie-
ties are mentioned with a certain degree of inhibition are called by their proper names.

The theme of sexual misconduct can further be illustrated by the next poem:

Osikampa iyabasi osikampa
O dojere nwagboghobia n’oguburu
Osikampa iyabasi osikampa
O butere nwagboghobia nnukwu iwe obi
Rice, onions, rice
You lured the young girl to the ogoburu
Rice, onions, rice
You have brought much grief to her.

In the above poem, the continued repetition of the words "rice" and "onions" is intended to establish the young girl’s weakness for rice and stew. The victim of the satire has an abnormal craving for a meal of rice which lured her into sleeping with her boyfriend and then, of course, the eventual pregnancy.

As a result of the shame and ridicule associated with sexual immorality and the pregnancy that may possibly result, many young girls, when they discover that they are pregnant, turn to the more abominable act of committing an abortion in order to escape derision. But because they hardly have access to sophisticated ways of effecting abortions, they resort to crude methods of terminating their pregnancies. In the poem below, a young girl is being satirized for using pepper to effect an abortion:

O ji ose aha ime
Nkata ose o jezikwara gi
A nasu n’ekwe
Ima n’obu agbogho n’ahu
She that uses pepper to terminate pregnancy
Will a basket of pepper be sufficient for you?
All the drumming and chorusing
Is surely in the woman’s body.

In some special cases the victims of satire can absorb the adverse comments and can cool-headedly hurl back a more devastating comment

1 A mud elevation used as bed.
on their attackers. In traditional Igbo society, it is normal for young girls to marry men selected for them by their parents. Only a negligible few deviate from this norm and marry men of their dreams even though such actions are never favourably regarded. In the next poem, the girl, Mgbeke Ogboebu, rejects a man selected for her but prefers another young man, Ojiaga, whose baby she is expecting. A member of her peer-group who certainly knows her story and who has been known to have committed an abortion pokes fun at her saying:

Mgbeke Ogboebu si na Ojiaga
Ja anu ya
Ya akwuoro ya eriri

Mgbeke Ogboebu said that if Ojiaga
Does not marry her
She will commit suicide

Mgbeke's reply:

Ana m aju gi
Ka mbu omezube
Aha gwene m ime

I am asking you
Although I am guilty of every crime
Have I committed an abortion?

This short dialogue reaffirms the extent to which abortion is abhorred in Igbo society and also reaffirms the confidence of the satiric victim in her choice of a marriage partner.

Stealing is one of the dominant themes of Ihiala satirical songs. Much as stealing is frowned at, yam stealing is considered an abomination here, as is the case in most parts of Igboland. In one of the poems of my collection, a woman who was caught stealing yams was immediately made the object of satiric comment. With the following song she was forced to dance through the village with a piece of yam hung around her neck:

Mborie Osuagwu onye ohi o
Onye ohi ana atuona gi o
Nga nwanyi n'ezu ohi ji o
Onye ohi ana atuona gi o
Mgborie Osuagwu, thief!
Thief, the earth has caught up with you
Where a woman goes stealing yam
Thief, the earth has caught up with you.

Here, virtually all the women of the community and young children participated in the performance by singing, clapping, and dancing behind the culprit. While actively participating, the performers were individually hurling invective at the thief—a way of registering their personal aversion to the abominable act.

Sometimes the victims of satire are incapable of mending their ways. But most people try to conform to the accepted mores of society, not necessarily because of guilt feelings arising from the misconduct for which they are satirized, but because of the fear of ignominious disgrace which is one of the aims of satire.

Another recurrent and persistent theme is rivalry among co-wives. It will be necessary here to point out that polygamy is deeply rooted in Igbo society. In Igboland the primary aim of every young woman is to get married because society frowns at any woman who is ripe for marriage but is still unmarried. Because every young woman is obsessed with this notion, she is not particularly bothered by whether she is the first or the last wife. G.T. Basden has this to say:

The Igbo woman shrinks from the prospect of being husbandless because she knows only too well the disgrace that is attached to that unfortunate condition. Such a woman is mocked and ridiculed, especially by other women while her own instincts are outraged, causing her to suffer acutely both mentally and physically. Not even in death would her failure be forgiven.2

Many factors contribute to arouse the jealousy of wives in polygamous homes. The man usually pays undue attention to the latest wife, who is usually the youngest one. He accords her certain privileges at the expense of the other wives. She therefore becomes a victim of the other wives' jealousy and scorn. The song below is a satire against the youngest wife by other co-wives reminding her that the attention she is getting will be shortlived:

Ogeri bia mbu
Ebunye ya eze
Okpebe loya o
Mgbe onooro aho nabo
A nara ya eze nye onye isi o
Mgbe ahu omaghaba anya o
Aghara abia n’ulo
Eiue ya o ji azu ari akwa o
Onya aru ka ibu o

When a woman first comes
She is given the throne
She plays the lawyer
By the time she has spent two years
The throne is taken from her
And given to the head wife
Then she looks confused
Confusion enters the house
Then she is called one who climbs the bed with her back
You are a terrible person.

Co-wives are also known to indulge a great deal in gossiping. Since jealousy abounds in polygamous homes, betrayal of confidences are bound to exist. The next poem is satirizing such a betrayal:

Akuko nknonyere nwunye di m o
Ka o jere konyere di m
Di m abata n’eegbu m
Ihe ni nkoro agbowana

The story which I told the wife of my husband
She went and told my husband
My husband came back and beat me mercilessly
The story I told has exploded.

Occasionally, satire can be directed at a dead co-wife depending on the degree of animosity existing between her and her rival. Here is an example:

Nwunye di m anwuona
Edoona m ahu
I fukwara ka mhazi
Ipetempe

---

The statement connotes her readiness for sexual intercourse at all times.
The wife of my husband is dead
I have put on weight
Have you seen how robust I now look
Ipetempe.

In the above poem, the calculated movement of the performer is designed to demonstrate the emotion evoked by the song – that of obvious relief. The women of the community, outraged at her bluntness and the sheer mockery of the dead, replied with the following poem:

Mgborie nwa eghu
Isi kporo nku
Okenye no n’uno
Eghu amuo n’ogbu
Nwunye di gi nwuru
Ijebe imikpo amikpo

Mgborie, child of goat
Headstrong woman
The adult in the house
When the she-goat is left to suffer
The pains of parturition on its tether
The wife of your husband died
You went to dry the body for meat.

The condemnation from the women is evident in their reduction of Mgborie to "child of goat" – a phrase which in Nigerian usage connotes stupidity.

The theme of the oppressive foster-mother is a fertile ground for satire. In Igbo land, all the women married into a family are expected to be kind and motherly to all the children in the household. A child is said to belong not only to his parents but also to the whole community. R.N. Egudu writes:

The Igbo man’s concept of family life is one of absolute solidarity, co-operation, common destiny and commitment, and love that must be apparent, even if behind this façade of overt love gesture there lurks some rancour or disunity.4

It is therefore mandatory that every wife of the family should play the role expected of her and satisfy the expectations of all the other members. The next poem is a song against the oppressive foster-mother by the child-protagonist:

Nne nne nne. Ayoro
Nwunye nma m o, Ayoro
Sichara nni, ayoro
Buru nke mu nwa bu ogbenye donye ya n'uko, Ayoro
Nwogbenye tia ukwu ya tia' aka ya
Aka eru n'uko, Ayoro
Nkpo nne m kpo nna m odighi nke zara m, Ayoro
A na m eme ihe oma obu ka nne m puta, Ayoro (twice)

Mother, mother, mother, Ayoro (chorus)
The wife of my father
Finished her cooking
Carried mine up on the uko
The orphan stretched his legs and his hands
But his hands did not get there
I called my father, called my mother
But nobody answered me
Am I doing a good turn
So that my mother will resurrect. (twice)

In the above poem, the woman abuses her role as a mother by her exhibition of partiality. The society often condemns such a woman morally but hardly does anything practical to save the situation for the oppressed child. Another issue that provokes satire is the relationship between mothers-in-law and their daughters-in-law. In Igbo society, the two parties have been known to have an unhealthy relationship, and the victim of the situation is, in most cases, the daughter-in-law. Callous mothers-in-law usually attempt to take complete control over their sons so that their daughters-in-law are at their mercy. In the next poem, the relationship between the two women has deteriorated to the extent that they are not even on speaking terms. The daughter-in-law is soliciting a response to her greeting while satirizing her mother-in-law's monopoly of her son:

5 A wooden platform constructed above the fireplace which is used mainly to store food items.
Ajo nne di o
Kwe m ekene onu o
Ajo nne di agabgbukwane m n'emu
Ajo nne di o
Kwe m ekene onu Ma nwa gi nuba gi o
Ajo nne di agbagbukwana m n'emu

Bad mother of husband
Just respond to my greeting
Bad mother of husband
Do not kill me with your sarcasm
Bad mother of husband
Just respond to my greeting
But let your son marry you
Bad mother of husband
Do not kill me with your sarcasm.

It is obvious from the above poem that the daughter-in-law has resigned herself to the situation.

In some cases the reverse is the case and the mother-in-law is the victim of the oppression. This, again, calls for satire. In the event of the death of such a mother-in-law, the women of the community will have a field day of merciless satire against the daughter-in-law. The women may even be violent, depending on the gravity of the oppression. The following song is a satire directed at a daughter-in-law at the funeral of a neglected mother-in-law:

Akwa ama ha ama ebe
Akwa ama ha ama ebe
Onye awowuru na nni
O bu ya ka ama ha ama ebe
Onye akwayiri n'oku
Ka ama ha ama ebe
Onye awowuru n'anu
Ka ama ha ama ebe
Onye enewuru n'anya
Ka ama ha ama ebe
Onye e tiwuru n'aka
Ka ama ha ama ebe
Onye azogburu n'ukwu
Ka ama ha ama ebe
Akpo ha na ikwu anuha ya
Akpo ha na ibe anuha ya
Ehe ehe
Anyi ajaha ekwe ya
They are shedding crocodile tears
They are shedding crocodile tears
She that was starved of food
Is she the one they are shedding crocodile tears for
She that was pushed into a fire
They are shedding crocodile tears for
She that was starved for meat
They are shedding crocodile tears for
She that was neglected
They are shedding crocodile tears for
She that was beaten to death
They are shedding crocodile tears for
She that was trodden to death
They are shedding crocodile tears for
They think the kith and kin did not hear of it
Ehe ehe
We shall not take it.

This particular performance took place very recently in my village and the performing women did actually attack the two erring daughters-in-law. They immediately imposed a fine of four live chickens on them, which they promptly produced. Then the women hit the chickens on their (the women’s) cheeks until the chickens were dead. The mother-in-law was alleged to have died as a result of injuries she sustained in a fight with one of the daughters-in-law.

It has already been pointed out that the performers of these satires are women. Their composition varies from one context to another. For instance, during traditional festivals and moonlight night plays, the young girls between the ages of 15 and 21 feature more prominently than the married women. But on funeral occasions the performances seem to be monopolized by married women possibly because the problems that are satirized are basically marital problems. Usually, the young girls sit or stand beside them and those who so desire may join them as there is no restriction regarding participation. Once the song has been composed and presented everybody owns it and it can be sung privately in people’s homes.

Musical accompaniment ranges from the use of drums to the clapping of hands. The women sometimes form a circle or a semi-circle round the lead singer, and sometimes dance in groups or singly. It is important to recognize that what the poet is singing is given promi-
nence over the music. The music is the spice. Its introduction compels both the performer and the audience to a better performance. This performer-singer relationship, brought about by music, gives birth to dramatic presentation of satiric poetry.

In almost all the poems that I have collected, the audience participates actively in the performance. The poet employs many gestures or facial expressions to direct the response to the audience. Sometimes the movement of the performers will be planned so as to leave no doubts about the emotions implied in the song.

**Conclusion**

From the above study one can conclude that in Igbo society as in other societies, satire exists with a view to correcting social misbehaviour and making for social convenience. It is important to point out that a criticism of social misbehaviour is rooted to the society's conception of morality. This accounts for the one-dimensional nature of the songs - a condemnation of disapprovable attitudes that counteract the ideal morals.

In Ihiala, women satirize the misdemeanours of fellow women as a means of encouraging good behaviour in the community. The women use a variety of techniques to make their corrective statements, chief among which is ridicule either in mime or song or dialogue. The persistent and recurrent themes that feature in the satiric activity have already been identified as sexual misconduct, co-wives' rancour, stealing, the oppressive foster-mother, bad mothers-in-law/daughters-in-law and so on.

Whether the satiric victims do actually mend their ways is another matter. The performers of the satires, in spite of their attempts to correct and possible deter others from committing the same offences are, however, content to jeer at and ridicule those disapprovable social behaviour. In the absence of everything else, they are satisfied with bringing the satiric victim to "bitter contempt."^6

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FEMINIST TEMPERAMENT IN IGBO BIRTH SONGS

Introduction

Any discussion of the dominant forms, types or generic categories of oral poetry among the Igbo of Nigeria which omits the birth (or maternity) songs would be neglecting a significant aspect of that poetry.\(^1\) For these birth songs are the product of a particular biological class or group in the society, and, as scholars of the sociology of literature have recognized, the theme and form of a piece of literary work may bear witness to "the origin and production" of that literature.\(^2\) It is the intention of this essay to examine these songs, first from the point of view of their possible typological classification, and then to show how, no matter how classified, these birth songs are an extremely convenient avenue for Igbo women to express their understanding of the

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\(^2\) This has been the persistent argument of Marxist literary critics, as is illustrated in Eagleton's *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1976). In Nigeria, any sample reference will do, like G.G. Darah's "Igho Sh'emu Sua: A Note on Capitalist Ideology in Urhobo Oral Literature," *Theory and Practice (Journal of Nigerian Academy of Arts, Science and Technology)*, No. 2, 1977, 187-207. But non-Marxists, like Richard Dorson, also recognize this fact, particularly in the area of folk literature, the study of which, Dorson argues, was originally class-motivated. See Richard Dorson, "Africa and the Folklorist" in *African Folklore*, ed. Richard Dorson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972) 3. The sociology of literature is the focus of René Wellek and Austin Warren in chapter nine ("Literature and Society") of their book, *Theory of Literature* (Harmondsworth: Peregrine Books, 1976) 94-109, in which the issue is treated from the point of view of an apparently ideological non-partisanship, though theirs is not much of a departure from the conventional "sociological approach" to literary criticism. Ruth Finnegan's *Oral Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 244-71 is a painstaking study of the dependence of oral art on the society that produces it.
norms and values of the Igbo society, and to comment on some of these norms and values.

The word "feminism" is not being used here in the rather restricted sense of "female protest" and campaign for "emancipation" in a situation of male domination and chauvinism in society. Rather "feminism" is expanded to mean "women's point of view" expressed in an uncensored medium. The issue is not necessarily whether what the women say is radically opposed to established conventions, but that what they say represents their own honest, realistic and constructive perception of order and stability in the society. In handling our argument, we do not lose sight of the fact that what we are discussing is literature, that the medium of the women's "feminism" is literary, and that the stylistic demands of the literary genre provide the structural framework for the feminist message.

Igbo birth songs: a typology of situation

A typology of a piece of oral literature suggests a generic classification that is based on the performance of the literature. Many an authoritative treatment of oral literature in Africa has been based on this kind of typology, with justification. For it would appear that it is the occasion of performance of a piece of oral literature that determines its form and structure, and even if one insists on a typology of form and structure, as is the tendency when it comes to written literature, one would ultimately be drawn back to considering how relevant the form and structure are to the occasion of performance. Our concern is not to prefer any one typology to the other, but to recognize all possible typologies as they relate to Igbo birth songs.

Footnotes:
Birth songs are surely situation-bound, and, in all cases, there is a relevance of the occasion to child-birth. The most common situation is the birth of a child. When the event takes place, other women raise a jubilant alarm called oro, which instantly brings every woman to the scene of the event. A good example of an oro runs as this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Igbo</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hia hia hia e e e e e5</td>
<td>Hia hia hia e e e e e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oe Oe Oe e e e e e</td>
<td>Oe Oe Oe e e e e e e e e e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onye ji ego hia ngaa o.</td>
<td>Whoever has money let him come here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Did she give birth to what?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>She gave birth to a baby boy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>She gave birth to a baby girl.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hia hia hia e e e e e e e e e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oe Oe Oe e e e e e e e e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chineke i meela o o o.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>God, you have done well.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This initial song, which is half-sung and half-chanted in a high pitched tone by many women, usually has a "magic" effect. Every woman in the community leaves whatever she is doing no matter what and runs in the direction of the song. Immediately, the women form a circular dancing formation, and begin to perform as many birth songs as possible. The duration of the performance differs from occasion to occasion, depending, for instance, on the ability of the man of the house to provide impromptu entertainment for the performers, and on the number of women who have come. It could last for one or two hours, and as the earliest callers leave, they tend to be replaced by new ones.

But there are other occasions for the birth songs. These include all the major landmarks in the chain of rituals of thanksgiving and purification involving childbirth, in which groups outside the nuclear family participate. These occasions include the naming ceremony of the child,

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5 The forty or so birth songs studied for the purpose of this paper were mainly collected by my 1983/84 students of African Oral Literature. The advantage of preferring their collection to mine is that, whereas my collection is from one local council area of Anambra State of Nigeria, those of my students are from various areas of Imo and Anambra States, before the creation of more states in Nigeria in 1991. The similarity in the songs is, however, very obvious, so much so that, in most cases, the words used are the same, barring dialectal differences. There are, however, cases of modifications of songs-in-performance, as we shall illustrate later.
which takes place in traditional homes twenty-eight days after the birth of the child (in Christian homes, the tendency is for the ritual of baptism to replace this occasion); the first "outing" of the mother since childbirth - *iputa n'omugwo* - which takes her to the communal market where she fraternizes and frolicks with her fellow women in the open, rubbing camwood and powder on them and receiving gifts in return; the presentation of *nri omugwo* ("maternity meal") to the mother of the woman who has given birth, both before she goes to look after her daughter for the traditional one-month from childbirth, and on her return from her "in-law's place" with all the goodies with which her in-laws have expressed their gratitude to "the mother of a wife who has given birth to a baby." In some areas of Igboland, like the Arochukwu area of Abia State, maternity or birth songs are also performed during puberty rites for girls who are to be initiated into womanhood. The rationale for the performance on this occasion is to be found in the belief that such rites are indeed fertility rites, in which the girls' primary value as "bearers of children" is affirmed.

Our situational typology thus shows that birth songs are a women's affair; they are occasioned by a woman's event, the delivery of a child, and other activities ancilliary to births, and the performance is almost exclusive to women. There is only one known occasion in which men take part in the actual performance of birth songs, and this is when the women invite the father of the child, through the medium of their songs (but in extreme cases they drag the man out of the house) to come out and demonstrate his own role in the whole affair of "making the baby." The following song illustrates such an occasion, and the

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7 In modern times, women's dancing groups usually include well-known birth songs in their choral repertoire. These songs are, however, usually restructured so as to fit into either contemporary forms of hymn-based songs or traditionally-based, carefully composed, rehearsed and adapted choral formats. Because of this restructuring, we hesitate to consider the miscellaneous occasions of their performance in our situational typology.
reference to mat, or wrapper in most modern versions of the song, echoes the sexual act that gave rise to the pregnancy:

Igbo

O lee nwoke mere ihe a?

O lee nwoke mere ihe a?

Nwoke mere iha a
Ya were akwa oji aru ala

Bia gbaara ayi egwu.

English

Where is the man who has done this?

Where is the man who has done this?

The man who has done this
Should come out with his "sneaky" wrapper
Come and dance for us.

Even from such a song, it is clear that the performance is a woman's affair, that the women's invitation to the man to dance is a way of ridiculing his tendency to be aloof in the midst of the excitement over a successful childbirth.

A typology of medium

We have tried to establish the occasions for the birth songs among the Igbo, and a logical sequence is the medium. "Medium" here implies "the how" of the performances of these songs; the manner in which they are realized. These songs are essentially vocal performances accompanied by dance, and - but not always - improvised musical instrumentation. They are mostly "songs" in the actual sense of their being sung, rather than in the rather general, "poetry-as-song" which Preminger talks about. The only occasion in which a birth song acquires some chant-like quality, is in the oro, when the few women who are present at the moment of the birth call on the other women in the neighbourhood to join in the celebration.

8 An Igbo proverb says that "you do not get a wife for a man at the same time provide him with a mat" (a maghi alunye nwoke nwayi, zutara ya ute). This is usually used to remind a man that there is a limit to which he can rely on the benevolence of other people. Even if the dowry for his wife had been provided by another, he is at least expected to perform the sexual act himself.


Usually the women dance in a circular formation as they sing the songs, and the performance is accompanied by abundant histrionics, the degree depending on the content of the song. For example, in the songs in which they make allusions to the sexual act as being a glorious act, since it results in pregnancy and child-birth, the women make very suggestive gestures which some people might consider obscene, indicating the location of the organs, and sometimes providing gestural descriptions of the organs that are involved in the procreative act, and the nature of the physiological movement that has precipitated the occasion. The following song is an example of such a song whose total effect depends greatly on histrionic accompaniment:

Igbo

Ndoghari ukwu lee e
Ndoghari ukwu.
Ndoghari ukwu lee
Ndoghari ukwu.
Ebe ndoghari ukwu turu ime
Ndoghari ukwu
Obugh ebe ndoghari ukwu
mur u nnwa
Ndoghari ukwu
Ihe ndoghari ukwu emeela o
Ndoghari ukwu.

English

The wriggling of the waist, look!
The wriggling of the waist.
The wriggling of the waist, look!
The wriggling of the waist.
Where the wriggling of the waists results in pregnancy
The wriggling of the waists
Is not the place where the wriggling of the waists results in child-birth.
The wriggling of waists
A wriggling-of-waist event has occurred.
The wriggling of waists.

As the women dance this song in a circular formation, they take measured leaps towards the right, during which they hold their hands on both sides of their waists, wriggle the waists, expand the gap between their legs, and point at the position of their genitals, all in rhythm with the song and the dance. Every woman in the group joins in the demonstration, no matter how reserved or shy she might be considered to be in her private life. The performance is therefore understood by all to be a special event; an event in which song and rhythm of dance coordinate with symbolic action in order to maximize eloquence. It is a medium that affords the women an opportunity to express group consciousness, for, as Ernst Fischer has observed, "rhythmical move-
ment assists work, co-ordinates effort, and connects the individual with the group."\textsuperscript{11}

There is a general air of hilarity during the performance of these birth songs. Most of the members of the audience are men and children, for even where there are women who, for reasons of old age or ill-health, cannot join in the performance, they throw in occasional phrases of praise and promptings to the performers, thus affirming their spiritual identification with the essence and mood of the performance. Some men could make uncomplimentary and humorous remarks about the "immodesty" of the women, but this kind of remark is usually made in the spirit of the satiric and overall comic mode of the performance. For no one ever forgets what has occasioned the performance: somewhere inside the house (or in the maternity ward in modern times) a child is lying in the cradle. Thus this moment is one of demonstration of divine blessing; an Igbo proper name says that "there is nothing as valuable as a child (Ifeyinwa)," an expression which most of the birth songs repeat, echo or imply, and any anger or gesture of disapproval would be construed by the community as ingratitude and wickedness.

\textit{A typology of form}

Because these birth songs are realized through the medium of vocal music and dance, there is a heavy reliance on the time-line, repetition of segments, use of addressive markers and the lengthening of vowel sounds. Igbo birth songs confirm John Nketia's conclusion that "the use of time-line (a recurring rhythmic pattern of fixed duration or time span), which clarifies the regulative beat, is a common feature of rhythmic organization in some African traditions."\textsuperscript{12} It does not matter whether the line contains essentially only one word or whether there are up to ten words. What is important is that the duration in time of all the lines in the stanza is the same, even if the line has only a few words, as in a refrain which could be a repetition of just one word, and the word is lengthened through the use of significant, ululating, vowel

sounds so as to make the line have the same length as when many words are used in the same breath-group. While the lengthening process through the use of breath is on, the rhythm of the dance is of course maintained so that, in the end, all the lines have the same number of beats determined by the rhythm in harmony with one complex rhythm of dance steps.

In our formal analysis of Igbo birth songs, we identify three categories. The first is that group of songs where the song is made up of only one stanza, and no line of the stanza, possible other than the last, is a total segmental repeat of the other; the second category is that where the song is again made up of only one stanza, but where alternate lines of the stanza are merely repetitions of one syntactical segment; and the third category is where the song is made up of more than one stanza, each stanza having either the form of the first category or that of the second. We will examine these formal categories more closely, with a view to identifying their rhythmic structure.

In the first category, the song is made up of only one stanza, each line of the stanza, possibly other than the last, not exactly the same syntactical unit as any other. The stanza is repeated as often as possible in the course of the performance, until the women decide to move over to another song. All the women in the group sing the song in unison; there is no solo as distinct from the chorus. An illustration of this category of Igbo birth songs goes like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Igbo</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Unu no n’ulo eme gini e?</em></td>
<td>Are you in the house doing what?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ayi no n’ulo amuga nnwa o</em></td>
<td>We are in the house bearing children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ka mgbe ututu, ka mgbe anyasi.</em></td>
<td>Every morning, every night. The child is here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ayi amuala nnwa o.</em></td>
<td>We have delivered a child.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"Obi aadila ayi mma o.  
Ayi no n’ulo amu nnwa.

We have become happy.  
We are in the house bearing children.

In this six-line stanza, the last line is a repeat of the second. It is a significant repeat, because it is an affirmation of the central idea of the song that the primary value of the woman in that culture is to give birth.

Our study of the songs in our collection shows that there is nothing fixed about the number of lines in the stanza: there are mainly four-line, five-line, six-line, seven-line and eight-line stanzas. The four-line and six-line stanzas are the most recurrent in that order. Where the number of lines is even, the last may or may not be a repeat of the lines, but where the number is odd, the last line is usually a repeat of one of the lines which embodies the central idea of the song. It is easy to determine what constitutes a line in the stanza, if one is able to listen to the songs in performance. This is because the line, in performance, is identified as one syntactical unit constituting a breath-group, and determined by one complex unit of dance steps. In other words, the line-meter of the song is determined by the rhythm of the dance accompanying the song. Where therefore there are fewer words or syllables in some line than in others, all the singers do is lengthen either the last vowel sound of the line concerned, or add a vowel sound different from the last but easily assimilable to it.

The second category of form of the birth songs is that in which the song is made up of only one stanza, but the alternate lines of the stanza are repeats and also refrains. The following song illustrates this category of form:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Igbo</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Onye n'onye kuru omumu?</td>
<td>Who and who have carried the child?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omumu ka mma o o o.</td>
<td>The birth of a child is the best.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onye n'onye kuru omumu?</td>
<td>Who and who have carried the child?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omumu ka mma o o o.</td>
<td>The birth of a child is the best.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ihe no ngaa kuru omumu.</td>
<td>Everybody here has carried the child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omumu ka mma o o o.</td>
<td>The birth of a child is the best.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I kuru omumu i muta omumu. You carry the child, you get a child.

Omumu ka mma o o o. The birth of a child is the best.\textsuperscript{14}

Most often, all the women in the group sing all the lines of the song, but at times, there is a solo-and-chorus identification, where only one voice in the group (who usually beats some improvised musical instrument) sings the major lines, while the chorus sing the refrain. Where this happens, the tendency is for the length of the stanza to be determined at the discretion of the solo performer, who could create more of the major lines.

The third category of Igbo birth songs is that featuring more than one stanza. We find, however, that each stanza is of the form of the first category, and it would therefore be necessary for us to illustrate this category. What needs to be added is that this category of more than one stanza is not as dominant as the single-stanza forms and that, of the two single-stanza forms, the second which features refrains is the most recurring.

The issue that arises from our discussion of the formal typology of Igbo birth songs is the question of composition. There is no doubt that the nature of the situation of these songs gives them a great communal significance. Like most forms of folklore, the songs are "due to the collective action of the multitude and could not be traced to [any] one individual influence ...."\textsuperscript{15} This conclusion is justified by the fact that the songs do not seem to "rely on fixed texts that performers memorize."\textsuperscript{16} The songs are communal creations of the women as one group, and the unpredictable nature of pregnancies and births makes it impossible for the womenfolk to have any specific "trial versions" of the songs before they are performed.\textsuperscript{17}

It is rather the repeated performance of these songs, and the fairly standard typology established by the occasion of their performance, that give the forms and words of the song some degree of fixedness.

\textsuperscript{14} This is an allusion to the general belief in the Igbo culture that women who are desirous of bearing children should always use any opportunity to carry babies and play with them.


\textsuperscript{17} G.S. Kirk, \textit{The Songs of Homer} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962) 55.
This fixedness is, however, fragile. Albert Lord's theory of "themes" and "formulas" of oral composition would seem to apply very much to Igbo birth songs.\(^\text{18}\) To that extent then, the songs have "fixed texts," but there is no doubt that at any single performance, there is evidence of some kind of creation-in-performance; a creation-in-performance that is aided by the factor of liberties associated with solo performances. It is significant that the many cases of repeats of expressions in the songs are usually associated with a chorus, who cannot take the liberties of textual variation. The songs examined in this paper come from various parts of Igboland, and are both very traditional and fairly modern in origin. But there is no doubt that they belong to the same genre of oral poetry. Where there are some differences in two or more versions of the same song from different parts of the culture, and performed by groups with different religious orientations, the differences have been in the nature of dialect and lexical items.

In a popular Igbo birth song, to illustrate this, the women argue that the birth of a child is an opportunity for them to receive all kinds of gifts from their husbands. The gifts listed in some versions of the song include cloth (of unspecified quality), meat (of unspecified nature), yam, rice, and a motor car. But in some other versions of the same song the gifts listed include beef, salad, "Etorika" (a kind of very expensive modern textile material), a hand watch, Mercedes Benz and \textit{ntu oyi} (an air-conditioned car). There is hardly a doubt that the first song must have been performed by women whose values have a traditional orientation, whose demands are modest and congruent with the material circumstances of the community, while the second version must have been performed by the younger wives of the modern generation who are in a position to expect such expansive and modern gifts as enumerated from their husbands or somebody else. But the form of the versions is the same: they are all a one-stanza song of our second category, where the major lines constitute a list of the gifts expected at childbirth, while the repeated lines, in one way or the other, denote "the act of giving." In one of such songs, the "modern" form features "the positive act of giving" ("\textit{a gam enwe} " "I will have"), in place of that of "expecting" ("\textit{dim ga-enyem}," "my husband will give me"). These ver-

sions indicate different marital attitudes: the first perceives obligations from a husband as mandatory, whereas the second sees such obligations from the point of view of benevolence.

Our typology of form of Igbo birth songs thus establishes that, even from this classificatory point of view, the songs belong to the women entirely, and afford them an exclusive literary forum to make the comments they want.

A typology of theme

The last of our typologies for classifying Igbo birth songs is the thematic typology. This typology seeks to examine the content of the songs and, looking into them in their entirety, to be able to identify the songs as birth songs simply because of this content.

One of the most pervading themes in the songs is the idea of the child being the primary justification for marriage. And the women's birth songs emphasize this point unambiguously. The refrain for one of the popular songs says that the beauty of womanhood lies in children ("mma nwayi bu nnwa"); and another song wants to know whether there is any woman who has any priority to children:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Igbo</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Nam aju gi si</td>
<td>I ask you and say:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mkpa giodi ole</td>
<td>How many are your needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Na-abughi nnwa e?</td>
<td>Other than children?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The best way to satisfy a husband is by bearing children for him (Nwayi mnuo nnwa, obi alo di ya o), and it is only the child that gives a woman a sense of belonging in her husband's place (Onye muru nnwa nodu na be di ya ribe ngwodongwo, "Let whoever has given

---

birth remain in her husband's place and feed lavishly"). Childbirth preserves marriage, for no matter what a woman does, she is safe as long as she has children (Ihe omene, ihe omene/Gbaghara ya na o muru nnwa ohuru, "Whatever she does, whatever she does/Forgive her for she has given birth to a child"). Another song says that a barren woman is a thing of ridicule in the community:

**Igbo**

Dadam i meela muo nnwa.

Asi n'imutaghi nnwa

Ha gara ime gi ihe ochi.

**English**

My sister, you have done well to get a child.

Had it been that you had no child

They would be ridiculing you.

Hence a protagonist in a song pleads with her husband not to lose patience with her; she would yet bear him a child (Ezigbo dim e wela iwe na-agam amutara gi nnwa), since she recognizes that "when a man's wife fails to get a child/it appears as if he has married a fellow man" (Onye nwuye ya na-amutaghi nnwa/Odi k'olutara nwoke ibe ya n'ulo).

It is easy to see from these songs that the Igbo woman does not regard child-bearing as a necessary evil, but as a thing of joy; an obligation. This is to be appreciated in the context of a society that believes strongly in the cosmological phenomenon of re-incarnation. In this kind of society, the woman is an important link in this recurrent cycle of human existence in the cosmos.²⁰ Not to bear children is to create a kink in the chain of human regeneration; and this would amount to a disaster for the family, the clan and the community.

This probably explains the fact that the woman in the society, as is revealed in these songs, sees her role as a bearer of children as heroic. The woman really makes the world what it is, as one of the songs puts it:

Ala mara mma

Ala joro njo

Obu nwayi na-edozi ya.

If the land is good

If the land is bad

It is the woman who conditions it so.

And a similar song, defiantly vulgar, asserts:

²⁰ See Henderson op. cit. 219.
O si n’olee?
O si n’ikpu.
O si n’olee?
O si n’ikpu.
Ma nwa bekee?
O si n’ikpu.
Profeso?
O si n’ikpu.
Prezidenti?
O si n’ikpu.
Govano?
O si n’ikpu.
O si n’olee?
O si n’ikpu.

Where did he come from?
He comes from the cervix.
Where did he come from?
He comes from the cervix.
The white man?
He comes from the cervix.
The Professor?
He comes from the cervix.
President?
He comes from the cervix.
Governor?
He comes from the cervix.
Where did he come from?
He comes from the cervix.

In a gesture of strong protest and complaint all rolled in one, the women, in another song, accuse the men of indolence. For the women do not only go through the rigours of childbirth, but are also always busy, while the men deliberately subjugate female interests. The rigours of childbirth then become a metaphor for the suffering of the womenfolk:

**Igbo**

*Kpuru kpuru bu mgbe mbu.*
Being busy is a primordial thing.
*Kpuru kpuru nnwa.*
The business of child-bearing.
*Umu nwoke na-eje ozi soso otu onwa*
The men do real work only for one month.
*Ma a muchaa nnwa*
For after the birth of the child.
*Emechaa ha e were anyi dowe n’azu*
Again they relegate us to the background.

One is not surprised that these songs go to the length of articulating the hazards and heroism of pregnancy and childbirth. The pregnant woman bears the greatest suffering in the world, living on the edge of fear and uncertainty, and yet people think that she is in a period of glory (*Nwayi taga afufu n’uwa/Umu uwa asi na o riwela/Ege oji obi n’abo agariga*). The many birth songs that plead with death not to "kill a woman in her pregnancy" (*onwu egbule nwayi n’afo ime*) assert the fact that pregnancy is like a journey to the brink of death. Elsewhere it is described as being similar to climbing to the precarious top of the giant iroko tree:
Igbo
Ekene diri Chineke
Onye mere ka o ritue n’udo.
N’ihi na ya bu elu oji
Adighi ofere.

English
Thanks be to God
Who made her climb down
safely.
For that top of the iroko
Is not a plaything.

Many of these songs present the whole business of pregnancy and child-birth as being akin to the uncertainties of investment in the market, in which one stands as much chances of losing terribly as gaining; the songs make constant reference to "the market of the night" (ahia abali), "the market of the bed" (ahia bedi), and the enviable risky business of the climbing of the hill:

Ugwu nnwa di ebube.
Onye na-adighi ike
Agaghi ari ugwu nnwa.
The hill of the child is glorious.
She who has no strength
Cannot climb the hill of the child.

And the songs often throw a jibe at the men for being party to a venture for which only the woman bears all the risk:

Ihe ayi diri abuo me,
Ahia mgbaji ukwu
Emerega a si otu onye
bute ibu ya
The thing which two of us did,
The market of the breaking of
waists
Later only one person is asked to
carry the consequent load.

Perhaps one of the most thematic characteristics of these songs is the unapologetic sexual overtones and innuendos. Ordinarily, these women are uncommonly modest, even to the point of prudishness. But their performance of the birth songs suggests that the songs provide them with an opportunity to exhibit a surprising degree of obscenity both in words and miming. But constant reference to the sexual act in the songs is not frivolous, for the women seem to be arguing that the sexual act is a creative act which leads to generation and regeneration of the human species.

The sexual "content" of the birth songs includes not only the obscene gestures already described under our "typology of medium," but also brazen reference to the female genitals as the proud "road" through which the child emerges into the world from the dark, mysterious re-
cesses of the womb. Thus, the woman is happy that the final point of transition which a child traverses before it becomes human is the cervix (ikpu). The sexual organs are therefore very useful organs because they bring out riches into the world. One of the songs can therefore frown at the prostitute, because she is misusing her organs for mere satisfaction of the sexual urge (iri nwancholonwu, as the song idiomatically calls it). The sexual dance (egwu ukwu) which results in the child, is a glorious dance (egwu omu), and the joy of sex is not a frivolous one, but the joy of suffering (odi uto n'afafu). The noise of sex as couples tumble on the bed (the biam biam, biribiri or ngvodongwo ideophonic sounds) is the best of noises, say many of the songs, because it leads to pregnancy and childbirth. As one of the songs puts it so courageously:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Igbo</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shaka shaka</td>
<td>Shaka shaka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ihe ayi gbatara n'ute</td>
<td>The thing we won on the mat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piom piom</td>
<td>The thing we won from kissing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ihe ayi mitara n'onu</td>
<td>Kiri kiri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiri kiri</td>
<td>What we gained from laughter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ihe ayi chitara n'ochi</td>
<td>The benefit of the bed, the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uru bedi, uru bedi wu nnwa.</td>
<td>benefit of the bed is children.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These sexual overtones and innuendos, expressed through gestures of the sexual act, through liberal mention of the sexual organs, and through the use of ideophonic expressions that suggest the noise of sexual activity, seem to indicate that the women see the occasion of their performance as a moment of liberty and freedom from societal restrictions. Mircea Eliade discusses this phenomenon of "sexual liberties" on a universal, mythic dimension when he says that

the secret behind it is the revelation of fecundity.... [They] are not erotic, but of a ritual character: they represent vestiges of forgotten mystery and not profane enjoyments. We cannot otherwise explain the fact that in societies where modesty and chastity are obligatory, the girls and the women behave on certain sacred occasions ... in a manner that terribly shocked the observers .... This complete reversal of behaviour – from modesty to exhibitionism – serves a ritual purpose, and is therefore in the interests of the whole community. The orgaistic character of this feminine mystery is explained by the need for a periodic abolition of the
norms that govern profane existence, in other words, the necessity of suspending the law that bears like dead weight upon the customary, and of re-entering into a state of spontaneity.\textsuperscript{21}

We cannot improve on Eliade's observation, except to add that we find it applicable to the performance of Igbo birth songs.

An offshoot of the sexual licence which some of these birth songs suggest is the occasional affirmation in the songs that the occasion of child-birth is an opportunity for the expression of solidarity by the women. A good number of the songs actually make mention of the community where the event of child-birth has taken place, and in all cases what follows is a call to all the women to gather, for one of them is on a maternity outing and therefore needs comradeship. One song affirms that the event of one child-birth by one woman is a thing of glory and concern for all womanhood, and each second line of three of the four stanzas of the song expresses this idea in a different way (\textit{o churu ndi ibe ya uwa} - "she has kept all her colleagues awake"; \textit{o kwara umu nwayi ibe ya oru}, "she has stopped all the other female colleagues from going to work," \textit{o kwara umu nwayi ibe ya ahia}; "she has stopped all her female colleagues from going to the market").

Indeed, a good number of these songs express some degree of group defiance by the women, as one that calls on all women in the homes to come out and celebrate the birth, for no matter what they do in the course of events, nobody can make a case (\textit{Ife anyi mere n'okwu adiro ya}). A similar song asserts that they, the women are out (during the performance) solely for the purpose of exhibiting their pride and importance, for which reason they would not tolerate any trouble from any quarter (\textit{Anyi biara ebe a ikpa nganga/Onye enyenayi torobulu}).

While the women express their non-conformist views, however, they never keep their focus for long off the primary value of their event, the value of the child. It is for this that a good number of these songs emphasize that it is not enough to have a child; it is equally important that the child be given that adequate training that would enable it to be useful in life. The most popular expression in many of these songs is that whoever gets a child has the responsibility of training that child (\textit{o muru nnwa zu a nnwa ya}), an observation which many early scholars

of Igbo studies have made. No amount of suffering is too great in the training of a child, and one of the songs expresses delight in the women collecting firewood, fetching water, going to the market, all for the joy of making sure not only that the child survives, but also that it is well-trained. Another song talks in the same vein, this time listing inconvenient sources from which the women eke out some livelihood for the benefit of training their children; sources and inconveniences like the picking of palm nuts and palm kernels, having to go without supper, doing all types of odd jobs, keeping sleepless nights, and ignoring their sickness. Another song includes the money spent on school fees, books, uniforms and bags as part of the sacrifices of bringing up the child.

But the women do believe that the effort is worthwhile, because they will eventually reap the fruits of their labour. The child, after all, is being trained so that it can become an adult and begin to look after the mother. No wonder a song says that the joy of having a child is best experienced in old age (mma nnwa bu na nka). As one of the recurrent phrases in the Igbo kola nut prayer puts it, "we bring up our children so that our children will look after us" (Anyi zua nnwa, nnwa a zua anyi). It is not surprising that a good number of these songs go to the extent of listing all the imaginable good things of life which the mother expects from her children in future, and the unmistakable impression is that this expectation helps to sustain her expectations in life.

While these songs emphasize the need to give a child an adequate training, some of them do not fail to mention that, after all is said and done, the child belongs to the community as a whole, for which reason the business of training him or her is a communal responsibility. Thus many of the songs insist that whoever hears the cry of a child should respond immediately, for it is not one person alone who owns the child (O nuru akwa nnwa gbata/Na o bughi otu onye nwe nnwa). Some of the songs take pains to mention and praise the name of the community "which owns the child." Another song says specifically that whoever undertakes the training of a child alone will never recover from the fatigue (Onye naani ya na-azu nnwa/Ike gwuru ya). After all, as the

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last line of the first stanza of a three-stanza birth song in answer to a question as to "who owns the child" emphasizes, it is the Ama Ala, the highest legislative authority in the traditional Igbo community, which "owns the child" (Ama ala nwe nnwa!).

**Conclusion**

In this paper, we have tried to use four classificatory typologies, of situation, medium, form and theme, to establish that Igbo birth songs qualify as good folk poetry with its own generic distinctions. We have tried to show how this poetry is an all-women affair, and that this fact makes it a convenient medium for the women to express certain views and attitudes without inhibition. This lends this repertoire of songs to some feminist possibilities, and the kind of degree of feminism expressed in the songs would depend entirely on the women's sense of responsibility and obligation to their community.

It is generally agreed that Igbo society, like most other African societies, reveals a large degree of male chauvinism. As Ada Mere aptly puts it, "because she is stereotyped as physically weak, fickle-minded, highly emotional and because she, traditionally, is involved in patriarchal marriage and does not perpetuate the family name, [the woman's] status in traditional Igbo society is low." But it is also known that, even in the past, Igbo women had some fairly well-organized social mechanism to let their feelings or concerns for society become known. Leith-Ross found these women "possessing startling energy, [great] powers of organization and leadership..., practical common sense and quick apprehension of reality," and that "Igbo women are in theory dependent upon men but in practice independent of him." Francis Arinze, substantiating this view, believes that among the Igbo

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24 Leith-Ross *op. cit.* 337.
women have more power than was generally recognized by earlier authors. They can hold their own not only by means of public demonstrations, group strikes, ridicule, and refusal to cook for their husbands but also by their inherent vitality, courage, self reliance and uncommon organizational ability. In this connection the Aba riots of 1929 were an eye-opener.26

It would therefore appear as if the feminist tendencies in Igbo birth songs are in pattern, rather than out of pattern, with the activities of Igbo women in other spheres of life. What indeed is surprising on the surface is that these women do not use the occasion of these songs, as they well might have done, for protesting in a way that would resemble modern-day patterns of feminist emancipation. Rather, what these women songs reveal is a kind of mature, positive and constructive feminism that could fearlessly ask relevant questions, and make significant comments about the nature of the society, without seeking to capsize cherished values.

One possible explanation for the low-keyed feminism in these songs is to be found in the nature of the occasion of their performance. It is an occasion that is, all told, linked with marriage and, as Jordan has observed, "marriage was an excellent sign of the fundamental sanity of Ibo [sic] view of life, for nothing reflects the sanity or insanity of any society than its attitude toward marriage."27 But a more appealing explanation of the nature of the feminism in these songs is the fact that the medium of the feminist viewpoint is literary, for which reason a great deal of subtlety is demanded. These women performers of Igbo birth songs seem to realize not only this need for literary subtlety, but also the fact that the occasion for their performance is joyful and comical. In other words, they are operating within the framework of art, and as George Devereux puts it, "art ... prescribes polite ways of saying impolite things; it provides ways of expressing the inexpressible."28


27 Jordan op. cit. 221.

Ambrose A. Monye

WOMEN IN NIGERIAN FOLKLORE: PANEGYRIC AND SATIRICAL POEMS ON WOMEN IN ANIOCHA IGBO ORAL POETRY

Literature has the social responsibility of serving as an indirect comment on human conduct and the comment is meant to either commend or condemn with a view to making the individual conform to societal norms. Among the Aniocha Igbo of Delta State in Nigeria, oral literature serves a similar social function, for it is used to comment on people's conduct, especially that of women, who are regarded as models of good behaviour in society. As a matter of fact, a majority of the people perceive their women as mother symbols by reason of the fact that they do not only take proper care of their children but of their men as well. They see them as the epitome of all that is good and beautiful in society. Thus, the moral expectations of society from women are high and it is for this reason that society can readily condone any misdemeanour from either a child or man but can hardly forgive any shortcoming from a woman. It is quick to commend a woman for any good thing she has done, but it is also quick to condemn her for any bad thing she has done. It seems that the reason why the Aniocha Igbo society entrusts women with so much social and moral responsibility is to ensure that they perform the dual traditional role of giving children proper moral training and taking good care of the house when their husbands are working in the farms.

In our study of the oral poetry of the people of Aniocha we notice that whereas some of their songs are used to commend women for the noteworthy roles they play in society, others are used to condemn them for any bad thing they do.1 We also notice that these panegyric and

1 Contrary to R. N. Egudu's view that folksongs or song-texts are not oral poetry (see R. N. Egudu, "The Igbo Experience" in Oral Poetry in Nigeria, eds. Uchegbulam N. Abalogu, Garba Ashituwaju and Regina Amadi-Tshiwala [Lagos: Regi Nigeria, Magazine, 1981]) 247, I hold that folksongs are part and parcel of oral poetry and I would treat them as such in this paper.
satirical poems may be seen as indirect commentaries on the conduct of women in the community. It is for this reason that Ruth Finnegan sees such poems as "a fruitful source of the currently authorized interpretations of certain historical events and genealogies." It is our purpose to examine how praise and satirical poems are used in Aniocha to assess women's conduct in society.

Panegyric poems in Aniocha oral poetry

Marriage is one of the occasions in Aniocha during which women are showered with endless praise by society for the proper training they have given to their daughters. For during such an event both the families of the bride and her spouse are full of praise for her and her mother. There are three reasons why she receives such praise and honour. First, it is for her willingness to marry and thus fulfil one of the most important societal expectations. Secondly, it is for her beauty which has attracted her spouse and his people. Thirdly, it is for her moral virtue since she is able to remain a virgin till this day of marriage.

The praise heaped on her also indirectly goes to her mother because it was she who brought her up and gave her all the training needed to become the marriageable young lady she is today. The praise for her mother is given in recognition of the fact that it is not easy to bring up children to adult life and that it is even more difficult to bring up female children to marriageable adult life without any blemish such as having a pre-marital child. Aniocha Igbo society, like most Igbo societies, has great respect for marriage as a social institution because, to the people, it is the only respectable and legitimate way to procreate and raise one's family. Before the coming of the white man with the introduction of modern medicine there was no way a young lady would be able to carry out the risky and criminal act of abortion without her parents and the people around her noticing her condition. Consequently, any young girl who got impregnated would go through the shame

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3 Until in recent times in Aniocha, young girls were expected to retain their virginity till they got to their husbands' house. Young girls who uphold this moral virtue are highly respected in the society whereas those who lose their virginity before marriage command no respect because they have nothing to be proud of.
and pain of carrying the pregnancy till full term. So, it took great moral restraint for a young lady to keep her virginity intact till she got married in those days. This explains the kind of joy and sense of pride which a young girl who remains a virgin till her marriage day enjoys.

On this joyous day of marriage, all the friends, well-wishers and family members of the bride accompany her in a colourful and dignified procession to her husband's house. There is feasting and merriment for everyone who is close to both the bride and her groom. For her it is an occasion of mixed feelings. On one hand, she is sad that she is leaving her paternal home for ever to build another. On the other, she is happy that rather than bring shame and disgrace to her family she has brought them pride and honour by not only retaining her virginity but also by not carrying any pregnancy to her husband's house. The songs which accompany her to her husband's compound are therefore meant to salute her and tell her indirectly that her community endorses her conduct so far as to make this marriage day possible. One such praise song sung in Aniocha when a maiden is joining her husband is called "O nweli Ife Eweli Ife e."\footnote{This marriage song was recorded by the writer in Onicha-Olona, his home-town, on the 17 November, 1986, when one of his cousins, Nkechi Monye, was "going to her husband's house," as his people say.} It is reproduced below in Igbo and English:

\begin{align*}
\text{Igbo} & \\
O nweli Ife eweli ife e & \\
\text{Ka umu-ikolobia n'ewe akwa} & \\
\text{Ezi di bu shuge o} & \\
\text{I lacha shuge o na aso-uso} & \\
\text{Ajo di bu onugbu o} & \\
\text{I lacha onugbu o na enu-inu} & \\
\text{Ajo di ga-anwu onwu} & \\
\text{Ka mmu na lov u} & \\
\text{Kwalime o.} & \\
\text{English} & \\
\text{The owner has taken his property} & \\
\text{Let the young men start weeping} & \\
\text{A good husband is like sugar} & \\
\text{When you lick sugar it tastes good} & \\
\text{A bad husband is like bitter leaf} & \\
\text{When you eat bitter leaf it tastes bitter.} & \\
\text{The bad husband will die} & \\
\text{So that I and love will enjoy life.} & \\
\end{align*}

The bride and maiden of honour is the subject of the praise song above. She is that priceless gem which was, before this day, the centre of attraction for all the young men in the community but will today and
henceforth be the property of the lucky man who has picked her. Now she has publicly made her choice, the young men in the village who erstwhile cast lustful eyes on her will weep bitterly for having lost her. However, her admirers and well-wishers are full of praise for her because of her physical and moral beauty and because she has made them proud. Their wish for her is a good husband who is as sweet as sugar and not one who is as bitter as bitter leaf and who would make life so miserable for her as to give her cause to sue for divorce. Their prayer is that she would have such a loving and caring husband as would make her marriage most enjoyable and successful.

The next Aniocha Igbo marriage song which is sung in praise of a maiden who is going to join her husband is entitled "Ife Ewele." It is rendered below in Igbo and English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Igbo</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adolie nwanne m ije ewele</td>
<td>Adolie my sister farewell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ije ewele o nwa ka ego</td>
<td>Farewell, for a child is more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>valuable than money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ife anyi kpali -akpa o</td>
<td>What we have agreed for will</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>bring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O ma see okwu</td>
<td>no misunderstanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Na obuna o seme o</td>
<td>For if it does</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O ma se m o</td>
<td>I would not be happy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here, the singers bid the addressee, Adolie, farewell as one who is going on a long journey (which marriage, as a matter of fact, is). They pray that her marriage will be most fruitful and successful. They particularly look forward to her begetting children who their people consider more valuable than money, as the second line suggests. In the third line, they remind her to follow the good advice that people have given her so that there will not be any quarrel or misunderstanding between her and her husband. The singers seem to be saying that if she

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5 In Aniocha, like in most Igbo societies, a woman is believed to be the property of her husband. Everything she possesses including her children are all for her husband. That is why, on seeing a housewife anywhere, people normally ask her "ka maka odafe i?" (How is the person who owns you?).

6 The writer recorded this marriage song in Ezi town in Aniocha North Local Government Area of Delta State on the 24th of December 1988 during the "ina be di" ceremony of Adolie Egomdi of Ezi.
is good to everyone including her husband everyone around will be happy with her.

The next marriage song to be examined is called "Nwa Di Mma." It is sung in praise of a bridegroom on her wedding day. In this song, the singers recall the attributes which have endeared the maiden of honour to everyone in the community. The intention here is to encourage this young girl and others like her in the community to try always to comport themselves in a most edifying manner so as to uphold the dignity of womanhood. Like the preceding praise song, it has a solo-chorus sequence as shown in the Igbo and English versions below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Igbo</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mgbọ nwa oyi mọ</td>
<td>Mgbọ my dear friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nwa di mma o o</td>
<td>Beautiful child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mgbọ nwa oyi mọ</td>
<td>Mgbọ the friend of her mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nwa di mma o</td>
<td>Beautiful child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nwa wa mu n'ukọ nwa</td>
<td>The child who came when</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>expected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nwa di mma o</td>
<td>Beautiful child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mgbọ nwa oyi nne e</td>
<td>Mgbọ the friend of her mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nwa di mma o</td>
<td>Beautiful child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ishu ugegbe nwa oyi nne e</td>
<td>Mirror's face and friend of her mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nwa anụ ji eme inyanga</td>
<td>The child who is the source of our pride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nwa mali obi nne e</td>
<td>The child who understands her mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nwa di mma o</td>
<td>Beautiful child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ugodi uno nwa oyi m e</td>
<td>The key to the house and my dear friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nwa di mma o.</td>
<td>Beautiful child</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The song is addressed to Mgbọ who is simply called "beautiful child" because of her striking and remarkably good looks. The singers also obliquely comment on her inner beauty when they call her a friend not only to her mother but also to themselves, the implication of which is that she is a friend to all. There is also the suggestion that she is trustworthy and reliable for she is described as a key without which a door

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7 This marriage song was recorded by the writer at Agba village in Onicha-Olona on the 14th of April, 1989 during the traditional marriage ceremony between John Ikenwe and Mary Ngadonye both of Agba and Umolo villages in Onicha Olona.
to a house would not be opened. The implication is that a woman like her would not disappoint or betray anybody who reposes confidence in her. It is further suggested that she would not divulge the secrets of her husband to outsiders. Yet another attribute of hers which the singers speak of here is that she understands and knows the feelings of her mother. By implication, she is believed to be very intelligent and caring and will, undoubtedly, transfer this loving and caring attitude to her husband who, in turn, will have cause to love and cherish her dearly for showing sympathy and concern whenever he is in difficulty. That she is very beautiful is also suggested in line 9 where her face is likened to that of a mirror. It is in recognition of these attributes that Mgbo's admirers shower praise on her.

As noted earlier in this essay, whereas there are some songs which are used to commend women for their good behaviour, there are others which are used to condemn them whenever they do any bad thing. Such songs are satirical because they indirectly bite the miscreant to make her conform to societal norms. Our investigations reveal that the themes of such satirical songs which are directed at women in Aniocha include sexual promiscuity, pre-marital pregnancy, infidelity in marriage or inability to cope with such marital responsibilities as taking proper care of one's children, home or husband, etc. Like most Igbo, the people of Aniocha abhor any form of sexual indulgence, especially by their womenfolk. However, since sexual misconduct is, in terms of seriousness and impact on society, a less offensive act than, say, stealing, murder, arson, etc. a verbal reprimand is usually the most acceptable form of punishment given to offenders. For the people of Aniocha, in their wisdom, believe that giving any other form of punishment than a verbal rebuke would be too severe on a woman who has only abused her body and no one else's. This appears to be general Igbo thinking, as clearly pointed out by D.I. Nwoga, who states that:

Major crimes of course were punished with judicial or ritual execution or being sold into slavery or being ostracized but minor conflicts and crimes did not appear to attract established reprisals in physical terms. It is this gap that satire appears to have filled in traditional societies.  

One notices that a great majority of Igbo satirical songs are directed at women because of their illegal sexual escapades.

One of the Aniocha Igbo satirical poems which we shall now examine is called "Ada Nwa Mgbo kii lo?" The song is meant to castigate any young girl who is guilty of sexual promiscuity or of pre-marital pregnancy. In the first stanza, the singers ask her the question: "Kii lo?" (What is it?) giving the impression that they disapprove of her conduct. After this question which is also repeated in line 3, the singers tell us, in lines 5 and 7, some of the deplorable things which she has done. For instance, we are told that she flings her vagina up and down, thus suggesting that she hawks her body as an article for sale. Also in the second stanza, they accuse her of indecently displaying her teeth as a cotton plant does its lint, probably with the intention of attracting the attention of young men. Finally, in the third stanza, reference is made to the amorous glances which she makes when we are told that she makes faces like the sky when it is threatening to rain. The intention, it seems, is to draw attention to herself and lure young men to come to her. It is on account of these unacceptable sexual advertisements that the singers call her a harlot and ask her to go away from their sight because her mother has not properly brought her up. The implication is that her mother has a share in her shameful sexual misconduct.

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9 This satirical poem is very popular in Onicha-Olona. It is sung during the "Igba Ine" festival which takes place in September, every year, after the new yam festival. It is an occasion for lampooning during which men and women bluntly comment on one another's sex organs. Another occasion during which it is sung is when a young girl is either caught committing any illegal sexual act or found pregnant when she has no husband.
Ada nwa Mgbo kii lo

O Aninye
Ada nwa Mgbo kii?

O Aninye
I fe agama si enu
O Aninye
I fe agama si ani
O Aninye
Nne i azugbue i o
O Aninye
Aaa aha
O Aninye
Aaa aha
O Aninye
Ada nwa Mgbo kii lo

O Aninye
Ada nwa Mgbo kii lo

O Aninye
I chakapu eze
O Aninye
Lika olulu
O Aninye
Nne i azugbue i o
O Aninye
Aaa aha
O Aninye
Aaa aha
O Aninye
Ada nwa Mgbo kii lo

O Aninye
Ada nwa Mgbo kii lo

O Aninye
I na eshecha ishu
O Aninye
Lika igwe
O Aninye
Jeme ajedu mmo
O Aninye
Aaa aha
O Aninye
Aaa aha
O Aninye
Our next satirical song is entitled "Eee Ada mma ee." Like the preceding one it is made up of three stanzas which are, however, shorter than the former. Whereas the nameless Ada is as beautiful as the title of the poem suggests she has spoilt her beauty with her indiscreet and indiscriminate sexual activity. Thus she is like a ripe cherry fruit which has fallen into faeces and is therefore not fit for human consumption. For having indulged herself sexually, no respectable man would like to have her as a wife. For instance, in the first stanza, she is called an "akwuna," a prostitute, probably because of the frequency of her sexual activity, whereas in the second stanza, she is accused of making love on the farm, which is considered by society a sacrilege to the goddess "ani" mother earth, the goddess of fertility. Such a crime, it is believed, will affect the fertility of the crops on the farm, the consequence of which would be a poor harvest and famine as the goddess "ani," appalled by her immoral act, would cease her regenerative activity. As punishment for her crime, the singers curse her and wish her death from acute stomach ache. Lastly, in the third stanza, she is accused of sneaking out always to satisfy her sexual urge. It is suggested that she can easily manœuvre any situation no matter how difficult to get her sexual satisfaction. The singers deplore her shameful sexual life and curse her to a crime-ridden life that will end in disgrace.

Igbo

E ee Ada mma ee
Ada mma ee
Akwuna asogbue i o
Akwumampe
E ee O la Oshu ugbo

O la oshu ugbo
Na afo jeko atagbu i o
Akwumampe
E e e O bee-mpi oshu

Na alu jeko agbu i o
Akwumampe

English

E e beautiful lady
Eee beautiful lady
Prostitution has eaten your head
Akwumampe
E e e the one who fucks on the farm
The one who fucks on the farm
You will die of stomach ache
Akwumampe
O the one who sneaks out to fuck
Crime will kill you
Akwumampe

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10 This is a popular Igbo satirical song which is sung to castigate any young girl who is beautiful, but morally loose.
Our last satirical poem, which is entitled "Ifele Emechionuma Nwunye Ifekwune,"\textsuperscript{11} is addressed to a specific individual whose identity is only suggested by the mention that she is the wife of Ifekwune. Unlike the preceding satirical poems, the theme of this one is the inability to handle marital responsibilities effectively. The singers call the addressee the shameless wife of Ifekwune. They accuse her of asking her husband to do such jobs as sweeping the house, doing all the washing in the house, washing the dresses and cooking food, which are clearly jobs meant to be done by housewives in Aniocha, as, in fact, in most Igbo societies. She thus typifies the character of Chaucer's \textit{Wife of Bath} who controls her husband. She is expected to do these jobs which she now leaves to her husband, who also has to take care of the job on the farm. By either refusing or lacking in ability to discharge the duties of a respectable housewife, she has shown that she has not been properly brought up by her mother. She is, therefore, a shame to womanhood.

On noticing what she has been doing to her husband, leaving him to do all the jobs in the house, with the consequence of a premature death, Chap, their neighbour, cries out and alerts other members of the neighbourhood to see to what she is doing. Her conduct is perceived as a crime in a rural setting such as Onicha/Olona. This tradition may not make much sense in modern urban centres where men handle some of the jobs in the house traditionally meant for housewives. But this story is placed in a traditional context in pre-colonial Onicha-Olona where the duties of men and women in the house were clearly divided. Whereas men had to do all the tedious jobs on the farm such as clearing the bush, felling big trees, weeding, planting and harvesting yams women had to take care of the home, sweep the house, wash the clothes, cook food, etc. Because the farm was quite at some walking distance from the home, men had to leave the house as early as six o'clock in the morning, to return in the evening. On getting home, they must have been physically exhausted. It is in this kind of context that we see a man like Ifekwune, on returning from the farm,

\textsuperscript{11} This satirical poem was particularly addressed to the wife of Ifekwune in Umolo village in Onicha-Olona. She was guilty, according to her people, of asking her husband to wash her dresses and cook food for her, knowing that these are duties specifically meant for housewives. The writer recorded it on the 26th of April, 1989.
still having to do the domestic work in the house which his wife should have done to ensure that labour was properly shared between them.

The singers decry this attitude because it shows that Ifekwune's wife either does not love him or care for his well-being. Their intention is to condemn her with a view to correcting her so that she would conform to what other housewives in her community are doing. They want to make her realise that husband and wife should share both the joys and problems of life. For one thing, this song helps demonstrate the point that Aniocha satirical songs have other themes than sexual infidelity. It points out that there are other ways in which, through her conduct in society, a woman can win the displeasure of the people around her other than by being found guilty of sexual promiscuity. Furthermore, our investigations reveal that whereas the majority of people in Aniocha can condone sexual infidelity which many people believe to be the most heinous crime which a housewife can commit, they can hardly condone the refusal by a housewife to carry out the traditional domestic responsibilities which she is expected to perform:

**Igbo**

Ifele emechionuma nwunye
Ifekwune
Ifele emechionuma nwunye
Ifekwune
Anyi si ka anyi ju iyo
Anyi si ka anyi ju iyo
O bu iyu na anu di i?
Ka o bu di i na anu iyo?
Na di i na etc mgba o

Na di i nwe uko nni o

Chapu akpoa akokoko
I makwana Chapu njini
akpoa okokoko
Idumu etipoesia

**English**

Shameless wife of Ifekwune
We want to ask you
Are you boss to your husband?
Or is your husband your boss?
For your husband sweeps the kitchen
For your husband cooks the food.
Chap shouts okokoko
Chap who is as short as an engine shouts okokoko
That the neighbourhood is destroyed
That you have committed a crime.
Conclusion

Our aim in this study has been to show how man uses literature to comment on the behaviour of the people around him. It is by reason of this important social responsibility which literature performs in all societies that we see it as a barometer for measuring human behaviour. And in no other setting is the need to watch how human beings behave as greater than in rural communities where everyone is his brother's or sister's keeper, where whatever the individual does affects his or her next door neighbour. Since society either gains or loses from the conduct of the individuals in it, there is a need for people to concern themselves with commenting on what their neighbours do day in and day out. It happens that the particular group of persons whose activities are commented upon more than any other one (probably because of society's high moral expectations from them) are women. We have seen in the foregoing how the men of Aniocha in their oral poetry (through songs) comment on the conduct of their women in society with the object of either identifying with some of the noteworthy roles they play or condemning them for their shortcomings. We have also observed that it is through such commentaries that the moral and social values of Aniocha Igbo society are preserved for posterity.
MAKER AND DESTROYER: WOMAN IN AETIOLOGICAL TALES

Background

The existence of a direct causal relationship between traditional African social organisation and the representation of African women in modern African literature has become an axiom of African literary criticism. From here, African scholars like Izevbaye (1975: 5) have postulated a direct influence of characterization in oral literature on the practice of modern African novelists. While Izevbaye does not specifically deal with the portrayal of women in oral literature, his statement undoubtedly applies to that issue, too. Not surprisingly, the charges of misogyny, paternalism, male chauvinism, and machismo which are frequently raised against the novelists are also extended to traditional literature. This work therefore examines the portrayal of women in a selection of West African oral narratives in order to determine how far it relates to these charges.

The existence of negative gender-stereotyping is not the issue here. Countless folktales, satiric poems, and proverbs exist which highlight a series of flaws ascribed to womanhood and which caution men against women. Many ritual practices also exist which are based on negative perceptions of women. In this matter, African women have not fared better than their counterparts in Europe and other parts of the world. One is reminded of Aristotle's famous characterization of women in his Poetics, now subtly modified by editors under pressure from radical feminists. "There can be goodness in every class of person; for instance, a woman or a slave may be good, though the one is an inferior being and the other entirely worthless" (my emphasis).

This paper argues that, such stereotyping notwithstanding, the portrayal of women in traditional African (or, in our particular case, West African) folklore, is more balanced and complex than is generally rec-
ognized. The relationship between men and women is not exactly that between superior and inferior, master and slave, or that between proprietor and chattel, though there is something of each of these in it. It is primarily a love-hate relationship between two partners, one of whom is recognized as superior and the other as subordinate, with the subordinate becoming superior in certain areas of life.

Often, too, one suspects that the myths woven by men about women are more expressive of men's anxieties relating to women than of any deep convictions about male superiority. Numerous tales and proverbs cast woman as treacherous, capricious, vindictive, small-minded, and, frequently, brainless. Yet others, as well as many facts of everyday life, imply otherwise. For example, Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1958), a novel which gives a detailed cultural portrait of the Igboos of Nigeria, shows that Igbo culture balances a premium on maleness with an insistence on a harmonisation of male and female principles (Okonkwo, 1988: 135, 335-339). In a piece of dialogue which is also a true statement of Igbo ritual practice and world view, an old man, Uchendu, explains why the highly patriarchal Igbo culture also gives the name "Nneka" meaning "Mother is Supreme," to children, and why "when a women dies she is taken home to be buried with her own Kinsmen ... She is not buried with her husband's kinsmen":

It's true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you. She is buried there. And that is why we say that mother is supreme. (Achebe, 1958: 94)

Igbo attitudes – and the attitudes of many other African peoples – to woman are therefore ridden by irony and paradox, suggesting contempt and something of the superstitious awe which mortals feel in the presence of deities or when confronted with unfathomable phenomena. Folk wisdom, whether in classical Greek tragedy or in Igbo folklore, also portrays the gods as capricious, often mean and vindictive, even while asserting their virtues. In his remarkable work on "Igbo Folktales and the Evolution of the Idea of Chukwu as the Supreme God of Igbo Religion," Azuonye (1987: 43-63), drawing on his
own research and that of other scholars, demonstrates the permeation of Igbo folktales by such antinomies. Like the gods, women are perceived as creators and destroyers.

For illustration, commenting on Tortoise's outwitting of Chukwu in a popular tale, Azuonye observes that "we are dealing here with a common tale-type in which the name of Chukwu Ukpafia has been substituted for the names of other stupid ogres"; he also cites another tale in which "Chukwu is subjected to thorough-going ridicule in a series of encounters which seems to have no other apparent purpose than to undermine [his] claims to divine omnipotence or omniscience" (54). "In other tales," Azuonye continues, "the idea of Chukwu as the God of creation is debunked by means of motifs which question his sense of justice and fairplay," while an Ohafia myth stresses the "capricious incapacity of Chukwu to arrive at fair decisions" (55). Finally, in some tales "Chukwu merely occupies motifemic slots in various tale-types usually occupied by characters symbolizing various vices" while in others he "takes the place usually occupied by a heartless spirit or hag who dwells under water and through whose temptations the innocent is rewarded and the wicked punished just as the temptations of the Devil expose innocence and vice in man" (57).

Wole Soyinka (1976: 1-36, passim, 140-160, passim) reveals a similar ambivalent attitude to deity in his Yoruba culture. "The gods are quite amenable to fustian, nowhere more so than in their most sacred oriki (praise chants)" (5), and "the gods are accommodating and embrace within their eternal presences manifestations which are seemingly foreign or contradictory" (155).

It is such antinomies, rather than any misogyny or unalloyed negativism, which constitute the norm, as the following analysis of a selection of tales from another part of West Africa – the Republic of Benin, formerly known as Dahomey – will demonstrate. The primary texts are the seven tales numbered 103 through 109 and categorised as "Tales of Women: Love, Intrigue, and Betrayal" in the Herskovits' Dahomean Narrative (1958). They have been chosen because their main plots project admittedly negative stereotypes of women. They are therefore most suitable for evaluating the use, forms, and extent of gender-stereotyping in traditional tales. They have also been chosen for their accessibility.
Several issues should be clarified at this point. First, my approach is that of a literary critic rather than that of an anthropologist or a folklorist. Consequently, despite Richard M. Dorson's disapproval of the "literary bias" of Ruth Finnegan's *Oral Literature in Africa* (Dorson, 1972: 39), I accept Finnegan's argument that once the oral modes of composition and transmission are taken into account, oral literature may by fruitfully subjected to the kind of critical analysis which is normal for written literature, for

the basic medium is words .... Beyond this, literature, we are often told, is expressive rather than instrumental, is aesthetic and characterized by a lack of practical purposes – a description equally applicable to much oral art. The exploitation of form, heightening of style, and interest in the medium for its own sake as well as for its descriptive function can clearly be found in oral literary forms. So too can the idea of accepted literary conventions of style, structure, and genre laid down by tradition.... The sense in which literature is set at one remove from reality is another familiar element: this too is recognizable in oral literature, not merely in such obvious ways as in the use of fiction, satire, or parable but also through the very conventionality of the literary forms allied to the imaginative formulation in actual words. (Finnegan 1970: 24)

Furthermore, I have chosen to avoid the practice, dear to folklorists, of "identifying tale types and motifs by the Aarne-Thompson system" (see Dorson, 29), for doing so would becloud the fact that, analyzed in more delicate detail, each tale is in reality not just one motif but a composite of several motifs. In fact, the habit of emphasizing one major motif as if it were the only one is a major contributor to oversimplification in the interpretation of folktales. My procedure is therefore to treat the motifs as literary motifs, the women as agents for working out certain themes within the plots, and the portrayal of women as literary characterization which is best understood in terms of its interaction with other aspects of the tale form.
General portrayal of women

One thing which immediately strikes the reader of these tales is the rich variety of rôles in which the women are cast—hence the variety of motifs within which they are introduced, both as individuals and as members of a social collectivity. Of particular interest is the striving after fullness and balance, with the women being more rounded, more complex, than a cursory glance suggests, or than is achieved by some of the novelists who sprang up in the early 1960s to imitate Achebe's cultural nationalism. The plots in which these women function as heroines, villains, or just background characters, are also richer than conventional wisdom associates with folktale plots. Given the widespread assumptions about the misogynist ideology that informs the traditional tale, it is proper to start with a tale which seems created to subvert such assumptions. This is Tale 108: "Wives Cure Boastfulness."

Tale 108 is cast in the form of an allegory. Pigeon wives finally lose all patience with their husbands who, after being fed by their owners, invariably puff out their large chests and start boasting, "If I had someone, I would fight him, If I had someone, I would fight him" (401). Being worldly-wise, they realize that their husbands are merely indulging in male vanity. But they apparently feel that they must not take a chance. They therefore consult among themselves and invite Aklasu the vulture to pour humility and good sense into their husbands' heads without inflicting bodily injury on them. The "conspiracy" works out without a hitch. Vulture even plucks out the pigeons' feathers, leaving them literally and metaphorically naked. Now they confess that they do not really want to fight but had adopted their pugnacious postures "only to frighten the women." To compound their humiliation, their wives mock them with parodies of their former song. "If our husbands saw something, they'd fight. If our husbands had someone, they'd fight him" (401). After such experience, the pigeons have changed their tune and now coo a more acceptable, "I don't want to fight. I am not here for a fight."

From the outset, therefore, the tale contrasts the maturity of the female pigeons with the puerility of their husbands. There is a strong impression of an awareness of their adult responsibility on the part of the females, and it is this sense of responsibility which prompts them
to seek to tame their husbands' exuberance before it gets out of hand. The tale undermines the macho male's hallowed assumptions that man is full of good sense and courage: the male pigeons' nakedness is a symbolic exposure of their cowardice and imposture. It also exploits conventional archetypes of woman as life principle to offer women's ideals as an alternative to the aggressive instincts of men in the evolution of a humane culture.

In contrast with this positive image of women is the negative image of the co-wives in aetiological Tale 107: "Slandering co-wife: Why there are several attendants at childbirth." Whereas the pigeon wives display exemplary maturity and spirit of accommodation, the co-wives here are a mean, evil-minded, treacherous lot. Particularly disturbing is the rôle of co-wives in bringing grief upon other women, especially the heroine, as in Tale 107. This aetiological story deals with a co-wife's malicious attempt to ruin the heroine, Agenu, also called Tohwesi, daughter of King Aliliba Numayago. Married to a king, Agenu becomes pregnant and, in the fullness of time, is delivered of a boy. Her envious attendant or midwife, a co-wife, deceives her into closing her eyes at the crucial moment (on the pretence that this is the custom), uses the opportunity to substitute a stone for the baby boy, and takes the boy to her own hut. But an old woman has espied it all, and she steals the baby away from the co-wife's house. For a long time, the unfortunate young wife is subjected to a variety of tortures, not only from the king and the townspeople but more especially from the other wives.

The negative rôle of co-wives in such tales as this reminds one of the analogous rôle of women in the rural novels of such writers as Chinua Achebe, Flora Nwapa, and Buchi Emecheta, in enforcing the customs of patriarchal culture. The presence of this paradox in the works of male writers frequently attracts the censure of Nigeria's feminist critics, notably Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1988: 60-67). Like their Marxist counterparts in the last two decades, some of these feminist polemicists have yet to go beyond ideological (in this case, sexist-ideological) heckling and name-calling and analyze the literary works in question as literary rather than sociological works. It is not here a question of divorcing the two but of recognising that, being figurative, the former requires a multi-level interpretation. Though
this particular tale does not emphasize the point, it is implied that the setting is one which values male children above female children, and hence the co-wife's envy is provoked by the fact that having a son will consolidate the new wife's position in the family.

The behaviour of the co-wife in Tale 107 is a stock motif in traditional literature, but this does not detract from the truth of the portrayal. After her treacherous act, she confronts the victim with self-righteous taunts: "Ah, women here give birth to children, not stones. You will surely be killed" (397). The other wives join in denouncing the woman as a criminal freak. And when the king their husband asks what should be done to the freak, they join the townspeople in screaming for the most extreme punishment. In fact, for all the time the unfortunate woman is shut up in a house, they unrelentingly torment and insult her for coming here "to spoil the name of our husband!" (398).

One fact which the reader of these tales cannot miss is the peculiar nature of the rôle of old women in the plots. In Tale 104, Degen who allowed himself to be seduced by Sewezo, one of his father's wives, is killed according to custom. But it is two old women who determine the fate of Sewezo (391). In tale 106: "Fate of a faithless royal wife," it is again an old woman who determines the fate of Nyunyomamohwe. "An old woman said to the king, 'Dada Segbo, a thing like this must not happen in your house. You must cut off her head'" (396). When another woman suggested that the corpse be buried, "the old woman cried out, 'No. A woman like this must not be buried. We must put her outside for the vultures.'"

The centrality of these old women merely acknowledges a fact of everyday life in many African cultures, which is that old women receive a lot of reverence, just like old men. Throughout Tale 107, the hysterical behaviour of the other wives is contrasted with the sober, thoughtful behaviour of the old woman, whose rôle virtually makes her an embodiment of the forces of restorative and retributive justice in the plot. Introduced very early in the tale, she appears frequently, and is the prime agent for all the turns and twists of the plot, and it is she who brings about the dénouement by staging a public identification test in which the boy identifies his mother and then his father the king. She then reveals the whole sordid secret of the slandering co-wife and brings the full rigour of poetic justice upon the malefactor. In a coda
befitting the harshness of those times, the womb of the culprit's corpse is horribly mutilated to prevent her bearing a child in subsequent incarnations. The moral tag at the end of the story asserts:

That is why now when a woman is about to give birth, she gives birth in the presence of many women. She is never alone with but one. If she were to give birth in the presence of only one of her husband's wives, the co-wife would harm her.

An iconoclastic figure, the old woman is the antagonist and counter-force to the villain's force of evil, thus shattering the gender-stereotype of the "evil old hag" which is more familiar to many people.

*Woman's capacity for treachery and susceptibility to flattery*

Four of the stories contain motifs of woman as liable to betray her husband (though never her son or her brothers) and as susceptible to flattery. The betrayal motif is found in Tales 104, 105, 106, with variations on the motif in Tale 107 and Tale 109. In Tale 104, a man, Degenio, is betrayed by the wife whom he had taken from his own father and whose life he had restored at immense personal cost after she had been killed for her adulterous relationship with him. The woman's treachery comes shortly after her succumbing to the flattering words of Adjahosu, the King of Adja. And in Tale 106 the wife of Dada Segbo betrays her marriage by letting herself be seduced by a man she met in the bush while gathering firewood for cooking. In Tale 109 ("Guessing a hair-tying conundrum: Wife as Informer"), the woman's betrayal of the husband is inadvertent. In Tale 107 ("Slandering co-wife: Why there are several attendants at childbirth"), it is not a husband but a co-wife who is betrayed.

Feminist criticism would eagerly use these tales, especially Tales 104 and 105, to buttress their case against patriarchal society, which tends to treat women as men's chattel. The case is quite strong. Both tales begin by emphasizing the unparalleled beauty of the wife who later proves unfaithful, and the husband's peculiar and insensitive steps to ensure that only he enjoys this beauty. In the case of Tale 106, Metonofi the man "had a very, very beautiful wife. If they had searched far and wide, they could not have found a woman to rival her
beauty. So Metonofi shut his wife up in his house, saying that no man but himself should see her" (391-392). In Tale 106, Dada Segbo's wife Nyunyomamohwe is "more beautiful than the beautiful" and has "everything. Fine cloths, money. Nothing was lacking." But she is also "a young girl who had never seen the sun" (395). In both cases, the woman in question has been confined in a kind of purdha, a cruel abridgment of freedom which ignores the victim's human feelings, rights and dignity.

Yet a proper interpretation of these stories demands taking these opening details into full consideration, for there is nothing fortuitous either in their inclusion or in the link between such inhuman treatment and the wife's betrayal of the husband. In both cases, there is an implicit condemnation of the husband's action, and the wife's action is either a form of revolt, as in Tale 105, or a product of innocence, as in Tale 106. There is therefore a direct relationship between the type of treatment to which the wife has been subjected and the nature of her act of betrayal. In the case of Metonofi's wife who is shut up in the house, and who is secretly seduced by her husband's son, her revolt reveals a substratum of bitterness and vengefulness.

Some people may detect some irony in the fact that Metonofi's wife's negative feelings are directed not towards the original husband who had locked her up and who had later killed her, but at the seducer/lover who had shown spectacular devotion and undergone much suffering to literally rescue her from death. There is really no such irony, for there is a strong suggestion that Degeno had also treated the woman, now his wife, in the same way as his father had done. The wife's infidelity begins the day she "asked his permission to go to market in Adja (and) Degeno agreed" (393). Her having to "ask his permission" means that she had also been shut up, either literally (as is most likely) or figuratively. One strongly suspects therefore that her going to market was merely a ruse to leave her prison and see the world. The market here symbolises the world – a symbolism adroitly exploited in Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman (1976). Interestingly, the Dahomean group whose tales were recorded by the Herskovits are a branch of the great Yoruba ethnic group whose mythology and symbolism inform Soyinka's art.
It must also be recognized that the type of existence to which the woman has been subjected in both marriages has somehow warped her personality, and the excesses of her "vengeance" on Degeno alarm even her latest seducer. Once she gains her freedom, the woman vents the suppressed rage of many years on the latest embodiment of her dehumanization. She seizes the two horse-tails which gave Degeno the power of life and death over his enemies. Next, once she moves in with Adjahosu, King of Adja, she incites him to wage an unprovoked war against Degeno. And once Degeno is killed, she has his head cut off and subjected to all forms of taunts and humiliation. One of her songs of mockery betrays an unconscious wish to reduce him to mere object:

Gather up for me his fat,
With which to light my lamp;
Give me his bones,
To use as firewood. (394)

This is one of those monstrous reprisals which many victims of oppression dream of having an opportunity to inflict on their oppressors, but which few ever have the opportunity to achieve.

The story of Nyunyomamohwe, wife of Dada Segbo king of Agbome, is much shorter than that of the wife in Tale 105. Moreover, here the wife is not so much an agent in the plot as a constant victim of other people's actions. When she moves from her gilded cage to the bush, she is symbolically transported from the security of her closed world to that archetype of chaos inhabited by forces and creatures which seek the destruction of man (see for example Mircea Eliade, 1958: 9-11; also chapter 1, Arnold van Gennep, 1960). There, she meets the tempter, who in this story as in Tale 105 is a man. The language and tone of the relevant passage show the innocence and bemusement with which she enters into the illicit liaison: "Now, there in the bush she met a man. This man flattered her. He talked to her, talked to her until ... she let him seduce her" (395).

Here the woman's susceptibility to flatter is counterpointed by her innocence of the ways of the world (and of the bush), a pattern reinforced by the swift juxtaposition of the opening paragraph portraying her gilded cage and this second paragraph in which she falls. The third
paragraph opens with the revelation that "when the woman came home, she said nothing to Dada Segbo." But this is not primarily a sign or proof of her duplicity; it is all too consistent with her portrayal as victim, for one remarkable thing about her rôle in the plot of the tale is that she says absolutely nothing in the story.

Both tales end with the woman suffering a gruesome punishment. In Tale 105, the woman is recaptured by Degeno who then lures her into a pit, stones her, symbolically turns her into a corpse while she is still alive in the pit (by casting in those materials of everyday living with which the dead are buried), and then buries her alive. Finally, he makes a figure of a woman out of earth, there on the grave, makes a roof over it, and calls it *hweli*: "This is the *vodun* of the woman of a household. She watches over woman. Where there is a *hweli* in a house, she will keep the women who live there from committing acts like these. And it is forbidden till today to take an oath on *hweli."

On her own part, Nyunyomamohwe is killed and thrown into the bush to be eaten by vultures, and then Dada Segbo has the cranium brought in and solemnly displayed to all the other wives as a grim reminder that "any woman who lives with me must never lie with another man. Nyunyomamohwe did this, and here is her head" (396). The moral tag appended to the tale is: "That is why the wives of the kings of Abgome must never have anything to do with other men."

In going through these stories, one is sometimes struck by a certain inconsistency which can best be explained as a product of the reworking of the same motifs by several generations of storytellers, each of whom endeavours to suit the tale to the times and the audience. As H.A. Junod (cited in Finnegans, 8-9) has observed of the Thonga, tales are constantly transformed by the narrators and their transformations go much further than is generally supposed, further even than the Natives themselves are aware of.... I go further: New elements are also introduced, owing to the tendency of Native story-tellers always to apply circumstances of their environment to the narration.

This inconsistency is best illustrated with Tale 105: "The Faithless Wife: Death as a Moralist." The story opens with what should have come at the end as the moral tag to which it has been tending: "It is said here that a son must never sleep with one of his father's wives. It is a *su*
[taboo] for us." The story proceeds to reveal Degeno's crime of defiling his father's wife in the hut where she is shut in to keep her inaccessible to other men and to sons like Degeno. The first inconsistency comes when the crime is discovered and the death penalty is exacted from the victim rather than from the villain Degeno: Metonofi "was so enraged that he renounced this son and killed his wife. They threw the body of the dead woman outside" (392).

It is tempting to speculate that this perversion of justice is caused by the fact that the king may not kill his own son but may kill his wife, for the former is his own blood while the latter is not. This interpretation receives some weight from the analogous case of Agamemnon's family in classical Greek mythology. A sex-war polemicist would see it as another proof of the oppression of women. But in terms of the argument being developed here, the importance of the killing of the woman is that it points to a crucial shift of thematic focus in the tale. The taboo invoked at the opening of the story is explicit: "that a son must never sleep with one of his father's wives." Degeno violates this taboo and should have paid the penalty. The next twist comes when Death, acting as moral preceptor, warns Degeno that his dead mistress does not deserve his devotion, for "sooner or later this very woman would cause Degeno's death" (393). With this, the entirely new motifs of woman's infidelity and fickleness are introduced, as against the earlier motifs of incest and filial treachery.

Interestingly, the above tale is a variant of the much shorter Tale 104, and its length and lack of thematic and moral coherence suggests an accretion of several motifs and stories. Most probably, the original intention of the tale has been altered sometime along the line of reworking and transmission. By the time the story concludes, the original message has been completely forgotten, and it is now the villainous son Degeno who dispenses justice and words of wisdom. If this tale proves anything about traditional culture, it is not so much the oppression and dehumanization of women as it is that in a society without strong foundations of order and justice it is usually the strong who determine what the values should be. It is only in such terms that one makes sense out of the favourable reversal in Degeno's fortunes. Degeno's death in the battle with the Adjahosu's army is most probably a convenient telescoping of a series of adventures by which he (or,
as is equally likely, another culture hero) acquired wealth and the power that wealth confers, and returned to rule the very society from which he had been formerly cast out.

The imposition of a new theme on a traditional motif is also seen in Tale 109: "Guessing a hair-tying conundrum: Wife as Informer." In moral or thematic terms, two major motifs are involved here: namely, the motif of the trickster, the picaresque hero who lives by is wits, and the motif of the wife who cannot keep secrets. Each motif is usually worked out to derive an appropriate moral point, and that is the case here. At the same time, however, blending the two motifs has enabled the narrator to cast the wife in the rôle of villain, irrespectively of the lack of proof to this effect in the story itself.

In the tale, a picaresque hero parts his hair in three, ties the separate parts with thread, then, going to the king and the other nobles one after the other, he challenges them to name the three parts in this hair pattern, or, in default, give him money. If any of them got the names right the man himself would be killed. Not knowing the names, they give him money. Come another year, the man sets out again on his rounds of quizzing, having first put on the coat of a child who lives in his house. However, the king has already learnt the names from the man's wife. Of the three parts, the design in front is called "Another-man's-child-is-not-my-child," the one on the left is called "Sleep-does-not-know-death," and that to the right is called "Wives-never-keep-their-husband's-secrets." Now the man is in danger of losing his life. He is saved, however, by the fact that the names of the designs are now proved to be not only eternal truths but particularly applicable to the man himself. Not only is he forgiven: he is also promised a regular supply of food each year. And then,

the king said it was his wife who had disclosed the names. So it is true that women never keep their husband's secrets. So they brought the wife before everybody, and they told the people that it was she who had told. (404)

Yet a careful examination of the tale shows that the wife is not really guilty of any indiscretion or betrayal. It is neither stated nor is the reader encouraged to assume that she is privy to the husband's secret. The king's getting the names from her is presented as quite normal,
despite the phrase that he "plotted with her." His position makes his request tantamount to a command. But he also strengthens his hand by treating her courteously and plying her with gifts and then announces: "All the money I gave is not just a present. It is to pay you for telling me the names of the three designs of hair tying" (402). The implication of this statement is that she had provided the information in all innocence, without expecting any kind of payment. It is not even stated whether the man's hair-do is his own design, in which case the names of the parts are known only to himself and those in whom he chooses to confide, or whether the hair-do is really from the cultural repertoire, in which case the king could have learnt the names from any of his own wives or any of the top hair dressers.

Consequently, the abrupt twist of the plot into a vilification of the woman is both morally wrong and artistically shoddy. It is a shoe-horn conclusion, by which a desired ending is forced onto a plot which has been tending towards some other message. Once again, one sees the collapse of an attempt to manipulate a traditional tale towards narrower ends than envisaged in the original motifs. Other tales in the Herskovits' category of "Tales of Women" are even more explicit in balancing the faults of women with their manifest virtues.

**Woman as temptress and as lover**

This motif of woman as the archetypal temptress is found in Tales 103 and 104. Tale 103 recounts how a woman's seduction of a cult initiate leads to his death, contact with a woman at this time being taboo for the initiates. The young man Hundjo, in his early twenties, is spending the customary eight years in the initiates' cult house when he is tempted by the heroine Ahwala: "A woman, a young girl, who sold acasa and cakes." No sooner does Hundjo succumb to her wiles than he drops dead. Again, this ritual archetype has been employed by Soyinka in a play: *The Strong Breed*. In Tale 104, "The Faithless Wife," the heroine Sewezo, a wife in a polygamous family, tempts her husband's son by another wife into committing adultery of a specially abominable kind with her. For this act, the boy, Degeno, is killed and denied burial
- a most extreme punishment reserved for one whose crime is deemed particularly outrageous (as also in Sophocles' *Antigone*).

The two tales have been intentionally truncated, the motifs abstracted from the larger woof of the story, to demonstrate what happens when such motifs are examined in isolation from their tale contexts. Thus abstracted, the motif here emphasizes the heroine's portrayal as the evil temptress who causes the hero's loss of innocence and brings him to his doom. Yet this is not the case, for in both stories the heroine proceeds to undertake a most exemplary act of love and self-sacrifice, as a result of which the hero is ultimately restored to life.

In Tale 103, the heroine takes her place by her lover's corpse and keeps the flies away, to the surprise of the priest who had expected her to run away as soon as the calamity occurred. Moreover, when everybody else (other initiates, Hundjo's mother, brother, and friend, in that order) refuses to take the supreme risk of walking into a huge fire in order to restore Hundjo to life, it is the heroine Ahwala who not only takes the risk but does it with a nobility which shames the men. The tone of the narrative stresses the exceptional nature of her courage and the contrast between her and the men. The priest's words to the assembled people constitute a clear challenge:

"Those among you who have courage to enter the fire with Hundjo, will come out from the fire with Hundjo." Not a man was willing to go into the fire. Not a woman among these.

In contrastively juxtaposing Ahwala and the men, there is an unstated evocation of the traditional ideal of manhood by which man is expected to possess and display more courage than woman. It is to this norm that Ahwala appeals when tempting Hundjo: "You are not a man. A real man, seeing a young girl naked, would take off his clothes and would be naked with the girl" (387), just as Sewezo invokes it when tempting Degeno in Tale 104. Audience or not, they are taken to apply, for, as Philip A. Noss has observed,

The world of the tale is normally the immediate world of the people for whom it is told. Rarely is the tale about distant places and persons. The performer may accordingly allude and imply with much greater freedom than the writer, who must describe his scenes in careful detail. (Noss, 1972: 86-87)
But this is not all. Ahwala's act – both the temptation and the sacrifice – turns out to be one of those events that catalyse history and contribute to social evolution, for the years of seclusion for the initiates is reduced from eight to three. This order comes from no less a personality than "Metonofi," the "king of all the world," who rules the "vodun (gods) and Destiny, the animals and all men ...," in Dahomey as well as in France.

A little difficulty may arise here over the story's seeming attribution of the rôle of agent of change to Hundjo: "Long ago, a child named by the vodun was held for eight years without seeing the sun, or playing with women. As Hundjo disobeyed, they changed it. Now they keep them for three years instead of eight. The disobedience came from Hundjo." The question which arises here is: Why does the story cast Hundjo in the historical rôle which actually belongs to Ahwala? For answer, one needs only consider that the thrust of the story is not really Ahwala's rôle as temptress but Hundjo's nature as a weak human, liable to fall when tempted, even with the best of wills to resist.

In "The Faithless Wife" (Tale 104), it is instructive that it is not Sewezo but Degeno who is killed for the adultery they committed. Punishment is meted out to "a man who sought out his father's wife, and made her his wife" (390) rather than to the wife who seduced her husband's son and made him her husband. On the more positive side, Sewezo displays towards Degeno and his corpse the same courage and love which had made her flout tradition ("Death is nothing," she boasts, while tempting him) and initiate the unlawful relationship.

The woman, Sewezo, let it be known everywhere that this thing happened, and that they killed her lover. She wanted a medicine to bring him back to life. Now, at the place where they threw the boy, the vultures came to eat the body. But the woman sat beside him, and drove away the vultures. Day after day she sat beside him, keeping the vultures away, and weeping. (391)

The granting of Sewezo's wish by Mawu, the supreme deity, requires even a sacrifice as demanding as the one she has already made: "in order to resuscitate the young man, the woman must sit there for seven days and seven nights, without sleeping" (391).
The portrayal of the heroine as a lover in some of these tales is particularly significant, for two reasons. First, it debunks the myth fostered by such writers as James Olney and Rev. G.T. Basden that the capacity for romantic love lies beyond Africans and was unknown in African culture until the coming of the Europeans (Olney, 1973: 157-203). Next, the motif underscores what many people experience in real life but which critics of traditional culture tend to ignore, namely, that traditional society recognizes that women are also as capable of heroism and nobility as the menfolk, and are not only capable of destruction but also capable of creation.

An objection that might be raised here is that in both cases it is the woman, rather than the man, who sacrifices her interests to the love relationship, and who therefore shows exemplary devotion to the lover. In other words, there is the continuation of the gender stereotyping under a new guise: the inferior being sacrifices her interests to the interests of the superior being, but never the other way round. A variation on the Degeno story proves this to be untrue. In Tale 105 ("The Faithless Wife: Death as Moralist"), it is the son Degeno who penetrates his father's barricades around the wife to seduce her. Degeno, like the heroine in Tales 103 and 104, takes his place beside the lover's corpse. He not only beats off the vultures but also dares Death himself to seize the corpse:

Death came softly towards Degeno, and he asked him why he did this. Degeno told him his story, and he said he would rather die beside the body of the woman he loved so much, than let her be devoured by the vultures.

Furthermore, when Death cautions him that "he had decided to revive this woman, but that sooner or later this very woman would cause Degeno's death" (393), "Degeno accepted Death's proposal." The fidelity is certainly not one-sided, suggesting that the heroine is worth such self-sacrifice.

Such a portrayal is not uncommon, for a little research uncovers even more idealised paragons whose virtues are not defined in terms of a patriarchal valuation scheme. The diverse portraits of women in the Herskovits selection do not exhaust the range of portraits of women in West African folklore. Going through Dahomean Narrative and
similar collections, one is amazed to discover the vast range of gradations in the delineation of female characters. Contrary to such undergraduate long-essay topics as "The Image of the Woman in Traditional African Literature," there is actually neither a single "image" nor a few simple "images" (for example, woman as wife, mother, temptress, or mistress) though there may well be motifs which could be conveniently summarised in such terms. If there is any "image" of woman, it is a composite image harmonising all the different qualities that woman may possess both as woman and as human beings. For every image of "woman as destroyer" there is a counter-balancing image of "woman as creator;" more commonly, however, destroyer and creator are likely to exist within the same being in a creative tension of opposites.

It is clear therefore that the notion of hostility to women, which is one of those "self-evident truths" of the criticism of African literature and society, is alien to the world of the traditional tale. Individual tales there certainly are which contain such negative images. But the images are no more the inventions of male society than the real-life models of such female characters are. Far from projecting a negative image of women, these tales in fact confront the reader with the full gradations of characters which abound in life itself.

Conclusion

In addition to challenging the conventional notion of the portrayal of women in West African folklore, several other major conclusions can be drawn from the foregoing discussion. First of all, it is clear that attempts to evaluate the themes of folktale have often foundered on the same simplifications which bedevil the study of African folklore itself. From the now-discredited belief that folk literature is the product of a group mind, bequeathed in one immutable form from generation to generation, students of the genre rarely bothered to study how any particular tale, for example, might develop over the years in response to various transformations in its social context and in response to performer-audience interactions. Consequently, changes and additions within a given motif were ignored, and relatively recent creations were treated as standard archetypes. In addition, generations of
European and American anthropologists, pioneers in the field, spread the wrong notion that the traditional tale is thin and uncomplicated in plot and characterization, and that this feature is a function of its didactic conception and function in society. These dicta were accepted unexamined. Yet a little trouble to analyze a sample of tales easily exposes their lack of merit.

Treating the tales first and foremost as works of art, there is now little doubt that type-casting them according to what is perceived as their dominant motif would subvert the effort itself, for such an approach is likely to becloud the rich ambiguities and multiple significances which the literary critic is interested in, and which alone can yield a comprehensive vision of the values and world views encoded in the tales. Furthermore, the study suggests that neither the titles of tales (whether such titles are used within the culture or are assigned to tales by folklorists) nor the moral tags which conclude the tales themselves, are infallible guides to the themes which sensitive literary analysis can uncover in any tale, for both suffer from the same flaws of oversimplification of plot/motif and ignoring of changes. One suspects that titles and moral tags may really be the most unchanging aspects of tales.

On the specific issue of the portrayal of women, the conclusion is inescapable that it comprehends a greater variety of perceptions, and is much truer to the realities of social organisation, than is generally recognized. It encodes all the prejudices and denigrations which women are subjected to; but it also highlights women's peculiar strengths and virtues. If woman is the Pandora who brought all the ills of mortal man into the world, she is also the Pandora who has kept for man the ultimate reserve of hope. Ironically godlike in her totality, she is not just a destroyer: she is also a maker, a creator. In other words, she is eminently human.
Bibliography


Damian U. Opata

IGBO ATTITUDE TO WOMEN: A STUDY OF A PROVERB*

Women have been objects of discrimination since Biblical times. Either that society deliberately builds up a body of dispositions and attitudes to justify this discrimination, or a long period of such discriminations leads society to develop certain attitudes and dispositions about its women. Where these attitudes and dispositions become so accentuated, as I hope to prove, that a people goes so far as to link deity and woman with the same destructive principle and go still further to encapsulate such a linkage in a proverbial idiom, then the need arises to investigate the reasons for such a linkage.

The Igbo proverb under study, Onyemma n'egbugi na nwanyi egburu, means "One who is not killed by a deity is killed by a woman." Among the Nsukka Igbo where the proverb is fairly widespread it has another variant: "One who is not killed by Omaba (an ancestral deity) is killed by a woman." I am also informed that among the Uli people in the Ihiala Local Government Area of Anambra state of Nigeria, a close variant of this proverb exists.1 Among them it is said: Onye mmuo n'egbugi, ala ohu egbue ya, that is "One who is not killed by a deity, what is underneath the buttocks will kill the person." "Underneath the buttocks," as used in the context, is suggestive of indulgence in the sexual act, and implicates both man and woman.

In this study, we shall focus our attention on the Nsukka proverb, but the fact that a variant of the proverb exists in another Igbo community about two hundred kilometres away from Nsukka would give our conclusion a more general validity. The task is then to see how the proverb under study reflects the Igbo attitude to women. This would be seen from the point of view of how the proverb agrees with the Igbo man's experiential realization, cognitive embeddedness, and

perceptual understanding of the woman. It is hoped that in spite of its limited scope, it would provide additional information about the attitude to women in Igbo society.

A preliminary analysis of the proverb

Speaking in logical terms the proverb Onye mma' n'egbuai na nwanyi gburu could be simply regarded as an ordinary sentence, in which case the question of its truth or falsity would not arise. If, however, we decided to elevate the proverb to a propositional status (contrary to my earlier opinion that proverbs are essentially ordinary sentences) then the statement would be false. If so a person could be killed in spite of the fact that death may be traceable neither to a deity nor to a woman, nor even to "underneath the buttocks." In spite of this, it still stands to reason that a person may be killed by either a deity or a woman.

A second way of making a preliminary analysis of the proverb is to examine whether it suggests an elevation of woman to the status of deity, and whether deity and woman are here used as binary opposites. The negative import of the proverb would tend to suggest that the woman has not been elevated to the status of deity. However, before giving a definitive answer, it is necessary to make a rigorous analysis of field data.

On a preliminary note, it is necessary for us to understand what the word "killed" means in the context of the proverb. One thinks that the word "killed," deriving from its Igbo context and usage, is here used both literally and figuratively. Literally it means having caused someone, an animal, or a thing, to cease to exist, or having caused someone or something to stop having life; and figuratively, it means having brought a person, animal, or thing to a ruinous state, thereby rendering the individual, animal, or thing to a less-than-being status. A person is the object which can be killed in the context of the proverb, and the person could be either a man or a woman, but because woman is mentioned as the killing agent or subject, the word "person" (victim) is here construed to mean "man."

Fieldwork

During the course of this study, I found it necessary to interview people to find answers to some important questions, such as: How and why does a deity kill a person? What common attributes do deity and woman exhibit that may cause them to be linked together in the same destructive principle?

As has already been noted, a variant of the proverb under study among Nsukka peoples is: "One who is not killed by Omaba is killed by a woman." One way of investigating this was to start with specifics. Omaba, we have noted, is an ancestral deity, a creative one. For the people, Omaba kills to punish for an offence or for some intransigent act that has been committed. Offences for which one may be so punished include adultery, poisoning and killing people, theft, etc. In some Nsukka communities, Lejja and Ozalla for example, any person (man or woman) who sees an Ovuruze (an Omaba type) before it answers faces the risk of instant death. A woman who sees a naked Omaba (that which has its face unmasked) also faces the risk of instant death. There are also other deities which kill people who have committed such offences as adultery, theft, poisoning of people, etc. One who swears falsely to any deity also faces the danger of instant death. In some cases where a person who swore to a deity survives for seven native weeks, such a person goes to the market place to celebrate his innocence.

In short, in most Nsukka communities swear words are attached to names of deities or to form curses, e.g., in all Igbo Omaba communities, people curse themselves with: Omaba gbua gi — "Let Omaba kill you." In addition, in specific towns, people have these ways of cursing themselves: e.g. in Lejja, Adada gbue gi — "Let Adada kill you;" in Ozalla, Egbiyi gbue gi — "Let Egbiyi kill you;" in Aro-Agu, Adoro gbue gi — "Let Adoro kill you;" and in Oba, Ochegi gbue gi — "Let Ochegi kill you," etc.

What is important to note is that a deity kills only when an offence has been committed. This does not exclude the possibility of a deity killing to please itself, for as Achebe has pointed out, "... a god like Ulu
leads a priest to ruin himself."³ Achebe's fictional characterization of Ulu – a deity – may well be an actuality in some Igbo communities.

But how and why does a woman kill a person (man)? Investigations reveal that when killing is used in this context, it is used both literally and figuratively. Most often, it is the figurative meaning – bringing someone (a man) to a ruinous state – that is meant. Since men also kill, an attempt was made to find out whether a distinction could be drawn between the way a woman or a man could kill a person. Poisoning – a common practice in the village – was said to be frequent among men and women, but there seemed to be a general consensus among the people interviewed (both male and female) that a woman was more likely to plan to eliminate her husband than a husband to eliminate his wife. In short, the practice in some Igbo societies, in which a widow who dies when she is formally mourning her dead husband is regarded as having died an abominable death, is no more than one of those ideological positions men take to ensure their safety. If the widow dies within this period, it is assumed that she was somehow responsible for the death of her husband. Some of the ways in which a woman could kill a man – literally and figuratively – were identified as follows:

a) through deliberate starvation and bad cooking;
b) through sapping the spiritual and psychic energy of the person, Igbu nkulu obi nwoke – "killing the heart of a man," as it is put;
c) through luring a man away from family and friend by bewitching the person with charms, cooking good food for the person, or providing him with sex all the time;
d) through rendering a man economically useless by concocting charms and providing sex;
e) through concealed adultery and through deliberately performing certain functions for a man (husband) when the woman is in a profane state that interdicts her from discharging such functions for the man;
f) through betrayal;
g) through bad behaviour, especially nagging, resulting in a situation in which a man becomes depressed and withdrawn, etc.

During the process of interviewing people, I was told some anecdotes illustrative of either what women are or of the way they essentially behave.

The first concerns a certain man, allegedly in Umuchime, Obimo, Nsukka Local Government Area, whose wife committed adultery and concealed the act from him. It was said that the woman became sick, and that the husband dutifully started taking care of her. The sickness, instead of improving, was worsening. The man went to a diviner who advised him to go home and ask the woman to confess her sin. Other diviners the man consulted told him the same thing, but each time the man asked the question the woman refused to confess any sin. The man trusted his wife so much that he continued taking care of her in spite of the warning he received from diviners that he was risking his own health. Later on the man himself fell sick, got bed-ridden, and by the time his wife confessed her adulterous act, it was too late for him to save either himself or his wife.

The second anecdote concerns a man who is allegedly reported to have had some protective charm made for him by a powerful dibia. This man hung the charm on the ceiling of his obi and told his wife that under no circumstances should any person tamper with it as that would lead to his instant death. The man and his wife, it was said, lived for many years and had many children. Then one day, there was a bitter quarrel between the two of them, and when the man started beating his wife, she ran to where the charm was hanging, tore it down, and threw it into the fire, saying: "Die, you wicked man." Unfortunately, the man did not die, for there was no charm after all; it was only a thing to test the woman's faithfulness.

The third anecdote concerns the general behaviour of women. Here it is said that a son grew up, walked to his father, and told him that he wanted to get married. The boy's father was happy and told him that it was a good idea. The following day the man went to market and brought three piglets and asked the boy to take care of them so that when they grew up the money obtained when they were sold could be used in finding a wife for him. One day the man returned from market to discover that the boy had killed one of the pigs because it put its snout in his water. On another occasion, the boy killed another of the
pigs for another act of misbehaviour. Finally, they boy killed the last of the pigs. This time the father called his son and said:

Look here, son, when you came and told me that you wanted to get married, I did not oppose the idea. Consequently, I bought some pigs and asked you to look after them so that when they are grown we sell them and use the money to marry you to a wife. Now you have killed all three for one alleged misbehaviour or the other. I now want to tell you that you are not yet mature enough to have a wife, because a pig is better behaved than a woman, your mother included. Allowing you to get married now would be to have a murder case on my hands.

There are many other anecdotes and illustrative stories of what women are or of what enormous harm they can do, but for now we shall limit ourselves to the three examples cited above. However, there are not many reasons given why a woman would want to ruin a man. Some "reasons" are: "It is the way God created them," "it is in the nature of woman to do so," "women, they can do anything to get what they want," "woman is a leopard that has no small one," etc. Many who were asked why they regarded women as basically evil simply replied: _ka Ezechitoke si ke ha_ - "that is the way God created them."

Given all this, there is no doubt that the Igbo man's encounter with the being called woman is not always a felicitous one.

How then can we account for the fact that these people link woman and deity with a destructive principle and encapsulate it in a proverbial idiom?

**Discussion**

To resolve this question one could begin discussing man's attitude to death. Death is an inevitability, but as Igboaja puts it: "Though we are sure we must die, death has paradoxically made a fool of us by totally keeping us in the dark as regards the when, the time, of our death." ⁴ Man is aware that both deity and woman can lead him to this death. Both beings are very important and phenomenal manifestations of man's experience of reality. A deity manifests an immense metaphysical

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as well as a symbolic and physical presence over the affairs of man. And woman manifests an immense but sometimes disturbing physical presence in the affairs of men. Since both of them can and do become causative agents for the death of man, man therefore finds it necessary to define his relationship with them. The proverb under study can then be seen as being normative with an implicit injunction on man to set standards for and define boundaries in his dealings with deity and woman. It would then appear that one of the Igbo man's attitudes to woman is that of fear; hence, the proverb tends to warn man to be careful in his dealings with the being called woman.

How has man done this? In order to answer this question, we have to establish the manner in which man relates to deity. A deity primarily belongs to the category of the sacred. And as V.N. Uzoho puts it, the sacred are "all personal and impersonal beings which are called gods — whether they are in the form of spirits and ancestors or animals and objects such as cows, tortoises, monkeys, snakes, fish, trees, rocks and springs."5 In another searching analysis of what constitutes a common definitional core for all the beings and things which can be regarded as sacred, Udochukwu Eze asserts that:

If we consider the objects and entities merely in, and of themselves, no answer is possible. It is not the things themselves but the nature of attitudes and emotions that reinforce them that is the hallmark of the sacred. Sacredness can further be thought of as consisting in emotionally supported mental attitudes.... The sacred is sublime, honourable, admirable, wonderful and imposing. The feeling it evokes, is such that touches deep — the sense of the numinous. On the other hand, the sacred is sometimes held to be dan—gerous to ordinary mortals. Its demands are mysterious and perhaps its character capricious so that intermediaries are needed who themselves partake of the divine nature.6

This extract has been quoted at length because it sheds light on our discussion, and we shall return to this shortly. What is instructive now is that because sacredness does not necessarily inhere in a being or an ob-

ject, it is an ascribable quality. As this sacredness is an ascribable quality, it becomes an evolving and a transmissible set. Over time, it transcends the people, becomes vast, impersonal, autonomous, generates its own logic, and finally overcomes the people and generates in them a set of attitudes. Such feelings and attitudes include: fear, awe, respect, dread, admiration, sense of wonder, etc. This is because as we have been told, "the feeling is such that it touches deep — the sense of the numinous." And as Paul W. Pruyser puts it,

the numen grips; it casts a spell. It constitutes itself. It is overwhelmingly there and thereby sets the stage for the relations between subject and object. The subject feels himself small in comparison with the greatness of the numen. Before one knows the specific qualities of the numen and before one can name it, it poses itself mysteriously, ambiguously revealing and concealing itself to the beholder.7

All this notwithstanding, the Igbo man does not perceive that attribute of sacredness as an everlasting property of the beings and objects to which it has been ascribed. As S.N. Ezeanya observes, the Igbo have a proverb which asserts that:

Agwu kpaha nganga, a gwa ya osisi ejili tu ya.
When Agwu (the divinity that regulates behaviour) becomes heady, it is told of what wood it is made.8

Commenting on this proverb, Ezeanya further asserts:

It appears that man can even confront a divinity to bring it back to its senses, since according to the proverb, when Agwu becomes proud and therefore begins to act ultra vires, it would possibly be destroyed since man can destroy the wood which Agwu inhabits and without which a particular Agwu ceases to exist as such.9

The late Igbo poet, Christopher Okigbo, also asserted: "Gods grow and (are) Abandoned."10 In another vein, Uzooho observes that "a sacred

9 Ezeanya 14.
10 Ezeanya 14.
object may not have such a position in universal scheme as will entitle it to a permanent reverence. It has not within itself a power or protection sufficient for its sacredness."\(^\text{11}\)

In summary then, we can say that the nature of deity is such that:

i. It has an ascribable sacredness.

ii. It is emotionally supported by mental attitudes and continually reinforced by them.

iii. It is sometimes dangerous to ordinary mortals.

iv. It is mysterious and of the nature of the numinous.

How does all this relate to the Igbo attitude to women? We have already seen that the Igbo attitude to woman is that of fear. It does appear to me that the Igbo tend to perceive in the being called woman those properties which are attributed to the sacred. First, it has to be acknowledged that the attitude of fear which the Igbo express of woman is not a necessary characteristic of the being called woman. It is an ascribed quality and is strongly supported by years of reinforced mental attitudes. Unfortunately, the Igbo tend only to see the negative aspects of the sacred as far as woman is concerned. They fail to see the "sublime, honourable, admirable, wonderful and imposing" characteristics of women and see only the "dangerous" and "capricious" aspects; hence the attitude of fear. Fear leads to self-protection; hence, the proverb enjoining man to be careful in his dealings with woman. But why should man, in expressing this fear, go so far as to begin to link, in his psyche, woman and deity with the same destructive principle? Is woman of the nature of deity or are the essential attributes and characteristics of woman opposed to that of deity? First and foremost, woman is not of the order of the sacred. She is, like man, profane, ordinary. Uzoho lists the following as constituting the profane:

1. that which is permitted for secular use (as distinct from that which is set aside for sacred purposes);

2. the thing upon which interdiction is applied and which must remain at a distance from the sacred;

3. the thing that is set free or polluted;

\(^{11}\) In Uzoho 40.
4. the ordinary, common, unconsecrated, temporal and outside the religious, i.e. that which is unholy, irreverent, blasphemous, defiled.\textsuperscript{12}

Woman as a genus is, like man, in the context of these specifications, profane. However, there are instances in which a woman can become sacralized; for instance, by being ordained a priestess. Nonetheless, there are countless instances in which woman is declared profane, defiled.

A man going to war is supposed to stay away from women if he is to maintain his physical and spiritual energy as well as his good luck. A man who is undergoing initiation rites is supposed to stay away from women. The potency of many charms could be rendered nugatory if they or their bearers come in contact with women. In some Igbo communities, married women are sent away from their matrimonial homes to the homes of their parents when such communities offer annual sacrifices to their communal deities. This is because the presence of the women at such a period would attenuate the potency of such communal deities. In other words, apart from the general profanity which man shares with woman, the Igbo tend to ascribe to woman those attributes which can attenuate the essences in certain beings and objects. It may well be that man's linkage of woman with deity in a destructive principle has some experimental validity. If this is accepted, we can then begin to answer one of the preliminary questions we posed earlier on, that is, whether the proverb under study elevates woman to the status of deity. This is apparently not the case. Nonetheless, and very significantly too, the linkage of woman and deity in the proverb illustrates the principle of dualism which pervades the Igbo worldview. As the Igbo would put it: \textit{Ife na – aso uso na egbu – egbu} – meaning "That which is sweet is also capable of killing." Furthermore, there is an Igbo adage which has it that: \textit{Ife di ibua ibua, nka kwulu nka akwudebe ya} – that is, "Things exist in twos; if one stands, the other stands close by it." It would then appear that for the Igbo, woman symbolizes the avoidance approach principle; for the Igbo man, woman combines good with evil. However, it does appear that whereas the Igbo man

\textsuperscript{12} Uzoho 37.
recognises this dual aspect of woman, he decides to emphasize the unpleasant aspect of woman, leading to his cultivation of fear.

Another way in which woman can be linked with deity, which calls for the Igbo man carefully to define his relationship with woman, is an apprehensive sense of mystery, the sense of the unknowable, which to him is crystallized in woman. According to Pruyser:

Mystery is a borderland situation in which something both powerfully reveals and powerfully conceals itself, and its concealment is a feature of its essence. Our inability of "solving" it in the way we are able to solve any puzzle or well-formulated problem is not due to inadequate thinking or poor training. Mystery alludes to the experimental and perennial fact that some important aspect of reality stubbornly resists analysis.\(^\text{13}\)

This stubborn resistance to analysis and patterning of a phenomenon is no doubt part of the Igbo men's understanding of women. During the process of interviewing people, one informant grinned with delight and left me with this poser:

You have been to the University, the end of all book (knowledge), and you are teaching there now. Please, tell me, have you in that place seen or heard of anyone who has known all there is to woman? If there is please I would like you to take me to the person.

Using the same image of the book, yet another informant declared that "woman is the book created by God which no man can read completely and understand fully." As if not wanting to be beaten to the game, another informant gave me the following graphic illustration of the unknowable nature of woman. According to him, a woman (married) has many bundles. The day she is going to live with her husband, she begins to drop these bundles one after the other right from her parental home, along the way, and right up to her matrimonial home. Throughout her married life, she is continually going back to bring these bundles, and one never knows what each bundle contains until it is untied. Worse still, the farther away each bundle is from her matrimonial home, the more unpredictable would be the contents of such a bundle.

\(^{13}\) Pruyser 104-5.
This anecdote has crystallized into a popular Igbo proverb which has it that *Nwanyi bu ngwungwu, nke onye toyetalu o buru* – "A woman is a wrapped parcel, whatever one finds after opening it he has to live with it." Friedrich Nietzsche's outcry against the being, woman, that everything about her is pregnancy and that even the most cautious men buy their wives still wrapped, is not an isolated case. As it is then, the Igbo man appears to have internalized in himself the idea that woman has in her a certain element of the mysterious, of the unknowable. According to Pruyser, "mystery and darkness have much in common." They are not merely annoying puzzles. They are not merely the absence of clarity. They have an oppressive thickness that envelops and overwhelsms us. They elicit dread. As we have seen, woman can kill. Because she is mysterious, unknowable to man, she elicits dread. Man, therefore, constantly seeks to define his relationship with her in order to avoid death.

Thirdly, and closely related to the mysterious and unknowable nature of woman, is the ambiguous nature of woman. As two proverbs drawn from two important aspects of human activity, sex and sleep, have it:

Onwere ogwugwu na-egbu nwoke ka-otu nwanyi, se onwere ogwugwu na-agu nwoke ndala ka?
Is there any pit which attracts man to fall into as the woman's vagina, and is there any pit that kills a man like it does?

*Nwanyi bu oji ishi na – etiji olu.*
Woman is a pillow (head rest) that breaks the neck.

In these two proverbs, the attractive combines with the dreadful and the destructive, thereby creating a sense of tension, and therefore stressing the need for man to define carefully his relationship with woman. The same destructive principle is at work in the proverb, again drawn from another important aspect of human life, — feeding — which has it that:

*O buru na nwanyi n-enye nwoke nri na umu nwoke a ga anwuchagwoma.*

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15 Pruyser 103.
If women were responsible for feeding men (being responsible for man's source of feeding), men would have long become extinct.

This implies the recognition of the immense but unfulfilled destructiveness which woman would have wrought on man had she had the power so to do. Woman is then seen as fully capable of inflicting destruction on man.

So far, we have approached our discussion from the male point of view. How does woman perceive herself in terms of her relationship with man? That she sees herself as disadvantaged in a man's world is not surprising. What is rather surprising is that she recognizes some evil tendencies which man has ascribed to her person. We remember the image of the mother-in-law in traditional Igbo communities, always suspect of her son's wife, wondering whether her son is safe in the hands of the woman. We also remember the hard screening and great show of concern which sisters show over the choice their brothers make in selecting a wife. In most cases, when a woman wants to use proverbs with woman as subject, she would normally add a modifier, as illustrated in the following proverb.

_Ezi nwanyi bu be di ya_
A good woman is her husband's household.

Even when a modifier is not expressed, and something predicated of woman positive, then it is the good woman who is also meant, as in.

_Nwanyi bu aji na-oke di ya na-ume._
Woman is a belt to her husband.

These areas of discussion, however, need a more rigorous study and documentation, but for now we can begin to tie up our discussion of the proverb under study.


Conclusion

From our discussion it appears that in the proverb under study woman and deity are not used as binary opposites. This is not to deny the fact that deity is seen to be sacred whereas woman is perceived as profane; but this is as far as it goes. Deity is creative, salvific, but also punitive and not infrequently capricious. At the beginning of this essay, we referred to *Arrow of God*, in which it was said that a god like Ulu could lead his priest to ruin. We have also seen that both deity and woman are mysterious and unknowable. These in turn are attributes which generate fear and dread in man. The linkage of woman and deity with a destructive principle in the Igbo man's psyche is not only a concern for his safety and protection but also a recognition of the things that can void these cherished desires. It is an attitude of fear, fear that what is dear to him could prove harmful, fear that what he considers an instrument that he can use at will will fail him. The proverb is then a dispositional statement arising from the male progeny and expressive of man's fear of and dread for woman, of the mysteriously tremendous nature of woman, and of his discomfiture at the perceived intractable dualism he ascribes to woman. It is not male chauvinism but its futility, an epiphany of his powerlessness where he feels he is very much the master.
Nnadozie Inyama

THE "REBEL GIRL" IN WEST AFRICAN LITERATURE: VARIATIONS ON A FOLKLORE THEME

Know further yet; whoever fair and chaste
Rejects mankind, is by some Sylph embraced:
For spirits, freed from mortal laws, with ease
Assume what sexes and what shapes they please.
(Alexander Pope, "The Rape of the Lock," Canto 1, 67-70)

A well known Igbo folktale tells about the village girl who is so beautiful and conceited that she will not look at, let alone marry, any of her teeming local admirers. Neither threats nor jeers nor pleas will make her accept any of the young men around. One day, to her boundless surprise, a very handsome stranger appears in her village, and she falls uncontrollably in love with him. No warnings will make her change her mind about eloping with this stunningly handsome stranger. The fact that no one knows where he has come from, or that other people feel that there is something uncomfortable – or even sinister – in his extreme handsomeness means nothing to her. Flouting all custom and decorum, she throws all caution to the winds and goes off with the stranger.

This story usually ends in a variety of ways; but most endings are usually unfavourable to the obstinate damsel: the handsome stranger either turns out to be an evil spirit sent to punish her overbearing arrogance, a python that swallows her, or a fish that regains its true nature at the first river they come to and plunges into the deeps. Where the lady does not lose her life in this ill-advised adventure, she is left in such a distressful state that she wanders away, too ashamed to return to the village and the jeers of her people.

The moral of this story is quite clear: anyone (girl) who thinks that she is too good for those around her will certainly pay a heavy price for such arrogance. But beyond this surface moral lie weightier deductions: the demand for conformity with familiar norms of behaviour; the group
distrust of strangers – no matter how handsome they look; the need for the community to keep for itself the best of its products, whether human or material, and – from a contemporary feminist perspective – the manifestation of the traditional restraints imposed on the female member of society. Whereas the male member of the community has the choice or freedom to go beyond the immediate environment to live or marry, the female member’s choice is restricted to the known environment. Any effort on her part to break this circumscription of her freedom or to upset the known order of existence is visited with a severe reprimand.

Folklore has been recognised by various critics as a powerful source of, and influence on the development of modern African writing. Without going into unnecessary details to illustrate this point, I shall reiterate the fact that the use or adaptation of folktales, legends, myths, proverbs, and so on, has helped to enrich African writing and give it its distinctive flavour and character. This is more specially true of writing from the West African sub-region.

Perhaps no other tale-type has been more frequently adapted by West African writers than the type with the rebel-girl theme. In the process of such adaptation and manipulation, the writers have revealed both their own biases and their consciousness of the prevailing social trends and preferences. The purpose of this article therefore is to use the work of four West African writers to show the extent to which the above processes have been manifested in the consciousness of the various writers, revealing in the process their debts to traditional folk sources, and more importantly, the perception of the place of the female adolescent in the community.

Perhaps the best starting point in this investigation would be Amos Tutuola’s The Palm-Wine Drinker, which contains the most direct reproduction of the rebel-girl tale-type. Tutuola captures and dramatises the exoticism, remoteness and terrifying attributes of the traditional cautionary tale, the closed community’s fear of unknown agents, and its distrust and disapproval of a character trait that defies communal and parental authority. He also maintains the essential narrative format of the tale-type. The young girl in question is a paragon of beauty, "very beautiful as an angel" (18), and "the daughter of the head of that town" (17), in other words, a princess of sorts. According to the narrator, she
was "due to be married" (i.e. old enough to have a husband), and "her father was telling her to marry a man but she did not listen to her father" (17-18). Indeed, "no man [around] could convince her for marriage" (18) and her father had given her to a man whom she "refused totally to marry" (18). The young woman is thus presented with all the motifs of the tale-type in Tutuola's rendering: she is beautiful, self-willed, and proud.

On a fateful market day, the unknown stranger is seen in the market place, and the proud village beauty is irrationally overwhelmed by his handsomeness. Tutuola elaborates on the physical attributes of this strange man, his "complete" gentleman:

He was a beautiful complete gentleman, dressed with the finest and most costly clothes, all the parts of his body were completed, he was a tall man but stout. As this gentleman comes to the market on that day, if he had been an article or animal for sale, he would be sold at least for £2,000 (two thousand pounds). (18)

At the sight of the handsome man, the girl abandons her wares in the market place, drawn almost magnetically to him, even though he does not show the slightest interest in her. As she follows him towards his home, he tells her repeatedly to go back home, but she refuses to listen; she is too intensely infatuated to hear any warning. Eventually, her nightmare begins. The "complete" gentleman whose beauty would have stopped a bomb from exploding, and who causes the envious narrator to curse his own features, turns out to be a "curious creature" from the deep forest, a bionic assemblage of borrowed parts which the wearer returns to their owners as they advance into the forest. But by now it has become too late for the girl to return home, for the "curious creature" will not allow her to go back now that his secret is out. The night-marish experience continues for the girl as she is forced into the home of the erstwhile "complete gentleman," now reduced to a bare skull: a hole in the ground, where he lives with other members of his skull family. Her seat is a large frog, and she is made dumb when the skull ties a magic cowrie around her neck.

Tutuola incorporates this familiar cautionary tale into the larger body of his otherworldly quest story, and in the process he puts in elaborate details of locale and characterisation which the traditional tale
usually dispenses with – the details of distance, habitations and physical appearance, for instance. More important, however, is the author's use of the tale to embellish the heroic image of the quester – narrator. He goes in search of the girl at her father's request and succeeds in rescuing her from the terrible skull and restoring her power of speech. As his reward, she is given to him in marriage by her grateful father.

This fortunate result is a variation from the usual fate of the rebel girl, but as I said earlier, it is for a different objective that Tutuola's heroine is rescued. She functions in the capacity of the "damsel in distress," a key motif in quest narratives, and becomes the hero's companion in his further adventures in the underworld. She serves to advance the knighting image or role of the hero, one of whose tasks is often the conquest of the dragon, or some other evil agent, in order to rescue and win the love of the heroine.

Tutuola is plain and direct enough in his incorporation of this tale-type in his quest story. But the same quality of directness can hardly be ascribed to Cyprian Ekwensi. His famous novel, *Jagua Nana*, has generally been seen as reflecting the new urban culture of an Africa in tradition. Jagua, the heroine, is seen as the new type of urban woman, a manipulator, as well as victim, of the city and its peculiar culture.

What has usually been ignored, however, is the fact that below the urban rhythm and flavour of the novel, Ekwensi essentially retells the story of the rebel girl. This is most visible in the details of the characterisation of the heroine. I shall quote substantially from the relevant section of the novel to establish these essential similarities in profile between Jagua, the city woman, and the rebel girl of the folktale:

She was an only daughter. Her father doted on her. In his Godly way he wanted her to marry a serious man from the village. Poor Dad. He was only a catechist at the time, although he struggled hard and later became a pastor. The husband he approved of said he worked in the Coal City. He had come to Ogabu on leave and he noticed her and wanted to take her back with him as wife.

Jagua was fond of changing her clothes often, and – in those early days of make-up – of painting her face. Every few hours she went down to the waterside and took off her clothes and swam in the clean cool water. The boys used to hide and peep at her breasts and hips. She knew it and always teased them. All the girls in her age-group had married and had children but she had resisted to the last, hoping ever for some eminent man to come along to
Ogabu to marry her. To the shock of the villagers she wore jeans and rode her bicycle through the narrow alleys of Ogabu and talked loudly and her laughter was throaty so that men drew up to her side and wanted her. She considered herself above the local boys most of whom she had bedded and despised as poor experience. (166-167) (my emphasis)

Once again we encounter the girl who is, from the communal point of view, a rebel and non-conformist, and therefore an object of criticism and distrust. She resists any attempt to force her into marriage, and at the same time feels superior to any local aspirant to her hand in marriage. The longing for something fresh and different is there also.

Although the heroine does marry, this is only an authorial attempt to disguise the folktale format. Ultimately, the story comes back on the known plot line, for the marriage fails and the heroine's longing for a free and different kind of life returns. Again, the author tries to blame this development of the heroine's inability to produce a child, the traditional crutch for pillorying women. But the more powerful argument lies in the heroine's essential longing for a different world, a different experience from the humdrum and familiar world of marriage to a man with routine ways. Her desire for something different from her Ogabu village and its people, which made her marry the Coal city man in the first instance, remains unfulfilled because essentially he is no different from the local lads she had despised:

But he never took her to parties, and would not dress well, for fear the money would leak away. In no way did his ideas of living attract her. She found that she had obeyed her parents but now they were not there to see her misery and they would never understand her longing, the hot thirst for adventure in her blood. She refused to adapt herself to his humdrum life and she wondered how she had been able to remain with him for over three years. (167)

In other words, the marriage has done nothing to transform Jagua from her initial image as the rebel and non-conforming girl of the folktale, in spite of the author's effort to give his story a different twist. She must inevitably go in quest of her strange man, and possibly suffer for her supercilious airs and refusal to conform with the staid norms of the familiar world and environment, her obsession with the unknown.
We are told that after she had mentally resolved to abandon her marriage,

She began to look at her man with detached air. To her, he was as good as dead. Dead and buried in her heart though he did not know it. She gave him her body, and thought instead of the slim young men in the dark bow-ties and elegantly cut lounge suits. (168) (my emphasis)

Ultimately, she runs away to Lagos, in search of these strange and exciting young men.

What happens to Jagua in Lagos is hardly different from what usually happens to girls in the folktale. She takes to the risky and illusory world of prostitution (which by traditional norms is a terrible moral fall) but finds no fulfilment in her encounters with the different men who come her way. When we meet her at the beginning of the story she is an ageing beauty, fighting desperately to retain the affection of Freddie, a teacher who is young enough to be her son. Eventually, of course, she fails, and her last involvement with a vicious politician nearly costs her her life. She comes into contact with all sorts: strange white men, vicious politicians and violent armed robbers.

The world of the city, in Jagua Nana, functions in the same capacity as the terrible nightmarish world we encounter in Tutuola's tale.

Eventually, a shame-faced Jagua returns to Ogabu, having failed to find any meaning in her adventure in a strange place and among strange people. When she returns it takes some times before she can fit into the rural world, where the people are at a loss to know who she is and what she is doing in Ogabu.

I shall come back to Ekwensi after introducing two other works in which the authors have also made use of the rebel girl folktale or theme: Anowa, a play by Ama Ata Aidoo, and "New Life at Kyerefaso," a short story by Efua Sutherland.

In the play Anowa the heroine is the typical headstrong village belle. This is her portrait as presented in the play's prologue:
Old woman:
That Anowa is something else! Like all the beautiful maidens in the tales, she has refused to marry any of the sturdy men who have asked for her hand in marriage. No one knows what is wrong with her!

Old man:
A child of several incarnations she listens to her own tales, laughs at her own jokes and follows her own advice.

Old woman:
Some of us think she has allowed her unusual beauty to cloud her vision of her world.

Old man:
Beautiful as Korade Ahima,
Someone's-Thin-Thread.
A dainty little pot
Well-baked,
And polished smooth
To set in a nobleman's corner.

In the early stages of the play we are made to know that she is a constant source of worry to her parents, especially her mother. Six years after going through her puberty rites she is still unmarried, and that makes her the subject of village gossip, to the consternation of her parents who cannot understand her rejection of all the men they have chosen for her.

Ultimately, the crisis point comes: Anowa rushes in one day to announce that she has found her man. Expectedly, he is violently rejected by her parents. Although the play deviates somewhat at this point from the traditional folktale pattern of a total stranger being the chosen one, we still find that Anowa's choice of a husband, though a young man from the same village, does not meet the required expectations. He has a reputation for shiftlessness. Anowa's mother gives us his profile as soon as Anowa announces Kofi Ako's name:

Badua:
Anowa, shut up. Shut up! Push your tongue into your mouth and close it. Shut up because I never counted Kofi Ako among my sons-in-law. Anowa, why Kofi Ako? Of all the mothers that are here in Yebi, should I be the one whose daughter would want to marry this fool, this good for nothing cassava-man, this watery male
of all watery males? This I-am-the-handsome-one-with-a-stick-between-my-teeth-in-the-market-place ... This ... This ...

(Anowa, Phase 1, 15)

But the louder the protest, the stronger Anowa's resolve to marry Kofi Ako becomes. After a violent quarrel with her mother Anowa packs away to her man, determined "to make something of him." She leaves with a mother's curse hanging over her head, for Badua tell her "But remember, my lady, – when I am too old to move, I shall still be sitting by these walls waiting for you to come back with your rags and nakedness, (Anowa," Phase 1, 17).

Anowa leaves with Kofi Ako, and with her pushful determination they make a huge success of their trading activities and their wealth becomes legendary. But the story, predictably, does not end on a "happily ever after" note. In time wealth becomes the source of their alienation from each other, complicated by the childlessness of the marriage. Ultimately, Anowa discovers that her husband has become impotent. When she confronts him with this fact before their servants and slaves, he goes off and shoots himself, too ashamed to continue living. Anowa goes and drowns herself. Thus the prophecy of Badua concerning the ultimate fate of the headstrong daughter comes true in a different but more tragic sense. Again, further conclusions will be drawn later from this particular adaptation.

Efua Sutherland's "New Life at Kyerefaso" is a beautiful poetic retelling of the rebel-girl tale-type. It is not elaborated into a play or a novel but reshapes all expectations as to the fate of the girl and her mate.

Foruwa, the damsel in question, meets all the specifications of the typical rebel girl of the folktale. She is of royal birth, like Tutuola's character, being the daughter of the Queen mother, and sensationally beautiful.

Shall we say
Shall we put it this way
Shall we say that the maid of Kyerefaso,
Foruwa, daughter of the Queen Mother,
was as young as a dear, graceful in limb?
Such was she, with head held high, eyes
soft and wide with wonder.
And she was light of foot, light in all her moving.

Stepping springily along the water path
like a deer that had strayed from the thicket,
springily stepping along the water path,
she was a picture to give the eye a feast.
And nobody passed her by
but turned to look at her again.

Those of her village said that her voice
in speech was of bamboo leaves.
They said her smile would sometimes blossom
like a lily on her lips and sometimes rise like sunrise.

The butterflies do not fly away from the flowers,
they draw near. Foruwa was the flower of her village.

So shall we say.

Shall we put it this way, that all the village butterflies,
the men, tried to draw near her at every turn,
crossed and crossed her path?
Men said of her, "She shall be my wife,
and mine, and mine, and mine."

But suns rose and set, moons silvered
and died and as the days passed
Foruwa grew more lovesome,
yet she became no one's wife.
She smiled at the butterflies and waved her hand
lightly to greet them as she went swiftly about her daily work:

"Morning, Kweku,
Morning, Kwesi,
Morning, Kodwo,"

But that was all.

And so they said, even while their hearts thumped for her:

"Proud!
Foruwa is proud ... and very strange."

And so the men when they gathered would say:
"There goes a strange girl.
She is not just stiff-in-the-neck proud,
not just breasts-stuck-out-
I-am-the-only-girl-in-the-village proud.
What kind of pride is hers?"
At the annual feast of the clan, when all come to pay tribute to the Queen mother, Foruwa is unable to join in the celebration. She would like to have her own man, but as she says to her mother, "I cannot find him here... He with whom this new life shall be built. He is not here, Mother. These men's faces are empty; there is nothing in them, nothing at all."

So, she is in many ways the folktale girl, seeing herself as too good for the local boys, who naturally resent it and express it in their song.

"There was a woman long ago,
Tell that maid, tell that maid
There was a woman long ago,
She would not marry Kwesi,
She would not marry Kwaw,
She would not, would not, would not.
One day she came home with hurrying feet,
I've found the man, the man, the man
Tell that maid, tell that maid
Her man looked like a chief,
Tell that maid, tell that maid,
Her man looked like a chief,
Most splendid to see,
But he turned into a python,
He turned into a python
And swallowed her up."

Eventually, however, Foruwa finds her man, a foreigner who enters the town one day, looking very much like the usual folktale strange man – handsome, and "tall and strong as a pillar."

Her being given away to a total stranger provokes "rages in the village, and many openly mocked saying, "now the proud ones eat the dust."

However, the stranger who comes to the village turns out to be an unusually gifted and creative individual, hard-working and strong. Soon the village notices his qualities and a revolutionary industriousness sweeps through the people. The next communal feast sees a proud and happy people bearing rich products of their farms, and creations of their hands in tribute to their queen. The tribute is also in praise of the stranger who brought rejuvenation and knowledge, rather than calamity, to the village.
In all these examples, the writers have all gone back to a simple but well-known folktale for their creative sources. Yet when we look carefully, we will discover that each author has used the story for the expression of a specific viewpoint or for a unique artistic goal.

In Tutuola's case, the tale is adapted for the enrichment of the quest motif of the story; the heroine must pass through challenges successfully and acquire a companion for his journey to the underworld. The rebel girl in this instance serves as the damsel-in-distress whom the gallant hero must rescue and win as his reward. In the overall quest narrative, the tale is just one incident in a long list of encounters which the hero has with supernatural and bizarre entities.

In the process, too, Tutuola reaffirms the inevitability and eternal nature of male-female companionship. It is a positive rendering of the woman's role in life's quests: the man needs the woman by his side to accomplish the tasks he sets himself.

Of all these users of the folktale motif, Cyprian Ekwensi appears to be the most ambivalent with regard to the fate he should assign his heroine. His dilemma arises from an authorial sympathy for his heroine, which however conflicts with the traditional morality which her conduct defies. Thus, the author ensures that her relationships with men in the city yield no happiness, that she comes dangerously close to tragedy at some points - all of which are consonant with the usual tribulations of the rebel girl of the folktale. When a shame-faced Jagua returns to Ogabu after her precipitate flight from Lagos, Ekwensi ensures that traditional, rural, conservative morality is not offended too outrageously: the child that results from Jagua's brief affair with a holidaying civil servant dies suddenly. But ultimately, Ekwensi casts his vote for freedom for the woman who defies the restraining codes of the community, codes which serve no other objective than selfish possessiveness. His heroine discovers that Uncle Taiwo's briefcase with which she had escaped from Lagos, and which she had not opened until after the death of her love child contained thousands of pounds. Ekwensi saves this bit of good fortune till the last moment, having assuaged the demands of conservative morality by making Jagua suffer for her wilfulness. But he grants her her freedom: with the money Jagua is going to settle in Onitsha and become a merchant princess, one of those rich, powerful, legendary market "mammies" of the West African region.
Ama Ata Aido's *Anowa* is partly a play and partly a polemical examination of the issue of the woman's role and fate in a traditional African society. Thus, she uses various characters in her play to express opinions on the right of individuals, especially the woman, to choose a way of life or a husband that suits her. Interestingly, those who appear to be in favour of this freedom are the male members of the community, represented by Old Man, while the more conservative members are the women, represented by Old Woman (19-21). Authorial sympathy is decidedly with the rebel girl. Even though her marriage to Kofi Ako, in defiance of parental disapproval, ends in disappointment and ultimate death, Aido ensures that this unjust end does not befall the heroine alone. The man must also suffer the same fate: hence Kofi Ako's suicide. In other words, the woman's effort for freedom and self-realisation should not necessarily bring her nothing but disasters.

The most positive adaptation of the rebel girl tale is decidedly Sutherland's "New Life at Kyerefaso." The heroine, Foruwa, is presented as intelligent and perceptive. Although what she says about the men of Kyerefaso is uncomplimentary, yet it is true. Their humdrum lives are uninspiring and uncreative and that is not what she wants to subject herself to in the name of marriage and tradition. Her quest for a new, creative life is fulfilled in the handsome stranger who comes to the village one morning, and whom she recognises instantly.

For the first time, the rebel girl is not thrown into despair and death for daring to seek a different kind of life for herself. Sutherland wants to show that the woman has as much right as any other member of society to seek a life different for herself. But more importantly, the imposition of restricting codes on the life of the woman is ultimately to the detriment of society, since the woman's illuminating insights may be thus obscured. But when this freedom and insights are unfettered, the result could be a regeneration of an entire group. The rebel girl, after all, need not always come to grief.
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