



# 1 | ENGAGING IFI AMADIUME'S FINDINGS THROUGH AN AFROCENTRIC-WOMANIST LENS

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## Abstract

Ifi Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* requires a retrospect while framing our conversations around Christianity, gender, and sexuality in our current African societies. Her book is an ethnographical study of how sex and gender were socio-culturally constructed among the Igbo people of Nnobi town in the precolonial and colonial, and postcolonial eras. In the precolonial period, females could assume the position of male daughters with the right to inheritance and female husbands who married wives (got men for them) for more descendants and as a portrayal of power and wealth. Although women occupied such power roles within patriarchal systems that still maintained the subjugation of women and distinct roles of wifehood and motherhood, gender roles were not necessarily biologically and sexually oriented. Indigenous spirituality assigned economic space and power to women. Women had the goddess of economic success, they owned and controlled the market space. Gender was not constructed in hierarchical and dualistic manner. The narrative highlights the significant role colonialism and Christianity played in assigning particular gender roles to males, and females, and therefore silencing women as a sign of true humility and obedience to biblical teachings they received from their newfound religion. Women were ripped off their political, spiritual, and economic powers while men were empowered by colonial/Christian ideologies and education. The chapter seeks to reflect on the experiences of women in the then precolonial and colonial Nnobi society and the role Christianity plays in the suppression and liberation of women in postcolonial Africa through an Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm. The Afrocentric-womanist paradigm provides a framework for researching African women in an African context.

**Keywords:** Ifi Amadiume, Male Daughters, Female Husbands, Gender, Colonialism, Christianity, Womanism

## Introduction

Ifi Amadiume's book on *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*, was first published in 1987 and later in 2015. Thirty-five years later, a retrospect on the book is in order, while framing our conversations around Christianity, gender, and sexuality in our current African societies. Amadiume (1987, 2015) did an ethnographic study of how the Igbo people of Nnobi town in Nigeria socio-culturally constructed sex and gender during the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial eras. In the precolonial era, also known as the olden days, females could assume male positions of power as male daughters who bore the right to inheritance and female husbands who could marry wives (got men for them) as a symbol of power and wealth and for more descendants.

Even though patriarchal systems existed, with women occupying such typical roles as wives and mothers, gender roles were not necessarily biologically and sexually oriented. Women could assume positions of power economically, spiritually, politically and socio-culturally. It is obvious that it was the advent of colonialism and Christianity that turned the tables by assigning particular gender roles to male and female, hence, silencing women in the process as a sign of true humility and obedience to biblical teachings from their new Christian religion. Women were therefore poached from their positions of political, spiritual, and economic powers while men on the other hand were empowered by colonial/Christian education and patriarchal ideologies. The chapter seeks to reflect on the experiences of women in the then precolonial and colonial Nnobi society and the role Christianity plays in the suppression and liberation of women in postcolonial Africa through an Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm. The Afrocentric-womanist paradigm is a research methodological framework for researching African women within an African context.

## Methodology: The Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm

I employ the Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm (Amenyedzi, 2022) as a methodological framework to guide the reflections on Ifi's work. The paradigm combines Afrocentrism and womanism to create a model that aids research on African women within the African context. The Afrocentric

research method proposes that African research is done by African people from African cultural lens (cf. Mkabela, 2005; Mazama, 2001; Asante 1987, 1988, 1990, 1991). Womanist scholars restate the fact that the experiences of African women are unique and can be lost in the larger feminist discourse, hence the need to pay particular attention to the issues of classism, sexism and racism as relating to the Black woman (cf. Walker, 1983; Gafney, 2017; Floyd-Thomas, 2010). These issues form the thrust of Ife Amadiume's book which deems this paradigm fit for such a reflection. As noted by Amenyedzi (2022:207), the Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm poses six questions to guide African women's research.

These are:

1. What is the African context?
2. What are the essential components of the culture?
3. What is the theological/religious view of the woman in this context?
4. How are women appreciated in the context?
5. How does the situation in question affect the African woman?
6. What are the redemptive elements of culture, and how would that influence the appreciation of the African woman? (The focus is on both Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and/or reformed/reformulated praxis).

### **Context: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Igbo Society of Nnobi in Nigeria**

The Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm commences with the question: what is the African context? The context was the then Nnobi town of Nigeria in West Africa in the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial eras. The precolonial period was pre-1900, which was also referred to as the "olden days", the colonial and postcolonial eras as the "modern days" (Amadiume, 2015:21). Pat Chapman in her foreword to the 2015 edition said:

More importantly, the book offered a new insight and understanding into the nature of sex and gender in an African society, since Amadiume demonstrates convincingly that among the Igbo of the

town of Nnobi in eastern Nigeria, gender was, at least in the pre-colonial period, not always tied to biological sex, that women could be ‘husbands’ as well as wives, and that many political roles were ascribed to both sexes (Amadiume, 2015:ix).

Nnobi town was significant in ancestral veneration and rituals. Also, due to the constant famine which was caused by soil erosions and low productivity, they were deeply involved in rituals. The inhabitants were mainly Igbo people. The people were traders who usually traded in motor parts. Women and men alike were powerful in wealth and power. The women controlled the market place and they were also farmers. It is worthy to note that despite the powerful roles women had; notwithstanding, it was a context of patrilineal inheritance where the males had full control of land and its allocation. The women however controlled the economic systems, as they were involved in local and external trade. There were sexual roles assigned to each gender, even in terms of farming; women had their own crops, likewise men.

Religiously, there was an “all embracing goddess religion above the cult of ancestors”. Socially, there were ‘matricentric units’ which had some level of autonomy. In the socio-cultural context, the appraisal of women depended on their industrial and economic achievements usually rewarded by titles. In the precolonial period, gender roles did not necessarily correspond with biological sexual roles (Amadiume, 2015:12-21).

A significant event that cannot be ignored is the impact of colonialism and Christianity on the power roles of women in the society due to biblical teachings of humility and submission and western rigid gender ideologies. In the research space, the book came at a time when anthropologists had made the west to perceive Africa as a primitive, backward and savage society and an object of research. Then, anthropological studies were characterized by ethnocentrism and racism where the British in particular assumed superior positions and worldviews as they research Africa and third world. Furthermore, it was a setting where feminism was approached from racist and imperialist ideologies (Amadiume, 2015:xi-xvi). This book then serves as an Afrocentric lens for the reportage of the realities of the Igbo people of Nnobi.

## Gender, Sexuality, Wealth, and Power in Nnobi

The second focus of the Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm seeks to ascertain the essential components of the culture. In this case, the focus is on the socio-cultural construction of gender, sex, and power roles in the various eras of colonialism. Amadiume's ethnographic study shows that in Nnobi town and among the Igbo people by large in the precolonial period, division of labor was influenced by sexual and gender ideologies however, there were also flexible non-biological gender constructions. Women were believed to have received and inherited from the goddess *Idemili*, the gifts of perseverance and industriousness – *idi uchu* and the pot of prosperity – *ite uba*.

The Nnobi culture had matrifocal/matricentric notions where households were organized according to mothers and their children who formed the sub-compound within the larger compound with the males in the front section of the house. These household units assigned to females were economically self-sufficient. The men normally farmed yam, which was the staple. Due to the poor fertility of the land, the farming of yam was shrouded in rituals and techniques mainly observed by the male heads of families who also had to give permission for yam to be eaten. Cocoyam was a female crop which was much easier to cultivate than yam. Yam required a lot more labour like the digging of the soil to create huge mounds to stain the yam crop from erosions and the rains. Cassava which later became a staple was farmed by women as its cultivation was not that difficult. The crops which the women farmed like cocoyam, cassava and plantain were to sustain the families during food shortage, hence, the women played significant roles in the sustenance of the family.

In Nnobi, wealth was characterized by fixed properties like land and food trees, and movable properties such as domestic animals, food, agricultural products, household goods and utensils, human labour, “especially women's productive and reproductive powers including their sexual services. Ritual knowledge and titles were also bought” (Amadiume, 2015:30). For men, their wealth was showcased by their houses, wives, and daughters (who brought in-laws), livestock, titles, yam farms and yam stores, ancestral compound, food, and cash crops. For the women, wealth meant to have livestock, dogs, fowls, farm and garden produce,

many daughters, and many wealthy and influential sons. Wealthy women could gain the *ogubuefi* title which is voluntary but reserved for both men and women who had killed a cow for their goddess *Idemili*. Wealthy women took other “involuntary titles taken only by women, and possession of wives by 'male daughters', first daughters, barren women, rich widows, wives of rich men and successful female farmers and traders, that is, the kind of women to whom I shall refer as 'female husband'” (Amadiume, 2015:31). Female and male portrayal of wealth were similar, though they possessed different items. However, it is significant to note that women did not own land. This is to say that gender roles were quite flexible in terms of economic and political power (as portrayed in the acquisition of titles and possessions). However, there were still some patriarchal notions although not as strong as it was during the colonial and postcolonial era.

Land was owned by inheritance where ancestral lands owned by patrilineages were distributed among sub-lineages and trickled down to family units. Individual land ownership was only possible if the owner was alive or had male descendants or 'male daughters' who would inherit the land after his demise. If there was no descendant to inherit the land, it was returned to the extended family, mainly the brothers of the deceased. Male daughters were daughters of men who did not have sons to inherit them, and would have called them back home from their matrimonial homes to assume the role of a son known as *nhayikwa* or *nhanye* in Nnobi custom (Amadiume, 2015:31-34). Women farmed their husbands' land and could only have continual access if they had sons or male daughters after the husband passed. Since women managed the land, when a wife died, the land was passed on to the wife of the son or the female daughter would marry a woman to take her place. Lands were normally distributed according to the number of wives or sons, land remained a constant source of dispute, murder, and mischief in *Nnobiland* as there would be scarcity and the younger generations would lack access. In Amadiume's words:

As men increased their labour force, wealth and prestige through the accumulation of wives, so also did women through the institution of 'female husbands'. When a man paid money to acquire a woman, she was called his wife. When a woman paid money to acquire another woman, this was referred to as buying a slave, *igba*

*ohu*, but the woman who was bought had the status and customary rights of a wife. With respect to the woman who bought her, who was referred to as her husband, and the 'female husband' had the same rights as a man over his wife. I therefore translate *ohu*, in the context of woman-to-woman marriage as wife. It was through this practice of marrying other women that the richest of Eze Okigbo's wives obtained their wealth (2015:46-47).

Women's wealth outweighed that of the men which also caused them to either lose or gain respect by the way they were addressed by their roles as husbands. The senior wife who was not industrious would lose the seniority role to the junior wife who was wealthy.

Stemming from their ancestral history where the first male son ruled, and had the prerogative to decide on rituals and ceremonies, this was the norm, so that in every *obi*, the most senior son in the patrilineage had the final say. Keeping in mind the fact that male daughters also had a place in this patrilineage, this makes the issue of sex and gender null and void. They operated in a hierarchical order based on seniority, while the first male (*di-okpala*) was in charge of the males, *Ada* (first daughter) was the overseer of the females. Women could assume roles assigned for males but not the other way round.

The religious structure is very significant as the people of Nnobi so revere their goddess *Idemili* who was a water spirit. Their goddess religion was also integral in their administrative, judicial and political systems where the priests and other titleholders acted as police and judges. The shrine was the sanctuary where social offenders like thieves, adulterers, debtors were summoned, and others were also sent there as gifts. Anyone who entered there apart from the priest was considered an *osu* (a social outcast or cult slave). The priest was a "female man" as he ties a wrapper like a woman, he consults with the senior *Ekwe* titled woman known as *Agba Ekwe*, who was next to the goddess in terms of hierarchy. The relevant thing to note here is that, the roles of the female and male in this context was not aligned to sex or gender. The goddess owned all the market places and therefore had shrines over there. *Agba Ekwe* held the most powerful political power in Nnobi. Also, *Idelemi's* daughter *Eno* was worshipped in Nnewi. The roles of the goddess *Idemili* and *Agba Ekwe*

denotes how womanhood was elevated in their religious and political lives.

Patrilineal daughters also assumed a lot of powerful roles especially during funerals. Another very important point to highlight is that, in Nnobi, the closest form of kinship was traced to siblings from the matri-centric unit (*umume otu afo*) children from one womb. There is also a form of recognition and reverence for the daughter's children (*nwadiana*) by her patrilineage. There was also the Women's Council, *Inyom Nnobi* (Women of Nnobi) which played a role likened to that of the magistrate's court, with the authority to rule on women's affairs. The leadership of this council was based on wealth and achievement; however, the members were those women with *Ekwe* title. Their main tasks were to ensure the welfare and safety of the women which included summoning men. They had a say in determining bride price, they would fine women who did not exhibit good conduct like stealing, gossiping and fighting in public. They enforced rules like banning sexual intercourse with nursing mothers and the spacing of children for two years. They monopolized the market place, ensured its cleaning and policing.

The Women Council's activities were not only limited to women's affairs but they also raised money to contribute to other works and repairs that concerned the public; sometimes, they demanded contributions from the entire town. The traditional leaders and men revered and feared the Women's Council. The men and women alike dreaded their meetings that were shrouded in secrecy. They would normally use mass strikes and demonstrations as their most powerful weapon, these strikes included refusal to perform domestic and sexual duties. They confronted the men for decisions and actions taken that did not favor women. Importantly,

the fact still remains that even though there was a unifying organization which safeguarded women's interests, female solidarity was neutralized, to some extent, through the division of women on the basis of gender; daughters were seen as males in relation to wives and superior in authority to wives; in this context, sex did not correspond to gender. Daughters, in alliance with their fathers and brothers, identified themselves with male interests. Nevertheless, this flexibility of gender allowed women to take on typical male roles, which gave them authority (Amadiume, 2015:67).



Just as in recent times, women's roles were typically wifehood and motherhood; they were normally married off into other lineages as marriage with close relatives from the same patrilineage was regarded as incest (although it was allowed among distant relations). Women still retained recognition in their patrilineages, even after marriage (mostly protected by their brothers) so for this reason, Nnobi people preferred marriage within the geographical vicinity. This made it easier to go back home to perform rituals and ceremonies when the need arose. If a woman's bride price/bride-wealth was not paid, the man did not have any legal right over his children, they belonged to the woman's patrilineage. Hence, the bride price was also referred to as child-wealth. Marriage ceremonies were marked by fertility rituals and ceremonies, coupled with relevant songs performed by women, this initiated her into womanhood, sexuality and motherhood.

This also signifies that women themselves expected that wives must by all means make babies (at the time the book was written, not all of the rituals as typically presented in the book were still being practiced in the same manner). Pregnancy and child naming ceremonies which included a ritual in the evil forest and a showcase of pregnancy in the market place to receive blessings were very significant. It was a taboo for women who had just delivered to work, the mother of the wife was required to come and help. The post-natal confinement was also to allow the new mother to heal. Most importantly, sex was a taboo during this period. At marriage, a wife received a piece of land from the husband which she was supposed to farm.

Death and funerals formed a relevant part of Nnobi culture, it was characterized by exchange of gifts among families. Among these rituals, it is worthy to mention that animals, mainly goats (sometimes cows depending on their wealth and affordability) were returned to the mother's patrilineage of the deceased. If a wife died, a goat was returned to her family; the first son was required to provide a goat for his mother's funeral; the first daughter's husband was also required to provide a goat for the funeral of either of the parents of the wife. If a husband died, one goat was sent to the mother's parental home, while when a wife died, two goats were sent, one to her own patrilineage and the second to her

mother's patrilineage. These all show the significance of women in the culture.

Despite the powerful roles women played, widowhood did not favor them. The men were allowed to marry soon after the burial of the wife while the woman would go through what Amadiume in her own words calls "hell-fire, *okunmuo*", very demeaning rituals (Amadiume, 2015:82). It is evident that the precolonial Igbo society of Nnobi constructed gender in flexible terms which allowed women in particular to assume male roles, they held powerful positions in the socio-cultural, religious, economic and political spheres. Moreover, it would not be long when they would be tamed by the advent of colonialism and Christianity as presented in the next section.

## **The Influence of Colonization and Christianity on Womanhood in Nnobi**

At this point, the question posed in the paradigm is: what is the theological/religious view of the woman in this context? The focus will be on how colonialism and Christianity reconstructed womanhood along rigid gender and patriarchal ideologies in *Nnobiland*. This is relevant because colonization was synonymous to Christianity. Ife recorded that in the 1900s, the invasion by the British "suppressed indigenous institutions" by imposing Christian and Western systems and ideologies on education, political administrative government, and the economy (Amadiume, 2015:119). The flexible gender systems were also replaced by strong and rigid sex, class and gender inequalities, ideologies, and systems. In fact, this is reflected in the title of the seventh chapter: Colonialism and the Erosion of Women's Power.

The women in Nnobi did not fancy this new religion, which was not favorable to them; hence, a mass protest was recorded in 1925 against colonialism; calling for a return to traditional customs. Unlike the pre-colonial era when women would have gotten their demands met by this means, the response was to send the military to ensure order and their leadership arrested. Monogamy was to replace polygamy, which was a challenge to the people.

Another contention was with the church, the titles of wealth and power both women and men acquired was a big issue. While the Catholic church in particular accepted the male titles, the female title was not even a topic for discussion. Christianity and education were put together and among the very early lessons were the condemnation of indigenous cultural ideologies and customs. They were regarded as pagan and heathen, especially the worship of the goddess *Idemili*, the notion of a female god was not acceptable, as the missionaries taught about the maleness of God: a doctrine of a patriarchal Christian God and His son Jesus Christ was the main message.

Even academics by then would attribute male characteristics to the goddess in their write-up. There were conflicts between Christians and Indigenous religion. Although Christianity was blamed for encouraging the people to disregard customs like the killing of a python, which was the totem for the goddess, and many other customs, the church became a refuge for those who were outcasts and rejected like mothers of twins, women accused of witchcraft and those with abominable diseases as leprosy.

In the colonial era, the institutions that favored women like that of *female husbands* and *male daughters* were condemned by churches, meaning converts would abandon such practices. It is significant to highlight that the *Ekwe* title which was a spiritual, socio-political and economic acknowledgment of the industriousness and achievements of women was banned. Christianity and education would not endorse the inheritance of widows by the brother with reference to the biblical text which prohibited a man from uncovering the nakedness of his brother's wife (Lev 18:8). Well, from a cultural point of view, the argument was that, this provided the woman and her children some security and sustenance. On ethical and moral grounds, this was rather liberating for the women. Amadiume observed in her ethnographic study that Christianity could not stop men from taking more wives but detested those customs that gave women some power and recognition. This was a form of bias towards women.

Overwhelming evidence shows that women in Nnobi and in Igboland in general were neither more comfortable nor more advantaged from an economic point of view under colonialism. They had lost their grip on the control of liquid cash; men had invaded the

general market, and women were becoming helpless in their personal relations with husbands. But, most important of all, pro-female institutions were being eroded both by the church and the colonial administration (Amadiume, 2015:132).

Although women formed the majority in the church, they remained the body (congregation) while the focus was on the patriarchal God, His bishops and priests who were men. These patterns were also reflected in education where the boy child was favored above the girl child, only very few girls could access education. Vocational schools also focused on the male with courses in carpentry, tailoring and printing. Men got the opportunity to train as teachers and clerks making them employable as against women. At some point in the early 1970s, even though female enrollment at schools shot up, they mostly ended at the secondary levels. The females were prepared mainly for domestic duties like cooking, cleaning, childcare and sewing. Those who made it to the university, the statistics show that the men were overwhelmingly more in many of the disciplines except for home economics which had more females, even in that, men also enrolled for hotel services. These notions of patriarchy were traced to the supposed colonizers civilized roots back in England (Amadiume, 2015:136). Henceforth, women were cut off from mainstream life, they could not easily access employment and leadership roles both in government and the church as in the precolonial era when they had so much power. Colonization and Christianity alike did not favor women in many ways.

The British forced its rule over the people of Nnobi through military expeditions as they resisted. A local government with a warrant chief system replaced indigenous political systems. The new systems and its poll tax and corruption did not settle with the people of Nnobi, there were agitations that was climaxed by the Women's War (riots) in 1929. They made an impact as they succeeded in dethroning the then warrant chief. However, their main fight was against the entire colonial administrative systems, which did not have a place for women. They were also losing grounds economically. Although there were some reforms, women were not considered but rather rigid gender ideologies were enshrined of which the men took advantage.

The colonial rule also came with the new cash economy with European firms. Even though some women were also trading, a few in the urban areas were wealthy as they served as middle women for the European firms; it was obvious that the women did not control the economy as it used to be. Significant among the shifts is the production and trade of palm oil and palm kernels which the women initially did. The abolition of the slave trade shifted the economy into the export of palm oil and kernels, which were used in manufacturing soap and margarine. There were now factories and oil mills that cracked the kernels and extracted the oil. This meant that the production moved from the family level mainly controlled by the wives to the factories. Now, husbands sold the palm directly to the mills, which blocked the monies that would have come to the wives. All these were part of the triggers of the Women's War. The women also struggled to pay their children's school fees. The women did not fight the White men directly however, every rage was towards them as demonstrated in their songs as they attacked the courts, factories, warrant chiefs and foreign goods in the market.

Polygamy was replaced by monogamy, while colonizers saw this as a form of security for wives and also offered the option for divorce, this was not appreciated by all as they valued some of the support systems they received from a wider family system. In short, during this period, the women became poorer at the expense of the men who were now wealthier both economically and ideologically including patriarchal notions.

The local government systems evolved into the Nnobi Welfare Organization (NWO), which did not include any woman at the initial stages but considered the representation of the Women's Council later on (this was a way to bring the Women's Council under the control of the NWO). The leadership of the organization was reserved for the males only. The Women's Council suffered great doom when its leadership was arrested in 1977 by an anonymous letter to the police indicating their supreme power even over men, making a case against them as a force to reckon with.

At the time, there was also the *Ifwe's* council which was exclusively male. These had replaced the *Ekwe* who initially held political powers to rule, in fact the *Ekwe* title for women was banned. Another organization evolved, the Nnobi Home Welfare Organization (NHWO), this organiza-

tion did not invite the women, so, as at 1982, there was no woman included. Even after independence, the story was no different. “Women, even though they were also liable to pay the levies, became an unwaged labor force for bush-clearing, carrying sand and wood, and fetching water, and in general became the public cleansing department and an entertainment group to dance for local chiefs and politicians” (Amadiume, 2015:148). The major influence of Christianity on women’s authority is summed up in this way:

Clearly, in the minds of Christians and Western-influenced elites, such ‘maleness’ and ‘headstrongness’ were unfeminine. In their opinion, all women ought to bow their heads to their husbands. The biblical story of creation was cited and woman was seen as a helpmate. One should respect and hold sacred what is written by God: for God said that a woman shall be under her husband and obey her husband (see Genesis 2:21; 3:16) (Amadiume, 2015:155).

The Bible and distorted cultural references became the conditions for gender relations and women were subjugated in the process. It was the modern institutions that empowered men over women as in the precolonial era, women assumed political authority comfortably.

In the precolonial indigenous Nnobi society, women assumed positions of power and wealth through organized cultural structures as wives, mothers, market women, council and Ekwe titles. They could also assume the positions of sons and husbands as explained early on. The post-colonial era was not favorable to them. Nonetheless, the women clung firmly to their positions as wives and mothers and observed these roles unreservedly. Despite the marginalization, their industriousness was still visible as they continued to farm foodstuff, which their families depended on, and paid much of the school fees. Consequently, women’s hard work was no longer recognized as in the case of men (who took the *ozo* titles) since they were stripped of their titles.

While men were now into big businesses and served as contractors, their wives remained in the farms, only few women would own a provision store or were in business with their husbands in the urban centers. Hence, the women themselves admitted that they were no longer wealthy (Amadiume, 2015:163). Motherhood became the main identity for

women and it was reflected even in their Christian associations. In the Catholic church was the Christian Mothers and in the Anglican Church was the Mothers' Union, there was then another national organization of successful business women which had a branch in Nnobi known as Sweet Mother. Women later settled with the duty as peacemakers enduring subjugation and servitude as the norm as they were silenced by male-biased, colonial and Christian patriarchal ideologies. The Christian women would now accept to carry the cross of Christ as against seeking for positions of power. The mother's organizations in the church had replaced the women's councils as they followed similar criteria for selecting leaders and membership. Moreover, leadership was exclusive to the wives of the clergy and leaders. The women now were involved in fundraisings and charity. Women experienced exploitation and marginalization, the Christian values of modesty and self-denial would not motivate them to pursue social, economic or political power.

### **Postcolonial Patriarchal Notions versus Indigenous African Womanhood**

The fourth phase of the Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm asks: how are women appreciated in the context? I seek to reflect on womanhood in the postcolonial era in Nnobi society vis-à-vis the perceptions of womanhood in Africa. Amadiume indicated that a comparative study with other African societies would be a good avenue for further research. A comprehensive comparison is impossible due to lack of space and the multiplicities of African cultures. Notwithstanding, some general African women and specific contextual notions are highlighted.

I have stated elsewhere that

“patriarchy in the African cultures is just a way of life and the norm. In fact, this is the order of the day, anything contrary is either applauded with some ‘Wow’ or detested with utmost fierceness ... Traditional, cultural norms and values demand that the man is always in charge. Female roles have been audaciously restricted to wifeness, motherhood, servanthood, and slavery in severe instances” (Amenyedzi, 2021a:173; cf. Amenyedzi, 2021b).

The revelation in Ife's research is that, after all, not all African cultures were originally patriarchal as it is now, but there was a huge influence from colonialization and Christianity. Masenya (1997) has indicated that African cultures were patriarchal before the advent of colonialization. Nonetheless, whether influenced by colonialism or Christianity, most African cultures are patriarchal, meaning that womanhood has not been valued beyond servitude, marriage and motherhood. A woman who is not married is an abomination, a childless woman must have been cursed or bewitched. Children remain the guarantee for inheritance in her matrimonial home, otherwise she must forget sharing in the inheritance of her husband. Widowhood rites remain "hell fire" as Amadiume rightfully puts it.

The socio-cultural constructions of womanhood in Africa compelled our mother Mama Mercy Oduyoye to lead this crusade for creating spaces for women to express themselves, and in our case, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and those in the ministry (cf. Oduyoye, 2001).

There have been many such women solidarity groups and organizations championing the inclusion and mainstreaming of African women, and relentlessly fighting against inhumane cultural practices such as female circumcision, widowhood and slavery among many others.

Just like Nnobi town, the market place continues to be the domain of women in various contexts and women continue to assume the roles of sustenance for their families. Women in most African communities continue to grapple with patriarchal notions in the church. Very few women have been able to access leadership roles in the church and society at large, but this is not without dealing with patriarchal ideologies. Interpretations to the *imago Dei* and biblical texts especially those on silence and submission of women in the Pauline letters are a constant point of reference to subjugate women in the church (see Amenyedzi, 2019; Apea, 2019).

In her conclusion, Amadiume mentions the role of queen mothers in other parts of Africa and their significant roles. The queen mother among the Akan of Ghana for instance, has the right to enstool and *destool* kings and chiefs; she reigns at the death of a king until a new one is enstooled



(Nkansah, 2008). There are still priestesses at many shrines, which are equally consulted by men. How is it that men submit to these priestesses in the spiritual settings but otherwise in other settings (Amenyedzi, 2021a)? Talking of appreciation of women in Africa, I argue that we are mostly appreciated as wives, mothers, and servants rather than as equal partners and role players in the society as a whole.

It would be interesting to further research the current gender and sexuality fluidity as compared to the then gender flexibility in Nnobi.

### **Postcolonial Reconstruction of Womanhood in Nnobi**

The next question to address in the paradigm is: how does the situation in question affect the African woman? The impact of colonialization and Christianity on gender roles has been reiterated in many places above. Womanhood was indeed reconstructed among the Igbo people of Nnobi in the postcolonial period. In the precolonial era, there were specific gender roles assigned to households and farming, however, there were non-biological sexual roles as in female husbands and male daughters. Women were believed to have inherited prosperity from their goddess, hence, wealth was synonymous to womanhood. They did not own land but they were assigned portions by their husbands on which the sustenance of their households depended on.

The households were matrifocal/matricentric, although the husband remained the head (he had his own space at the fore of the compound-*obi*); the mothers were in charge of their household units which were self-sustaining. The women's role in sustaining the family cannot be underestimated as they depended on her crops during famine and scarcity. Nnobi women undoubtedly were industrious, provided for their families which is a symbol of wealth and power. Contrariwise, the tables turned against them during the colonial period leading to the postcolonial era. Men easily accessed education and employment, the palm oil industry which was mainly owned by women moved to the factories and mills constructed by the colonial masters ripping off the women a major source of income. This became the new era of poverty for Nnobi women and wealth for the men.

The *ogubuefi* title was for both males and females who could kill a cow for the goddess *Idemili*. The male daughters and female husbands. There were flexible gender economic and political roles. It is relevant to mention that the goddess was female and the priest a male who dressed like a female (female man as he was referred to), who consulted with *Agba Ekwe* a woman who was next to the goddess hierarchically. This is another portrayal of gender flexibility. Religiously, women's position was revered. Since the goddess owned the market, it was the domain of the women. Patrilineal daughters had important roles, especially at funerals. Children also paid allegiance to their matrilineage and were required to perform different duties or rituals.

The Women's Council was indeed a force to reckon with; it ensured family planning and served as a form of security and protection for the women. Here again, it is clear that women in the precolonial period assumed political, economic and social roles. They had their own mechanism for protecting women against different forms of abuse. Unfortunately, postcolonial and Christian patriarchal ideologies eroded such powers from placing them under the subjugation of men. The reconstructed Nnobi woman in the church and society no longer had a voice of her own but had to submit; as she was told that submission was a form of portraying genuine godliness. Liberation theology teaches that biblically, submission is for both men and women, we all submit to God and to each other; the woman's submission is to her husband.

Wifhood and motherhood were accepted by the women as their roles were reflected in their celebrations and rituals that accompanied marriage, pregnancy and childbirth. However, this did not rip them off other spiritual, political, economic and social roles. Widowhood did not favor the then women of Nnobi as compared to men, even in the early days. Consequently, postcolonial notions seem to ascribe wifhood and motherhood as the only main roles women must play whilst the response to women's achievement is perceived as extraordinary or abnormal but not normal as it should be. (cf. Amenyedzi, 2021a). Widowhood seems to remain an ordeal for Nnobi women and women in Africa.

Amadiume highlights the tensions between feminism and womanism in that, the experiences of African women were not contextually considered and framed. Meaning the Eurocentric and imperialist ideologies

and framework for the feminist discourse were out of place and did not favor African women. Hence, the call for womanists to frame our discourse around our African socio-cultural experiences and framework is in order.

## **A New Era for African Womanhood: Re-claiming Our Empowered Identity**

The final phase of the Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm seeks to identify the redemptive elements of culture, and how that could influence the appreciation of the African woman. Our revered Mama Mercy Oduyoye and the renowned Matriarchs saw the need over thirty-five years ago to gather women theologians in Africa for solidarity and inclusion in mainstream ministry and academia (cf. Oduyoye, 2001). Not only in the theological sphere but the advocacy, debates and campaigns for the liberation of African women continues in many other contexts. There have been some victories in this endeavor but the truth remains that, women still experience subjugation due to patriarchal notions in the church, culture and various aspects of societal life.

Even though it is true that African cultures were enshrined in patriarchy even before the colonizers (Masenya, 1997), a focus on Ife Amadiume's book compels us to go back to take that which was lost, if not in all Africa, at least in Nnobi. The title of this book and others in this publication series is *Sankofa*. *Sankofa* is a Ghanaian (Akan) term, which means, "go back and take that which is forgotten" (Chic African Culture). This is a call to reclaim our identity, our empowered identity in all facets of life. Prof Musa Dube observed that in the fight against colonization, the focus was only on general imperialism but the suppression of women was not included in the fight, hence, the continual subjugation of the African woman (Dube, 2018).

To reclaim our empowered identity as African women, these frameworks as proposed by renowned African women will be useful tools. Since colonialism was synonymous to Christianity, I start from Christian models. Dube (2000) proposes a postcolonial feminist framework, she engages on that journey through reading literary works (particularly nov-

els) that portray colonialism and patriarchy. She also engages in a post-colonial reading of the Bible. Her groundbreaking book, *Postcolonial feminist interpretation of the Bible* is a go to for us Christians especially theologians. Masenya's (1997) Bosadi approach and womanist theological frameworks (cf. Gafney, 2017; Floyd-Thomas, 2010). I have also proposed a womanist theology of disability elsewhere in dealing with the ordeal of women with disability in Africa as I argue that they suffer 3D – three dimensions of Disability, Discrimination and Disadvantage (Amenyedzi, 2021b). Chisale (2018a, 2018b) also writes extensively on the emancipation African women in general and women with disability. In this *Sankofa* book series where this chapter is presented, there are liberation theologies of many African matriarchs who have called for the emancipation of African womanhood.

Aside theology, there are several voices in various fields against the subjugation of women in Africa due to religious and cultural patriarchal notions which extends to all aspects of life. If we do not stigmatize gender roles and break loose from rigid gender ideologies, masculinized and feminized roles. Oh! – Then this world would definitely be a better place for all of us.

## CONCLUSION

The chapter sought to reflect on Ifi Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. The findings from her ethnographical study prove that, in the early days, gender and sexuality were constructed in flexible terms so that females could assume male roles as male daughters and female husbands who were entitled to rights and privileges just as the men. Women possessed economic, political and socio-cultural powers that gave them the needed freedom from subjugation as compared to the colonial and postcolonial periods. Even though there were specified gender roles in terms of farming and households; women who were typically wives and mothers, could also assume significant economic, spiritual and political positions of power. The advent of colonialism and Christianity was the beginning of the doom of the Igbo women in Nnobi. Even though in some African societies, patriarchy and subjugation of women were there before colonization and Christianity,

the impact on women cannot be underrated even in such communities. Womanhood was now reconstructed along Christian and Western Ideologies to mean silence, humility and obedience to men which was a sign of true godliness. The struggle for emancipation of African women continues, as we engage various feminist and womanist frameworks as mentioned above, we hope that we shall overcome someday and *Sankofa* will become a reality for the Igbo women of Nnobi in Nigeria and Africa as a continent.

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