

Episcopal Church was “humble enough” to listen to voices other than its own. In accordance with the Lambeth resolutions, Iker has urged ECUSA to allow American bishops not to ordain women and to prevent the ordination of homosexual people and the blessing of their unions. He is fairly sure, however, that “the arrogance of the Episcopal Church is so beyond control there’s not going to be any reconsideration.” With the left wing behaving in such an imperialist manner, the Texas bishop has been able to sound the humanist watch cry, proclaiming that Lambeth “has reminded us that we are answerable to one another, that what we say and teach and preach and legislate in this country affects brother and sister Anglicans all over the world.” “It is a communion of mutual accountability,” he crooned, concluding with a conveniently self-effacing warning to his renegade brothers in Christ: “No longer does the United States or England speak for the Anglican Communion but the Church in Africa and Asia does” (Solheim 1998b). With Texas money, that is. *Who is colonized?*

INTERLUDE: WHENCE ALL THIS GENDER RIGIDITY? A NIGERIAN CASE STUDY

Before Christianity, so the stories go, people in Igbo- and Yorùbáland lived and worked unencumbered by the oppressive gender norms of western patriarchy.¹⁶ Unlike their European counterparts, women in communities within what would become southern Nigeria were highly organized, fully politically engaged, and frequently economically independent of men.

¹⁶ This section is offered as what David Chidester has called a “comparison of comparisons.” It is more an exploration of literature *about* gender, sex, and religious authority in Nigeria than an exploration of gender, sex, and Nigerian religious authority *themselves*. Infinitely grateful to the broadly “postcolonial” work engaged here, but also suspicious of its tendency to congeal into its own ideology, this exploration is supplemented (usually via notes) not only with critical interventions but also with sporadic references to Afro- and Euro-Christian perspectives. By interrupting the postcolonial, post-Christian story with the less academically rigorous, “pre-post” story, I am hoping to highlight the former’s tendency—despite its most acute critical mechanisms—to fall into an ideology itself. Moreover, it is my hope that the latter’s sporadic power to unsettle—even temporarily—the discursive hegemony of the former might reveal a certain neglected critical edge in the everyday work of Christian women in Africa, no matter how elitist, establishmentarian, or patriarchal the institution that frames and commends such work.

The view that Africans previously lived unfettered by the gender norms of western patriarchy, of course, is *not* the view of most African Christians. One of the most colorful descriptions I have found of “Misogynist Primitive Pre-Christian Africa” reads, “The World before Christ was a patriarchal or male dominated world. Similarly the status of Nigerian women was rated very low, from time immemorial. . . . Human sacrifice was part and parcel of everyday life. . . . The people were illiterates. Broken homes and divorces were not strange. Their houses were thatched-roofed. Diseases of all types were rampant [*sic*]. . . . There were numerous superstitious beliefs, hatred, jealousy, oppression, suppression of women and poverty prevailed. . . . The slave trade added petrol to the burning fire [that] the women were passing through already. . . . But thanks be to God, for bringing an end to their sufferings. . . . Christianity was the medicine for their body, soul, and mind” (Arulefula: 160–161).

The social structures said to have secured women's power and autonomy in precolonial West Africa vary from community to community (and scholar to scholar), but the most oft-cited are goddess worship, matrilineality, "dual-sex systems," "gender flexibility" in social roles, and neuter linguistic elements or systems.¹⁷ In each case, women's contemporary social inferiority can be attributed to the contamination or obliteration of these structures under European colonialism, whose primary mechanism of patriarchal control was (and remains) Christianity.

In her study of the Igbo town of Nnobi, Ifi Amadiume (1987) locates the source of precolonial women's authority in two cultural elements: the goddess tradition and the separability of "gender" from (biological) "sex." According to Amadiume, the central deity in Nnobi was the goddess Idemili, who was likewise worshiped by all communities along the river that bears her name. Unlike their mid-western or western counterparts, these "hinterland" societies were not centrally organized under a king or queen. Rather, political and economic affairs were overseen by titled men, *ozo*, and titled women, *ekwe*.¹⁸ The latter were said to be "chosen" by the goddess Idemili. If a woman's crops were thriving, if her farm animals were all surviving, if "whatever [she] touched yielded multiple profits," then a messenger of Idemili would visit her house to determine whether she had become possessed by the goddess. If so, a community-wide ceremony would confirm the woman as an *ekwe* or human servant and representative of the deity.¹⁹

Although the *ekwe* title was said to be "involuntary," meaning that one could not simply elect to take it, it was certainly not conferred haphazardly. In fact, Idemili seems to have kept close accounting records, for she would choose to possess only the most wealthy women in the community. Here it is important to recognize that this "wealth" came as a result of neither a good birth nor a good marriage but, rather, through tireless work and fiscal savvy. Women were chosen to take the *ekwe* title because they were economically autonomous. And the best way for a woman to secure such economic autonomy was to take a few wives.

Amadiume's analysis of *igba ohu*, or woman-to-woman marriage, is in close (corrective) conversation with Kamene Okonjo's constantly cited analysis of "dual-sex systems." In precolonial mid-western Igbo societies, Okonjo argues, the complete political and economic separation of men

¹⁷ See Olupona; Diop 1987, 1989; Okonjo; Amadiume 1987, 1997; and Oyewùmí 1997, respectively.

¹⁸ While Amadiume maintains (primarily to highlight the violence of Britain's "indirect rule" through imposed "warrant chiefs") that there *were* no "chiefs," male or female, in precolonial Nnobi, she also insists that if *anyone* held "overall political power," it was *aba ekwe*. This name designated the woman who had held the *ekwe* title longest and bestowed on its bearer ultimate "veto rights in public assemblies of all Nnobi" (Amadiume 1987: 133).

¹⁹ An Anglican might call such a person "a priest."

and women ensured that the needs of each sex were equally addressed. Okonjo opposes this system of “parallel functions,” in which sexual difference is respected, to the European “single-sex” patriarchy, in which difference is effaced. In traditional “dual-sex” Igbo societies, “each sex manages its own affairs, and women’s interests are represented at all levels” (Okonjo: 45). Contra Okonjo, Amadiume suggests that hinterland Igbo “gender flexibility” deconstructs any dualistic precolonial sexual organization. By separating “gender” from “sex” in her analysis, Amadiume is able to highlight “occasions or situations in which women can be males and vice versa,” instances of “gender bending” that confer considerable authority on women.²⁰ First, all Igbo daughters were considered “male” in relation to Igbo wives.²¹ Second, a brotherless daughter could become “male” through a process of *nhayikwa*, or “replacement,” in order to inherit her father’s *obi* (ancestral house or compound).²² Third, an economically driven woman could take one or more wives to manage the house and garden as she, now a “female husband,” focused on political and economic public life.²³ For Amadiume, then, precolonial hinterland Igbo women primarily secured power and respect either as representatives of the deity or as “gender benders.”²⁴

²⁰ Amadiume adheres to a fairly orthodox Beauvoirianism by maintaining the distinction between “gender” and “sex.” Her argument about “occasions or situations in which women can be males and vice versa” is a somewhat tautological vice versa; “males can be women” means that there are people occupying traditionally male social positions who “are” women (her designation for anatomical females), *not* that there are men who can occupy feminine social roles. “Male daughters” and “female husbands” are both anatomically female. It is disappointing that Amadiume never addresses the question of why precolonial Igbo “gender fluidity” is restricted to women; why is it that a woman’s gender can be separated from her “real” sex, but a man’s cannot? Because of the fluidity’s failure to flow both ways, it is unclear whether Amadiume’s revision of Okonjo’s “dual-sex system” truly resists dualistic determinations or whether it ultimately capitulates to a “single-sex” logic, according to which “women can achieve distinction and recognition only by taking on the roles of men in public life and performing them well” (Okonjo: 45).

²¹ Unlike wives, daughters could inherit property, and daughters’ organizations (*out umuada*) were far more powerful than wives’ organizations (*out inyemida*; see Okonjo: 52–53). For equivalents of such groups in Yorùbá societies, see Mba: 5–13.

²² Cf. the story of Nwajiuba, a woman who was called from her marriage back to her dying father’s *obi* to become a male daughter and inherit her father’s line of descent (Amadiume 1987: 31–33).

²³ Cf. the story of Ada Eze, whose Christian son, upon the death of his mother, refused to take her wife (Amadiume 1987: 128–130).

²⁴ It might be instructive here to note the similarity between these two precolonial routes to women’s authority (goddess representation and gender crossing) and the two questions currently dividing the Anglican Church (women’s ordination and nonheterosexual lifestyles). I realize that to draw such a parallel is to risk capitulating to an all-too-familiar discursive imperialism, especially considering Amadiume’s warning that a “lesbian interpretation” of woman-to-woman marriages “would be totally inapplicable, shocking and offensive to Nnobi women, since the strong bonds and support between them do not imply lesbian sexual practices” (1987: 7). That said, Henry James might be less than pleased with Eve Sedgwick’s reading of his “Beast in the Jungle,” and most nuns would be downright horrified to find themselves on Adrienne Rich’s lesbian continuum. If I persist,

Perhaps even more radical than Amadiume's analysis of Igbo "gender crossing" is Oyèrónké Oyewùmí's assertion of the utter genderlessness of Yorùbá language. According to Oyewùmí, "Yorùbá is a non-gender-specific language: Yorùbá names and pronouns do not make gender distinctions" (2001: 77). This linguistic "gender-freeness" grounds and reflects a society whose primary difference is not—or, at least, *was* not—sexual difference. Before the colonial imposition of western-Christian "bio-logic," "the [sexed] body was not the basis of social roles at all." If any vector of difference can be said to have been the most important, then it was not sex but, in fact, *age*, so that "in no situation in Yorùbá society was a male, by virtue of his body-type, inherently superior to a female" (Oyewùmí 1997: x–xiii).²⁵ The priority of age-as-social-determinant meant that a person's status was constantly shifting in relation to her or his conversation partner.²⁶ This ungendered relationality governs linguistic usage as well, inasmuch as "the position from which one speaks determines the mode of address and the choice of pronouns" (Oyewùmí 2001: 85).

Like Amadiume and Okonjo, Oyewùmí partly grounds this precolonial culture's antipatriarchal structure in its religion.²⁷ The sacred world of traditional Yorùbá religion was divided into three strata. Olódùmarè, the Supreme Being, was entirely genderless and, Oyewùmí conjectures, probably unanthropic before the introduction of Islam and Christianity into Yorùbáland. Below Olódùmarè were the deity's Òrìsà, or messengers to humankind, each of which manifested one of the divine attributes. Some Òrìsà were male, some were female, and some changed sex from community to community. Below the Òrìsà were the (male and female) ancestors. This gender-freeness within the divine sphere reflected and reinforced the genderlessness of the human, so the priesthood was fully open to—and made no distinction between—"ana-females" and "ana-males" (Oyewùmí 1997: 140). In precolonial Yorùbáland, then, there was no "gender," there was no "woman's place," and, Oyewùmí insists, there

then, in making this connection (in the safe depths of a footnote), I am not looking to draw precolonial Igbo practices into the register of Anglo-American "homosexuality"; rather, I am looking to assemble both of these under the (very provisional) category of practices-condemned-by-Victorian-Christianity-as-abominable-parodies-of-normative-heterosexual-lifestyles.

²⁵ It should be noted that whereas Amadiume uses the signifiers *male* and *female* to designate (flexible) gender and *man* and *woman* to designate (inflexible) sex, Oyewùmí uses *man* and *woman* to refer to western, gendered constructs and *male* and *female*, or *ana-male* and *ana-female*, to designate a person's ungendered, transcultural (and still ultimately unquestioned) anatomical sex.

²⁶ Oh, for an ungendered singular personal pronoun!

²⁷ See Amadiume 1987: 27–29, 99–105; and Okonjo: 50–53. For a reconstruction of traditional practice among the Efik of Calabar Province in southeastern Nigeria, see Hackett. In this particular society it is the chief priest, *often a woman*, who crowned the *obong*, or king, of Calabar. For a less rosy account of women's roles in traditional Igbo and Yorùbá religions, see Mba: 24–67.