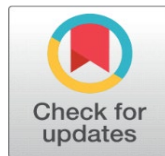
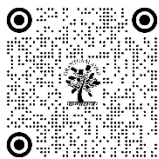


# BEYOND ACHEBE: FEMINIST VOICES AND GENDER FLUIDITY IN IGBO FOLKLORE AND LITERARY ADAPTATION

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## ABSTRACT

This essay returns to Igbo mythology and literary afterlives in fresh terms with feminist debates and gender fluidity's theme, diverging from the canonical gravitational pull of Chinua Achebe. While novels by Achebe give critical context for literary inscription of Igbo cosmology, Nigerian women writers and scholars have re-read deities, masquerades, kinship groups, and proverbs since then to emphasize women's fluidity and agency in gendered roles. Interweaving African feminist hermeneutics specifically nego-feminism (Nnaemeka, 2004) and snail-sense feminism (Adimora-Ezeigbo) with indigenous gender studies (Amadiume, 1987; Nzegwu, 2006), and strategic close readings of Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "The Headstrong Historian" (2009), Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996), and Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015), the essay illustrates how recent texts mobilize Igbo mythic figures (Ala, Uhamiri), institutions (umuada, female husbands), and performative actions (agbogho mmuo) to decolonize gender. The essay proposes a triangulated model mythic motif, social institution, and artistic adaptation to map the path of feminist voices reclaiming historical woman-centered power and writing new discourses on sexuality and identity onto the current landscape. The study holds that gender fluidity in Igbo societies occurs less as a borrowing from Western theory than as a refigured reading of practices intrinsic to that culture in which gendered functions were always negotiable, context-dependent, and performative. The conclusion calls for sustained work on Nollywood goddess cinema and digital adaptations as living archives of Igbo feminist futures.

**Keywords:** Igbo Folklore, Feminist Criticism, Gender Fluidity, Achebe, Uhamiri, Umuada, Masquerade, African Feminism, Adaptation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Chinua Achebe's fiction has anchored how global publics envision Igbo culture and its aesthetics of storytelling for some decades (Achebe, 1958). But the literary field since and alongside Achebe includes feminist re-mappings of Igbo folklore that problematize normative gender scripts. This essay raises questions: How do feminist authors and scholars rework Igbo myth and tradition in order to speak about women's agency and gender flexibility? What are the critical approaches that best illuminate those reworks? And how does focusing on women's texts and practices reshape our image of the Igbo archive itself?

The book is not so much to topple Achebe, as it is to read beyond him: to see how Flora Nwapa, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chinelo Okparanta, and other critics and cultural producers reenergize the mythic, ritual, and proverbial repertoires of Igbo life in ways that decenter strict binarisms. By doing so, they uncover a striking thread: Igbo cultures have historically had models of negotiable gender woman-to-man role reversals, female-preponderance institutions, and male exemplifications of "maiden-spirits" in masquerade—that later literature reimagines for present-day discourse.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RELATED SCHOLARSHIP

- Indigenous gender scholarship: Ifi Amadiume's seminal work on "male daughters" and "female husbands" in Nnobi demonstrated the way Igbo kinship had historically permitted gender cross-roles for social continuity (Amadiume, 1987). Nkiru Nzegwu (2006) goes a step further to affirm that precolonial Igbo social philosophy was based around women economically and morally, complicating externally imposed patriarchal thinking.
- African feminist hermeneutics: Obioma Nnaemeka's *nego-feminism* (2004) theorizes negotiation and "no-ego" strategies on the basis of African sociality. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *snail-sense feminism* is also an example of gradualist, context-dependent change methods widely transferable in reading characters making their way through custom without relinquishing it.
- Aesthetics and performance: *Masquerade and Igbo art studies* (Cole & Aniakor, 1984) emphasize the way gender is performed as appearance and role a notion that informs performativity theories (Butler, 1990) but emerges naturally out of Igbo practice.
- Decolonizing gender: More broadly African feminist scholarship, Sylvia Tamale (2020) appeals to moving beyond colonial epistemes to reclaim indigenous sexualities and regimes of gender. Translated to Igbo context, decolonizing gender means interpreting folklore as a living script where flexibility, and not fixity, was typically the order of the day.

## 3. METHOD AND CORPUS

The research uses qualitative, comparative methodology

- Major literary texts: Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966); Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996); Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *"The Headstrong Historian"* (2009); Chinelo Okparanta's *Under the Udala Trees* (2015).
- Cultural texts and practices: Igbo gods (Ala, Uhamiri/Ogbuide), women's institutions (umuada), gendered kinship (female husbands/male daughters), and masquerade (agbogho mmuo/maiden spirit).
- Secondary theory and scholarship: Amadiume (1987); Nzegwu (2006); Nnaemeka (2004); Cole & Aniakor (1984); Butler (1990); Tamale (2020).

## 4. ANALYSIS

### 1) Water, Wealth, and Womanhood: Uhamiri in Efuru:

Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* takes a heroine selected by Uhamiri/Ogbuide, the goddess of Oguta Lake and patron of beauty, wealth, and strict moral expectation. The genius of the novel lies in the manner in which it reinscribes value; that is, patronage by the goddess invests prestige unfounded on motherhood or conjugal success (Nwapa, 1966). Rather than condemning a woman who is infertile, Nwapa places *Efuru* within a divine economy in which women's power flows from water's abundance and from women's work and social relations.

This mythic identification performs significant work. It resists narrow maternal essentialism and honors native religion. Through *nego-feminism*, *Efuru* is a strategic negotiator; she does not abandon tradition nor accede to its most minimalist demands. Instead, her life with the goddess refigures agency as capability and contribution, not reproductive output (Nnaemeka, 2004). The result is a feminist rewriting of folklore that sanctifies very choices that patriarchy would banish.

### 2) Ala's Moral Earth and Women's Collective Authority:

The earth goddess Ala (Ani) patronizes fertility and law; abominations (*nsọ ala*) are sin against her. In a number of Igbo societies, the *umuada* (assembly of daughters of the lineage) have moral stewardship with ritual and social power to criticize evil and resolve conflicts. Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* brings these women groups to life in an effort to present women as custodians of communal balance, rather than domestic subjects (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 1996). The *umuada*'s authority illustrates function-based power that transcends rigid gender dualisms.

Amadiume's conclusion about woman-centered institutions and gendered role reversal provides a historical framework for the understanding of such scenes as not anomalous or necessarily symbolic (Amadiume, 1987). Adimora-Ezeigbo's fiction, in this sense, is an infusion of live folklore proverbs, rituals, assemblies into a narrative in which women's rule simultaneously becomes culturally legitimate and politically transgressive.

### **3) Masquerade, Performativity, and the Maiden Spirit:**

Igbo masquerade (mmanwu/mmuo) is a theatre of the spirits in which male performers embody characters on both sides of the gender continuum, for example, agbogho mmuo, the spirit maiden. As Cole and Aniakor (1984) illustrate, this is not "drag" in a Western sense, but an aesthetics of appearing that is disciplined, in which male bodies build the appearance, walk, and voice of idealized femininity. Gender here is a ritual staging of forms.

To read this alongside Butler's (1990) performativity is insightful but must be grounded in indigenous logic: the performer disappears into the spirit, and embodiment follows the gender of the spirit, not the performer's. Allusions to masquerade in contemporary literature characters who "wear" roles, women who take up titles inscribed male, men who become vessels for feminine spirits are reflections of old cultural scripts through which gender could be ritually reassigned for social or spiritual purposes.

### **4) Rewriting the Canon: The Headstrong Historian:**

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "The Headstrong Historian" is a feminist palimpsest of Things Fall Apart along a matrilineal line: from Nwamgba's resistance to colonial reinterpretations to her granddaughter's intellectual retrieval of history (Adichie, 2009; Achebe, C., 1958). Adichie's account reinscribes common motifs chi (personal spirit), kinship organization, Christian conversions on women's experience and memory. The text is twice adapted: of Achebean canon and of Igbo tradition. The "historian" granddaughter's text is both an unreflective appropriation of colonial archive and a repossession of women's names in the line of descent an archival feminism drawing on indigenous memory.

### **5) Love Under the Udala Trees: Sexuality and Indigenous Spaces:**

Chinelo Okparanta's Under the Udala Trees considers female same-sex desire in the context of war, religion, and cultural compulsion (Okparanta, 2015). While not a direct retelling of a single folktale, the novel is infused with Igbo symbolism—the udala (udala/udala) tree as home and threshold space and proverbial moral haggling. As read together with Tamale's call to decolonize African sexualities (2020) and Amadiume's account of gender role flexibility, the book asks whether indigenous epistemologies can support more expansive definitions of love and personhood than colonial-era moralities allow. The modest thesis of the novel is that tradition is not uniform; its different branches cast shadow for existence that does not adhere to binary imports.

## **5. A TRIANGULATED MODEL OF ADAPTATION**

Mythic motif: Gods and spirits (Uhamiri, Ala, agbogho mmuo) write values around wealth, law, beauty, and embodiment.

Social institution: Kinship regimes (female husbands/male daughters), women's councils (umuada), ritual punishments (nsọ ala) distribute power along axes gendered with significant elasticity.

Artistic adaptation: Novels and fiction translate these motifs and institutions into narrative trials that encourage women's agency and the fluidity of roles.

This model accounts for why feminist writers do not turn their backs on tradition; rather, they choose, emphasize, and even invert elements already there in Igbo cosmology and social practice. The payoff is a hermeneutic of decolonization: gender is neither alien theory imposed on Igbo texts nor some anachronistic category foisted upon them, but something legible within the grammar of roles, spirits, and communal authority within the tradition.

## **6. BEYOND BINARIES, BEYOND ACHEBE**

Achebe's achievement is magnificent, yet the feminist archive post-Achebe reveals that Igbo world-story was never subject to single vision. Through the books under review:

- Agency progresses from domestic obedience to public guardianship (umuada, Ala's moral earth).

- Femininity cannot be equated with motherhood; divinity membership and economic acumen (Efuru-Uhamiri) are other values.
- Social function of gender can be reassigned, embodied, or negotiated (female husbands; masquerade), an argument resonant with but independent of Western performativity theory.
- Adaptations of the canon ("The Headstrong Historian") and symbolic re-situations of sexuality (Under the Udala Trees) demonstrate precisely how adaptation may be critique and repair.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Feminist theory has not only broadened the Igbo literary tradition—it has re-energized the tradition's own mechanisms for thinking through rigid gender binaries. Through indigenous gender studies and African feminist paradigms, Igbo folklore uncovers a surprisingly contemporary proposal: gender in this archive is labor, connection, and role—often negotiable, sometimes religiously re-arranged, and always within community. Future research can map Nollywood's goddess cinema (e.g., Idemili/Uhamiri reinventions) and digital storytelling as transformatory sites where Igbo myth meets feminist imaginaries. This research would further provincialize the colonial gaze and affirm the expansiveness of the tradition.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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