Power, Marginality and Womanbeing in Igbo Oral Narratives

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Power and Powerlessness of Women in West African Orality

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In the introductory essay Chukwuma Azuonye examines two major categories of Igbo oral narratives, *akuko-ifo* 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-ifo* 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, childbirth 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 denigations 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 argumen-

tation.

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, "womanbeing," 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

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 commissioning, by that regime, of two studies of Igbo women's organizations, 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 councils\(^3\) (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 tradition. These are *akuko-ifọ* 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-ifọ* 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,

\(^3\) A typical example of such women's council is the *Omụ* society among the Igbo west of the Niger (see Okonjo, 1987), which, under its powerful queen-mother constitutes 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 organization, 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 century, 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-ifo 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 denotations. In addition to referring to the physical earth and to land as an
economic property (i.e. as residential estate or farmland), 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 "fatherland," "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 perceived 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 categories 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 geological 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 omenala (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 Igbo-land. 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 Amaduame (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 hegemony 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, *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 *Chi-ukwu* (great or supreme *chi*) which the Nri created seems to be a logical extension of the philosophy of *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 *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, *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):

*Chukwu* (from *chi ukwu*) is the creator of all things, with four manifestations of his existence. First, *Chukwu* is *Aryanwu*, 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 *Chukwu* all powerful, and as the sun's light reveals things so is *Chukwu* the source of knowledge. Secondly, Chukwu is *Agbala*, the fertility of the earth and the beings that inhabit it. Thirdly, *Chukwu* is *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, *alusi*. *Alusi*, the invisible creations of *Chukwu*, are the "beings" or "forces" that manipulate the hidden laws to shower good or evil onto the visible world of man.

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, *Chukwu*, was found. The new *Chukwu* of the Aro was however not so new. It was a crude appropriation of the humane and enlightened idea of *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 Echigwe (1987), Ala is still today invoked before Chukwu, in various parts of Igboland, 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-oke (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, \textit{Chi na Eke}, they constitute equal and counterbalanced forces standing in complementary relationship to one another and playing complementary rôles 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, \textit{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 \textit{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, \textit{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 – \textit{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 pat: local 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 Igedo (see Ekwealor, 1989) which attributes the origins of seven autonomous communities in the Anambra Local Government Area of Anambra State to the great Ancestress, Igedo. Today, these seven communities are collectively known as Umu-Igedo 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 along-side 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 okpiri (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 Mgbaafọ. When the heroine’s husband goes to war in Ibibioland and fails to return, Nne Mgbaafọ 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 Mgbaafọ 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 jealousyly 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.\(^8\)
But in the course of time it was taken away from them.\(^9\)
Today, the people of Abam perform the war dance;
Today, the people of Ohafia Ucumeziema 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.

\(^8\) It may be remarked here that the singer of this version of the tale of Egbele is Kaalu Igiirigiri, 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 Igiirigiri 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 Ihejiemebi 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, 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

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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-ifō*

Like *Akuko-ala*, the term, *Akuko-ifō*, 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 Revealers of Secrets*. 
Aro,\textsuperscript{13} in Yoruba. Akuko-ifọ 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-ifọ 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-ifọ 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-ifọ 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

\textsuperscript{13} The Yoruba Aro and its dialectal variant, Aọ, 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 Itan.
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-ifo 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 (Edeafia, 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 Edeafia, 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-ifo 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 femininity 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-ifọ 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,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 roles 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.

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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 akuko-ala 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 vari-
ous tale-types found across the world. My present project at the Uni-
v ersity 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 under-
stood than they are at the present.
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