**Mapping constructs of gender** **in research on** **Igbo women in Nigeria: Embracing a Southern feminist theoretical perspective**

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**Abstract**

Southern feminist theorists make a pertinent call for the democratisation of knowledge between the North and the South. In this article, we embrace a Southern perspective in feminist theory while embarking on a genealogical analysis of gender constructs in research about Igbo women in south-eastern Nigeria. In that sense, the study of gender constructs within feminist scholarship is itself a major source of inspiration. We therefore throw light on how the social position of Igbo women has been theorised by Western anthropologists and historians and discuss the different strands in African and Nigerian scholarship that are concerned with reappropriating and theorising the social position of Igbo women. Our wide-ranging analysis shows, surprisingly, that both Northern and Southern feminist theorists ironically tend to reproduce and reinforce the colonial perspective. We therefore argue that historically, geographically, contextually, and culturally grounded forms of knowledge should be produced, exchanged, and imagined.

**Key words:** women, postcolonial theory, post structural theory, difference and diversity

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**Introduction**

While drawing attention to the long-term dominance of ‘Northern theory’, a range of scholars have quite recently confronted global and historically rooted knowledge inequalities by offering new theoretical and conceptual approaches from a Southern perspective in feminist theory (see Epstein and Morrell 2012; Connell 2007; Dados and Connell 2012; Connell and Dados 2014). As a result of the process of post-war decolonisation, the term ‘Global South’, or ‘Third World’, mainly refers to the geopolitical marginalisation and histories of colonialism of so-called periphery countries (Epstein and Morrell 2012). The term ‘Global South’ is a term that has been emerging in postcolonial studies and is broadly used to refer to the geopolitical regions of Latin America, Asia, and Africa, and often refers to countries who share histories of colonialism through which large inequalities were maintained and reinforced (Dados and Connell 2012). The critique advanced by Southern feminist theorists implies that traditional Western feminism has tended to replicate the colonising imperative when theorising the struggles of women in postcolonial contexts (Oyewumi 1997; Spurlin 2010). In her influential book *Southern Theory*, Connell (2007) makes a pertinent call for the democratisation of knowledge between the North and the South, which includes a search for the periphery’s potential to produce new knowledge and new theories rather than treating it primarily as a site for the collection of data that are interpreted in terms of Northern paradigmatic world views. Mainly located in postcolonial and poststructuralist feminism (see Mohanty, Russo, and Torres 1988; Smith 1999; Mohanty 2003), Southern feminist theory attempts to ‘reread’ or ‘redefine’ taken-for-granted terrains of knowledge (Spurlin 2010) without denouncing the global North (Lewis 2007). In that sense, Southern feminist theory attempts to shift those terrains, ‘redrawing (…) spaces for decolonizing knowledge and re/claiming discursive territories for hybridity’ (Mutua and Swadener 2004, 1).

Embracing a Southern feminist theoretical perspective implies that the study of gender constructs within feminist theory itself becomes a major source of inspiration for theoretical analysis of gender relations (Walby 2009). As Mutua and Swadener (2004, 1) assert, ‘research itself has been described as a colonizing construct’, with a legacy that can be summarised as ‘they came, they saw, they named, they claimed’ (Smith 1999, 80). Connell (2014, 556) emphasises that a Southern feminist analysis therefore ‘must invert the problematic of recent gender theory in the global North’. This challenge, however, is not to be taken lightly and implies major complexities for scholars, who are required to be sensitive to avoiding the reproduction of existing gender and geopolitical inequalities when they engage in theoretical endeavours. As Epstein and Morrell (2012, 469) argue in a recent issue of *Gender and Education*, ‘Southern theory is not an on-the-shelf solution to global geopolitical inequalities but a work in process that is important both for the global South and to simultaneously dethrone and enrich Northern, mainstream theory’.

In this article and the larger work it represents, we are therefore inspired by Southern feminist theorists while embarking on an analysis of gender constructs in research about Igbo women in South-Eastern Nigeria in sub-Saharan Africa, a segment of the Global South. In what follows, we first situate our theoretical frame of reference, which is based on a feminist critique of how European colonialism has produced a Eurocentric paradigm in which essentialist claims about Self and Other are made. Secondly, we elucidate the aim of our genealogical analytical approach, which enables us to highlight the theoretical conceptualisation of gender constructs in Igbo society. Thirdly, we throw light on the ways in which the European colonial project also interfered with African civilisation and examine how the social position of Igbo women has been theorised by Western anthropologists and historians in rather stereotypical and sexist ways. Fourthly, based on feminist theory drawn from sub-Saharan Africa, particularly among Igbo and other Nigerian writers, we discuss the different strands in Nigerian scholarship that are concerned with reappropriating and theorising the social position of women. Our wide-ranging analysis shows, surprisingly, that both Northern and Southern feminist theorists ironically tend to reproduce and reinforce the colonial perspective. We therefore conclude that historically, geographically, contextually and culturally grounded forms of knowledge should be produced, exchanged and imagined.

**European colonialism and essentialist notions of Self and Other**

Southern feminist theorists draw upon poststructuralist and postcolonial feminist critiques of Western knowledge and its privileged ways of knowing (Connell 2007). These feminist thinkers reveal that the European colonial project was based on a particular Eurocentric world view that is rooted in the premise that there are essentialist properties which are universally shared by all women (Braidotti 2013). General in philosophy, essentialism is the view that ‘things have essential properties, properties that are necessary to those things being what they are’ (Stone 2005, 6). Or as Diana Fuss (1989, xi-xii) defined it, essentialism refers to ‘a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the “whatness” of a given entity’. In relation to feminist theory, essentialism implies that invariable and fixed properties are associated with male and female human beings, referring to deterministic and fixed biological, psychological and social characteristics that may lead to hierarchical social power dynamics within and between societies (Grosz 1994). In that sense, feminist theorists have argued that it is essentialist to claim the existence of a female nature, or sex, that is pre-cultural, pre-social and independent of social forces (Mutua and Swadener 2004). Southern feminist theorists therefore reject the idea that universal claims about women in the North and the South can be made, arguing that women who fail to exhibit characteristics that are supposedly ‘universal’ are often oppressed (see Mohanty 1997), and accordingly argue that the Eurocentric assumptions embedded in colonial world views were underpinned by such essentialist ideals, and developed historically into a civilisational model that was constituted in relations of Western governance. As Simpson (2007, 563) asserts, the grip of European colonial power constructed the peoples of other lands as ‘savage Others’, and ‘placed great emphasis on the importance of education (…) with uncivilised people. Indeed, it was this very lack of proper civilising education that defined savagery.’

In contemporary Southern feminist theory, it has been argued that, as a result of the above-mentioned Eurocentric paradigm, feminist theory and research also made essentialist claims for and about ‘women’ (Mutua and Swadener 2004). The critique concerns essentialist notions of sex and gender that are particularly directed towards women in the South, who are compared with white, Western, heterosexual, middle or upper-class wo/men (Connell 2007). In that sense, Southern feminist theorists (see Mohanty 1991, 2003; Acholonu 1995; Hountondji 1997; Smith 1999; Nnaemeka 2003; Mutua and Swadener 2004; Connell 2007, 2013, 2014; Epstein and Morrell 2012; Oloruntoba-Oju and Oloruntoba-Oju 2013; Connell and Dados 2014) have argued that Western feminism has aligned itself with the colonial project in theorising the struggles of women of the Third World. As Omolade states, ‘by confining their theories to their own particular history and culture, white feminists have denied the history and culture of women of color’ (Omolade 1987, 247). In her seminal essay *Under Western Eyes*, Chandra Mohanty (1988) criticised the hegemony of Western scholarship for producing and circulating essentialist knowledge on women in the South, suggesting that Western writers ‘discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneity of the lives of women in the Third World, thereby producing/representing a composite, singular “Third World woman”’ (Mohanty 1988, 62-63). In her work, Mohanty (2003) tackles this binary positioning of women in the Third World against women in the West as a discursive practice that disregards the complexity and heterogeneity present in both worlds and renders these women invisible.

In their criticism of the application of a universal and essentialist notion of feminism, feminist theorists who have a commitment to a Southern politics of location (see Bhabha 1994; Smith 1999; Mohanty 2003; Nnaemeka 2003) indeed argue that the lack of attention paid to the situated knowledges of women in the South have made them invisible in feminist theory, since their voices, conflicts and experiences have barely been represented or theorised within feminist circles (see Gilligan 1993; Nnaemeka 2003, 366; Beoku-Betts and Njambi 2005). Southern feminist theorists are therefore dissatisfied with issues of misrepresentation of African societies and cultures, raising the critique that this reflects a view in which, African cultures, for example, are portrayed as backward countries along with other forms of stereotype that negate their people’s subjectivity, agency and knowledge (see Nnaemeka 2003; Beoku-Betts and Njambi 2005).

It can therefore be argued that the European colonial project conceptualised the social position of women in the South according to essentialist sex roles, reminiscent of a prevailing perspective in Western feminism that reduced their gendered subjectivity to ‘universal female subordination’ (Arnfred 2005b, 12). Colonialism endorsed what Mudimbe (1988) calls a ‘colonising structure’, which perpetuates constructed binary oppositions between ‘the civilised subject’ and ‘the indigenous’ or ‘savage Other’ in the writing of history. The Eurocentric paradigm therefore implies a binary ‘dialectics of Self and Other’ (Braidotti 2013, 15), leading to a dominant, inferior and essentialist notion of the Other on which European colonialism built its civilising project and that obscures the dynamism and specificity of indigenous women’s culture (Mbembe 2001).

The European colonial project’s interference with African civilisation emerged during the nineteenth century (Lugones 2007; Oyewumi 1997; Mama 1997; Mudimbe 1994) in an attempt ‘to civilize the uneducated and untamed “savage” at home in Europe and abroad among the indigenous peoples of colonized lands’ (Simpson 2007, 561). The major presumption of the colonial project was that these interventions would transform the local conditions and cultures of the respective African colonies of European nation states. Spurred by imperialism, modernist beliefs and economic benefits, Europe legitimised its involvement in Africa in terms of the ‘mutual benefit of her own industrial classes, and of the native races in their progress to a higher plane; that the benefit can be made reciprocal, and that it is the aim and desire of civilized administration to fulfil this dual mandate’ (Lugard 1972, 272). This colonial conception was rooted in philanthropy, or as Lugard (1972, 272) puts it, civilisation would bestow ‘happiness and welfare [to] the primitive races’. According to Zins (1998, 66), the colonial project implies ‘a civilizing mission’ to make the native population discard their traditional ways of ordering and conceptualising their lives in favour of perceiving European forms of rationality and secular divisions as superior. The European colonial civilising project tended to judge ‘distant problems in the light of its own experience and to try to fit them into its own formulas, regardless of their relevance to local conditions’ (Amery 1953, 181). This phenomenon of cultural domination (see Spivak 1994; Mohanty 2003) evoked long-term and consistent justifications by, for example, politicians, religious men and women, anthropologists and other scholars. They perceived African indigenous political organisations and their institutions as a stumbling block to the civilisation of its peoples (Umejesi 2012).

In the context of the epoch of colonial power relations in human history, including their impact on the production of knowledge, however, we are yet to engage with the underpinnings of the colonial project, referring here to the set of both conscious and unconscious ideas which make up the comprehensive normative vision of colonialism.

**Analytical approach**

In our analysis, we engage in a genealogical analytical approach, a research strategy that enables us to analyse critically how gendered epistemologies and ontologies are constituted and produced culturally (Alexander and Mohanty 1997). As Butler (1990, 5-6) asserts, there is nothing like a ‘seamless category of women’. Drawing upon a critique of Western knowledge and its privileged way of knowledge producing, we attempt to deconstruct gendered binaries between Self and Other while seeking to uncover how this construct of gendered subjectivities has subsequently been naturalised (Alexander and Mohanty 1997; Mutua and Swadener 2004). This genealogical perspective also allows us to rethink feminism as a ‘practice of gender subversion that demands no unity among women’ (Stone 2005, 4). The analysis of Southern feminist theorists is located in the paradoxes, heterogeneities and messiness of human life (Epstein and Morrell 2012), and in an attempt to acknowledge the heterogeneity of women as the subjects of their own history and culture (Castaing 2014).

The research therefore explores how Southern feminist writers attempt to redefine research in a sense that captures the experiences of Igbo women, thereby positioning them at the centre of discourses that produce/define them. We should note here, however, that we prefer to make use of the term ‘womanist’ rather than ‘feminist’, as our language use also demarcates a central concern about a neocolonial appropriation in feminist theory (see Mutua and Swadener 2004). In our case, current African scholars prefer the label ‘womanist’ as they seek to release discourses on African and Nigerian women and gender relations from essentialist and universalist assumptions and to restore and revalue African and Nigerian *womanhood* (Sofola 1998). This term is introduced by scholars who call themselves ‘womanist’ and emphasise tropes of, and examine and contest discourses produced about, the specific situations of African women that are positioned at the centre of debate between Northern and Southern feminist perspectives (Oloruntoba-Oju & Oloruntoba-Oju 2013). These writers include, among others, Zulu Sofola (1998), Akachi Adimora-Ezigbo (2002), and Obioma Nnaemeka (1998, 2003). The core of the disagreement, according to Nnaemeka (2003), is that Northern feminism is not self-evidently applicable to the African environment. In their criticism, Nnaemeka’s concept of ‘nego-feminism’ is central and implies the negotiation of feminism and the exclusion of what she refers to as no-ego feminism or feminism without ego trip. In this context, Nnaemeka (2003, 361) argues in favour of ‘the importance of culture and difference’ and stresses the necessity and prudence of ‘building on the indigenous’ in the construction of African feminist theory. The desire of these scholars of ‘building on the indigenous’ refers to ‘whatever the people consider important to their lives, whatever they regard as an authentic expression of themselves’’ (Ake 1988, 19) and calls for a critical study that challenges taken-for-granted views or practices of their native communities (Smith 1999). ‘Indigenising’ does not refer to a stratified or reified notion of culture that is evoked by tradition and legitimizes oppressive elements, but to a critical perspective that is rooted in uniqueness and heterogeneity among women that emanates from ‘cultural and philosophical specificity of its provenance’ (Nnaemeka 1998a, 9). Speaking recently on the type of ‘feminism agreeable to African culture’, Ezeigbo (see Oloruntoba-Oju & Oloruntoba-Oju 2013, 12) describes African womanist or womanism as something that is ‘closest to our lives as African women, trying to build our society, our families’. Striking in these theories is that womanism is not necessarily being confrontational in relation to some strands in Western feminism.

In what follows, therefore, we engage in genealogical analysis of gender constructs in research about Igbo women in south-eastern Nigeria. First, we explore research accounts in which Igbo women are the subject of study, situating them in the context of early European colonial studies. Second, we discuss research accounts of early (post-independence) indigenous African writers in their attempt to recover Igbo women’s dual sex political system in Igbo society. This covers research accounts produced by what is popularly referred to as the ‘first wave’ of Igbo women scholars. Third, within this early emerging literature we analyse the work of Nigerian womanist writers who characterised indigenous cultures as patriarchal and portrayed their indigenous dual-symmetrical structures as oppressive to women. Fourth, we discuss the work of African and Nigerian womanist authors, referred to as ‘second wave’ writers, who criticise male-authored Nigerian literature as an entrenchment of an essentialist view of women. Finally, we discuss important shifts and revisions in the work of contemporary feminist writers, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where womanist scholars are developing ‘indigenising theory’ (Daymond 1996; Appadurai 2001; Saunders 2002; Nnaemeka 2003; Connell 2007).

**Igbo women as the subject of categorisation in early European colonial studies: producing the savage Other**

The ways in which the gendered position and subjectivity of Igbo women have been considered and theorised in Eurocentric research is not easily traceable; what has initially shaped perceptions of them and other African women has been, rather, the sexist and paternalistic depiction of the customs and values of African peoples by Western anthropologists and historians. Their pioneer work generated a large literature on Igbo society that refers to Igbo women either directly or indirectly. The earliest of these written accounts are those of European authors, including the exemplary works of Talbot (1926, 1937), Basden (1938, 1966), Leith-Rose (1965/1939 2nd and 1st editions respectively), Harris (1940), Greenberg (1949), Jordan (1949), Jones (1963), Green (1964), Horton (1972) and Northrop (1978). These authors attempted to document the social life of Igbo people at a time when no literature on this theme existed. Some of these scholars asserted that Igbo women generally occupied a low social status in society, based on the idea that Igbo men’s nature was naturally superior to that of Igbo women (see Basden 1966). Basden, an English missionary for the Church Mission Society, claims, for instance, that they are of low intelligence compared to Igbo men. For him, women are contented with any circumstance that comes their way and he argues that ‘there is no grumbling against their lot’ (Basden 1966, 88). In her first publication, *African Women*, Leith-Rose (1939) oscillates between admiration and condescension, respect and disdain for Igbo people. While Leith-Rose (1939, 55) argues that Igbo culture had been ‘rich and vital’, she states elsewhere that there is an ‘almost complete lack of art or craft’ (Leith-Rose 1939, 55) and that Igbo people are ‘ready to enter the modern world’ because they have ‘nothing of their own to lose’ (Leith-Rose 1939, 55). She stresses the inferior status of Igbo women to the point of suggesting that ‘they have nothing to be proud of in society’ (Leith-Rose 1939, 68).

Against this backdrop, most African indigenous writers (e.g., Mba 1982; Amadiume 1987; Akachi-Ezigbo 1990) argued that these scholars mainly produced Eurocentric accounts of Igbo culture and universalist, essentialist notions of Igbo women that were largely written from the viewpoint of outsiders in binary opposition to the insiders of Igbo society. They point out, for example, that later works of other European authors are dedicated to revising the image of Igbo women, since they ‘seek to show that Nigerian women in traditional times were active political animals’ (Okonjo 1976, 46) and that this view had been distorted by earlier authors. This effort to demonstrate the important roles Igbo women played in traditional village life can be seen in the later works of Leith-Rose (1965/1939) and Green (1964), who were commissioned by the government in reaction to women’s opposition. Sylvia Leith-Rose, for example, was one of the trained anthropologists deployed by the colonial administration to study Igbo women in order to come up with more accurate reports on their nature and customs. Her work *African Women* (Leith-Rose 1939) is of particular importance because it embodies a detailed study of the everyday lives of Igbo women in Owerri and Port Harcourt in south-eastern Nigeria. Although still Eurocentric, colonial and rhetorical in language, this early ethnographic study of Igbo women offers valuable information on some aspects of the lives of Igbo women. Leith-Rose makes the following admission of her own previous prejudice, revealing that she had thought that the women were confined to their ‘cooking-pots and babies’ (Leith-Rose 1965, 352). However, following her study of the women group at Eziama (one of the Igbo communities), she felt compelled to revise her previous ideas as follows: ‘When I sat with them in the Women’s Council, I knew I had been mistaken. There would be no confining these women within the conventional bounds of home life, not unless we wished to atrophy them, to waste their vigour’ (Leith-Rose 1965, 352). She argued that the political structure in Igbo society demonstrated how women in Igbo society exercised direct political power (Leith-Rose 1939, 106-08; see also Van Allen 1972, 165). More particularly, Leith-Rose also grappled with the question of whether the conventional practices of Western science could legitimately claim to produce ‘objective’, cohesive and comprehensive studies of the cultures of the world. She concluded that ‘it is better to admit the human factor at once than to pretend to a complete absence of personal bias’ (Leith-Rose 1939, 40). In these words, Leith-Rose underlines the ambiguities and tensions which permeate her writings.

**Dual-sex theory and the recovery of Igbo women’s political history**

The research accounts produced by early Western scholars, however, poorly framed the socio-political system of power distribution and gender differentiation among the Igbo at that time. Their interpretation of Igbo culture originated from their inability to understand an Igbo world view and to acknowledge the contributions that Igbo women made to their political system. This misconception led to the first wave of writings by indigenous African scholars, who made use of an archaeological approach to recover Igbo women’s political history, with reference to Felicia Ekejiuba’s (1966) work on *Omu Okwei* and Kamene Okonjo’s (1976) work on the *Omu of Ọbamkpa*. As Okonjo (1976, 45) asserted, ‘many observers concluded that the position of women in these societies was totally subordinate; as a result of their misconceptions, they produced a distorted picture of the “oppressive” African man and the “deprived” African woman’. They recovered Igbo women’s history through an exploration of the dual-sex political system in Igbo society, framing corporate and dual-sex political systems as the basis for analysing women’s **relative** autonomy. These authors did not specifically examine issues of equality in Igbo society, but their description of the dual-sex political structure provided a relevant framework within which the nature of traditional Igbo society could be articulated and understood.

A number of West African societies had *dual-sex political systems* in which the major interest groups were represented by their own sex. Within each sex, representatives managed their own affairs and governed their own members through a council based on their network of associations and sex solidarity (Okonjo 1976). As documented evidence shows (see Van Allen 1972; Okonjo 1976; Mba 1982; Amadiume 1987; Ezeigbo 1990; Okeke 1999), Igbo women exercised their political power according to a dual-sex political system embedded in ‘constitutional monarchy’ or ‘democratic village republic’ systems. Okonjo highlights that ‘the Igbo who live east of the Niger River traditionally had what Afigbo calls “democratic village republic” systems of political organisation, with authority widely dispersed in autonomous units. Th[os]e remaining (…) on the western side of the Niger and in the riverine towns of Onitsha and Ossomali, heavily influenced by the kingdom of Benin (…) developed a constitutional village monarchy system’ (Okonjo 1976, 47).The relative autonomy of Igbo women in the precolonial period was based on ‘their own political institutions: their “meetings” (*mikiri* or *mitiri*), their market networks, their kinship groups, and their right to use strikes, boycotts and force to affect their decisions’ (Van Allen 1972, 165). Igbo women represented themselves in two group solidarity associations present in every village and village-group in Igboland. Every woman belonged either to an association of *Otu Ụmụada* (Association of Patrilineage Daughters) or *Otu Alụtaradi* (Association of Patrilineage Wives). The former comprised all married, unmarried (but who had passed the traditional marriageable age), divorced or widowed women, who were considered as *bona fide* daughters of a particular town (Okonjo 1976). The latter group (*otu alụtaradi*) was composed of all the wives of a particular patrilineage (descendants related to a common male lineage). Particularly *otu ụmụada* enjoyed a lot of immunity, and their influence and power helped to check-mate the male arm of political administration in their agnatic patrilineages and towns (Chuku 2005). Although women were not able to confront men individually, and to a great extent remained subservient to them, as a collective they could press their demands. These gendered associations also produced inequality, which was hardly perceived because they were culturally legitimized, yet in a sense afford women ‘political platforms’ or relative agency through which they could ‘address their concerns outside the glare of patriarchal authority’ (Okeke-Ihejirika 2004: 13). The right to enforce decisions gave women a diffused voice to protect the group interest, to see that the group’s decisions were carried out and treated as legitimate for both individuals and groups (Van Allen 1972). Among the Igbo, arriving at a consensus on any major issue was vital, and how justice was done ought to be transparent to everybody (Okonjo 1976). Equally, this concept of political organisation underscores the various descriptions given to the political systems of traditional Igbo society later on, such as ‘excess democracy’ (Dike 1956, 37), ‘ultra-democratic’ (Forde and Jones 1950, 24) or ‘conciliar and democratic’ (Coleman 1958, 336). In deconstructing the myth of political inferiority of Igbo women, Van Allen (1976, 165-167) employs phrases such as ‘women’s traditional autonomy’, ‘political solidarity’ and ‘consensus’ to demonstrate their individual and collective powers in their communities.

The dual-sex nature of the political system was rooted in the idea of complementarity as Igbo people ‘aimed at a harmonious and effective division of labour by which both sexes would receive adequate attention to their needs’ (Okonjo 1976, 48). Although the political system was male-dominated and kinship-based, it was flexible enough to accord certain women relative political opportunities and a minority of Igbo women were participating in the political decision-making process (Amadiume 1987; Afonja 1990). Based on their kinship relationships as daughters, sisters, mothers, wives and in-laws to men*,* women became political actors. Okonjo (1976, 46) argued that women’s interests were represented and he demonstrated that some ‘Nigerian women in traditional times were active political animals’. The recovery of Igbo women’s political history therefore also shows that social norms have always been present, and consistently placed men in influential power positions as a source of women’s political powerlessness (Okwousa 1991). Although the dual-sex political system (Okonjo 1976; Mba 1982) provided a minority of women with relative individual and collective autonomy as a locus from which they could articulate and act on their standpoints, these social relations however also entail oppressive and conditional elements (Okeke 1999). For example, women were considered ‘empty’ unless when they were married. Moreover, the Igbo traditional practice of polygyny (polygamy) designated that women were prepared to share their husband at all-time with co-wives. Most Igbo women were reluctant to resist this idea, because any form of marriage was considered as the only way to confer women a degree of respectability in her immediate and wider community (see Nwankwo 1996). In this context, only mothers who were blessed with children of the ‘right sex’ had a say in the family which is referred to as the ‘male-child syndrome’ (Nwokocha 2007). Women achieved recognition and status by the birth of at least one male child, and ultimately received greater respect in relation to their counterparts in the family (Nwokocha 2007).

**The alternative framing of the dual-sex political system and organised women’s revolts**

The fact that Nigeria became a nation-state under colonial rule accounts for a widening of the precolonial gender gap in Igbo and many other communities. The accounts of these early writers illustrates, for example, how colonial intervention by Britain in the early 20th century marked the beginning of ‘the end of equality of the sexes in village as well as in national politics’ (Okonjo 1976, 55). In the colonial era, the British colonisers introduced a system of warrant chiefs in the guise of traditional institutions (see Afigbo 1972), which implied that men were appointed to fill the newly created posts while women experienced a loss of power. As Okonjo (1976) asserts, Igbo women were no longer allowed to make policy, and their political roles and organisations were discredited and eliminated. Our inquiry into gender constructs that are rooted in the historical and sociocultural fabric of Igbo society also suggests the issue of a gender gap in the formal educational system, that was historically reinforced during the colonial era (Leith-Rose 1965/1939). The rationale behind the sexist differentiation in education could be found ‘both in the indigenous society and in the colonial institutions’ (Mba 1982, 66). Western education was generally perceived as corrupting the minds of women, diverting their attention from the primary goals of becoming wives and mothers; why spending huge resources to educate women who would later marry outside the family? (see Okeke-Ihejirika 2004). Moreover, at the initial stages of colonial administration in Nigeria only males benefitted from formal (Western) education in Igboland and acquired jobs (Chuku 2005). Women were systematically excluded from public life and this deepened the erosion of the relative balance of power relations among the sexes (Nwankwo 1996).

The famous ‘Women’s War’ of 1929, which pitched Igbo women against the colonial rulers they regarded as oppressors, presents Igbo women’s demonstration for their right to be consulted on matters that affected them brought about the ‘War’, or the ‘Aba Riots’, a term employed in British colonial accounts to divert attention from women’s attacking symbolic institutions (Wipper 1992). During the Women’s War, thousands of Igbo women from the southeast and southwest provinces of Igboland converged on the headquarters and residence of the British colonial officer of the district, a Native Court building, a jail, and a bank. Van Allen (1976, 60) uncovers these symbolic acts of resistance, reporting that ‘the women chanted, danced, sang songs of ridicule’. At a few locations, the women broke into prisons and released prisoners. They also attacked sixteen Native Courts, most of which were broken up or burned. The British District Officers called in the police and troops and eventually more than 50 Igbo women were shot down and died, while 50 were wounded (see Van Allen 1976, 60-61). As Okonjo (1976, 46) argues, they were protesting against the introduction of sexist Victorian values into all aspects of Igbo women’s lives, values that extolled the ideology that ‘a women’s place is in the home and saw women’s minds as not strong enough for the masculine subjects of science, business and politics’ (see Smith 1970; Stenton 1957). Igbo women staged quite a number of demonstrations, ‘wars’ and protests to demand the restoration of their political system.

Van Allen (1976, 61) emphasises that the difference between the use of ‘Women’s War’ and ‘Aba Riots’ to describe how this incident is more than a word game, as it reflects a struggle between the coloniser and the colonised. While the British claimed they ‘won’ and imposed their terminology ‘Aba riots’, in order to justify the method they employed to stop the women’s action, scholars have recorded that the Igbo women themselves called it ‘Women’s War’ because it followed their traditional method of ‘making war’ on people (see Van Allen 1972, 60-61). The colonial term creates a picture of an uncontrolled, irrational and undisciplined mob that inflicted injuries and damage on humans and property. Describing it as the ‘Aba Riots’ also hides women’s exclusive role, as well as circumscribing its coverage to Aba town rather than engulfing, as it did, the whole of south-eastern Nigeria. To that effect, the use of the term in much of the literature to describe the incident is quite unfortunate and inappropriate (see Van Allen 1972, 60-61).

**African and Nigerian womanist critics of Igbo indigenous society as patriarchal**

In the African continent, new work by African womanist scholars emerged in the 1980s, concentrating on the status of women in the economic sphere and on their role in the mode of production. Inspired by the deployment of feminist concepts in development, their analysis mainly focused on the ‘gendered domestic order’ (see Nzegwu 1995, 88). African womanist writers such as Amadiume (1987), Afonja (1986) and Ogundipe-Leslie (1987) characterised indigenous Igbo and Yoruba societies, and more specifically the sexual division of labour, as incontrovertibly sexist and patriarchal. Their conception of patriarchy rests on ideas of gender stratification that gives women relative autonomy, and they argue that this form of stratification also reinforces inequalities that are barely perceived because they are ‘culturally legitimized’ (Afonja 1986, 122). Based on a framing of ‘cultural sexual differentiation’ as the central cause of inequality in economic production, these womanist writers framed the indigenous dual-sex political structures as inherently oppressive towards women. This interpretation is underpinned by a dominant notion of single-sex and patriarchal political systems that is inspired by normative values from the West (Endicott and Welsch 2003), since these African scholars employed rather individualist, approaches to gender relations as the standard by which to evaluate the indigenous gender system in Igbo society.

Their militant opposition to patriarchy reflects their viewpoint that is irreconcilable with African indigenous gender relations, but they simultaneously raised a critique of the misrepresentation of Igbo culture on the basis of categories produced by their cultural ‘Other’ (the West). Their views complicate earlier research (see Ekejiuba 1966; Okonjo 1976; Nina Mba 1982) that shows precolonial Igbo conceptions of gender to have been complex and structured differently from European conceptions. For example, while claiming to recover the values in Igbo society that were distorted by colonial interventions, Ifi Amadiume (1987, 37, 46) portrays Igbo society as patriarchal since women are like ‘objects and properties rather than as subjects’. Employing a problematic subordinate language, she ignores the relative agency and solidarity structures among Igbo women in precolonial times. To illustrate her point, she states that men pay money to acquire a wife, and when women do the same, the act is described as ‘buying a slave’ (Amadiume 1987, 46). Amadiume (1987) perceives this as an instrument for the preservation and extension of patriarchy and its traditions. Furthermore, she argues that ‘men have rights to yam, the prestige crop, which they use to assert their authority over women’ (Amadiume 1987, 46). The scholarship of these indigenous womanist scholars, however, tends to undermine women’s and men’s relative autonomy, to mis-frame the complex power relationships, and to erase the political histories and counter-hegemony that have long characterised Igbo women’s solidarity and struggle (see Amadiume 1997; Nzegwu 1994, 2012).

**African and Nigerian womanist critics of male-authored literature as entrenched essentialism**

Work from more radical African and Nigerian womanist scholars emerged in the late 1990s, including that of Oloruntoba-Oju Taiwo (1998), Chikwenye Ogunyemi (1985), Christine Obbo (1980), Stratton Florence (1991), Femi Osofison (2004), Asha Sen (1997) and Thérèse Agbasiere (2000), who raised a sharp critique of the entrenched essentialism in male-authored Nigerian literature. Remarkably, their criticism stems from the fact that most African male-authored literature has ironically reproduced and reinforced the colonial perspective in an attempt to counter racist colonial narratives on notions of indigenous sexuality and gender. A peculiar example is the ‘Mother Africa’ trope or slogan, which usually echoes the voice of male African artists and later became prevalent in their writings. Phrases such as ‘Black Woman’, the title of a poem by Léopold Sédar Senghor in which ‘mother’ is presented as ‘Naked woman, black woman, clothed with your colour which is life, with your form which is beauty’, also emerged in their writings. For these womanist critics, the nationalist formulations of the identity of African persons as species governed by intuition and emotion tended to imply an absence of proper analysis. Similarly, they would allude to the very striking elements of an essentialist representation of African women which echoes a colonial portraiture of the African female as ‘great overgrown women, *mothers* of families, *naked* as when born and quite unconscious of the disgust which their appearance excited’ (cited in Beoku-Betts 2005, 22).

Criticising the exclusive portrayal in the existing literature of males as heroes and protagonists of all that matters in African culture, Ogundipe-Leslie (1987:10) posits how this female taxonomy is produced: ‘very often she is a prostitute in the city, and when a rural woman she is a romanticized entity, one who is static as history passes her by, who wants the old ways of life’. Another contribution is made by Ogunyemi (1983), who uses stronger words to portray Nigerian male-authored literature as ‘male’ or ‘phallic’ (see Mbembe 2001:13), almost corresponding to what Asha Sen (1997, 56) described as ‘the immobilization of the female in male imposed traditionally-convened roles’. Stratton’s use of ‘exclusion’ to describe the portrayal of the African female by male literature also echoes the main contestation of feminist theory (see Hull, Bell and Smith 1982; Lugones and Spelman 1983; Omolade 1987). For these scholars, these and other pejorative images of Igbo women are reminiscent of new patterns of postcolonial masculinity that justify the colonial modernising process (Nancy 1983). Its undertone despises weakness, embodies suspicion of emotion and draws rigid social boundaries. According to these critics, this refers to a persistent and disturbing form of patriarchal nationalism that views women as walking reproductive systems and denies any active participation in the formation of the national project (McClintock 1995).

**‘Building on the indigenous’ as a prerequisite for new forms of gender relations**

Interestingly, emerging after the second generation womanist writers have been scholars who bring back tropes of ‘complementarity’ and ‘negotiation’, which characterise their discourse on gender relations alongside the discourse on postcolonial perspectives in research. Many of these African womanist authors are concerned not only with recovering the lost powers of women, but also with concentrating on modifying the critique of the previous generations of womanist writers. These writers include, among others, Zulu Sofola (1998), Akachi Adimora-Ezigbo (2002) and Obioma Nnaemeka (1998a). Their desire for ‘building on the indigenous’ (Ake 1988, 19) calls for critical study that challenges taken-for-granted views or practices of their native communities (Smith 1999). The basic argument of these womanist theorists is a call to appropriate those ‘essential feminine attributes’ of African women’s social position (Ezeigbo 1996, 1).

These writers seem to be re-evaluating the earlier attempt to confront patriarchy from a Western perspective, having discovered that certain indigenous African perspectives might have been compromised due to their rabid criticism. Amadiume captures this inherent gender complementarity in her account of religious structures, arguing that ‘political administration was embedded in the religious structure; we find both patriarchal and matriarchal ideologies juxtaposed in the indigenous political structure of Nnobi’ (Amadiume 1987, 52). In a trilogy that focuses on the imprints of a woman as daughter and mother in the joint patrimony/matrimony that defines Igbo patriarchy, Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo (2002) offers a fairly comprehensive insight into the literary appropriation of the tropes of ‘complementarity’ and negotiation that characterise the new womanist discourse in sub-Saharan Africa. In her chapter ‘Who is afraid of feminism’, Ezeigbo (1996, 3) unpacked her idea of a ‘true feminist’, which coincides with the idea of a woman who is ‘not a colourless, passive, ignorant and inert dormant of a woman. Neither is she termagant, nor a hater of men. She relates well to all human beings and is cheerful, friendly but restrained. As a wife or mother she is dutiful, responsible but not aggressive; self-confident but not arrogant’. For these writers, complementarity in the political system is central in conceiving Igbo society and womanism is not necessarily being ‘confrontational’, as some strands in Western feminism suggest. This implies the need for men and women to work together, in complementary ways, to achieve a better society, in the family, at workplaces, in politics and everywhere. For these womanist theorists, this ‘Nego-Feminist’ frame (see Nnaemeka 20003, 316) is paving the way for an alternative reading of feminist history but also for interpretations of contemporary social realities.

**Concluding reflections**

As we have stressed in this article, Southern feminist theorists challenge the dichotomisation of feminism that is rooted in unequal relationships as a result of the privileged location of Western feminism (Epstein and Morrell 2012). According to a Southern feminist theoretical perspective, Western feminism has traditionally occupied an intellectually and epistemologically superior position, so that experiences of women in the South are rather stereotypically represented (Connell 2013). As Madhok et al. (2013, 2) assert, the global North can no longer continue to be predominantly perceived as ‘the privileged location of agency and progress, and the South a space characterised by coercion, violence, oppression, and subjugation’. These theorists are concerned to abandon an unexamined Eurocentrism in feminist scholarship that is mainly reflected in universal and essentialist claims about women (see Braidotti 2013). Their aim is to avoid an unhelpful dichotomisation of the debate between the North and the South while engaging in the hard and complex work of uncovering and contesting global power relations and processes of subjugation within and between societies (Schwartz and Ray 2005) and embracing the complexity and heterogeneity of the lives of women and men in both the North and the South (Grosz 1994; Mohanty 1997), calling for ‘a much more nuanced understanding of how knowledge is produced’ to reimagine a new, more equitable, geopolitical global cross-fertilisation of knowledge (Epstein and Morrell 2012, 480).

Our wide-ranging analysis of gender constructs in research on Igbo women in south-eastern Nigeria, however, shows that Southern as well as Northern feminist theorists ironically tend to reproduce and reinforce the colonial perspective while entrenching essentialist notions of sex and gender. As Sensoy and Marshall (2010, 298) argue, ‘colonialism relies on the (re)telling of the colonized stories by the colonizer’, but, we might add, as well as by the colonised. Southern feminist theorists should therefore aim to challenge the representation of non-Western people based on Western and essentialist notions of the self, and critique these hegemonic forms of knowledge while producing contextually, ‘autonomous, geographically, historically, and culturally grounded feminist concerns and strategies’ (Mohanty 1991, 51) of women in the South. Challenging the idea of the existence of a universal woman, which produces a notion of women in the South as Other, Southern feminist theory might call for recognition of differences while acknowledging the historical and cultural specificity and heterogeneity of women in other places and times. Pivotal in these alternative and affirmative perspectives on our understandings of the human subject is the notion of a subject that is constituted across differences and that is also internally differentiated, but still grounded and accountable (Braidotti 2013). An anti-essentialist perspective might be very productive for Southern feminist theorists, emphasising a discourse that, even when the idea of negotiation can hardly offer a productive climate in the context of asymmetrical gendered power relationships, resonates with the tropes of ‘complementarity’, ‘negotiation’ and ‘reconciliation’ (Ezeigbo 1996; Nnaemeka 2005).

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