

Between *Odinani* and the Cross: Decolonizing Gendered Power Through Dual Spiritual Identities in Postcolonial Igbo Women's Lives".

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Abstract

This research situates spirituality as both a historical archive and a contemporary site of agency. My research interrogates the colonial assault on gendered power through spirituality in Igbo communities of Nigeria, by revealing how Christianity, western education, and colonial governance, imposed a rigid patriarchal framework that systematically altered Igbo women's sacred roles that gave them priority to gendered spiritual power. The concept of gendered spiritual power in this study is not confined to visible political authority but extends into the mystical and symbolic realms, where power is exercised through rituals, nature, the naked female body, pronouncements, blood, narratives, and intergenerational memory. My thesis posits that because of the "assault" on gendered power through spirituality, contemporary postcolonial Nigerian Igbo women have had to exist in a state of "*dual spiritual identities*", which can be understood as a form of spiritual compartmentalization. In this state of "*spiritual compartmentalization*", Igbo women have revealed that they navigate both traditional/*Odinani* and Christian spiritualities, side by side but separately, to respond to the push and pull that accompanies the goal of colonial modernity, while sustaining traditional existence and utility.

This research draws on an African decolonial feminist approach and explores how historical trauma from colonization reshaped gendered power, relegating Igbo indigenous/traditional spiritual practices to the margins while privileging western forms of religiosity as "civilized." My analysis situates spirituality as a locus of gendered power and resistance, proposing that the negotiation of dual spiritual identities reflects both the persistence, and adaptability of Igbo cosmologies and their reconfiguration in postcolonial Nigeria. In doing so, this work reclaims the validity of traditional gendered spiritualities and challenges the ongoing coloniality that continues to delegitimize African women's authority in both spiritual and cultural spheres. Ultimately, this thesis aims to contribute to African decolonial feminist scholarship by reclaiming the epistemic and spiritual legacies of Igbo women. I insist that the unique survival and persistence of traditional Igbo spiritual rituals, serve as acts of remembrance and resistance against colonial erasure, while foregrounding a holistic cosmology where Igbo women are active custodians of spiritual knowledge, agency, and power.

Dedication

*Nke a bụ nke gi, Nna m, Ernest Akosa Okadigbo. Onye nwere ọchịchọ buru ibu karịa igwe.
Ezigbo nnam a hụrụ gi n'anya ma na-eche ma ka gi oge o'buna*

This one is for you Daddy, Ernest Akosa Okadigbo. Who had ambitions wider than the sky.
You are loved and missed.

Acknowledgement

Ka otuto diri Chukwu taa, echi, na ruo mgbe niile. Ihe m chere na m enweghị ike ime, ị mere ya n'ihì m. Nara otuto niile."

To God be the glory today, tomorrow and forever. What I thought I could not do you have done for me. Receive all thanksgivings.

This research is a letter to my ancestors, who whisper strength into my spirit, and to all Igbo women whose stories of resilience and power inspire this work.

This thesis is not just the result of my research but the story of all the people who carried me through the moments when I thought I could not take one more step. To my family and my committee, you are the backbone of this work, the quiet force that stood behind every page, every tear, and every rewrite.

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To my darling husband Tony Ogbechie my rock, my tech support, and my reality check, thank you for being the voice of reason when I wanted to burn the entire thesis and start fresh (which happened far too often). You endured endless monologues about “gendered spiritual power” and “colonial residues” when all you wanted was to watch a movie in peace. You fed me, made me tea and reminded me to sleep. Thank you for encouraging me through the messy drafts, the

breakdowns, and the moments when I questioned why I ever started this PhD. This degree belongs to you as much as it does to me.

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In the end, this journey was not just about producing a thesis; it was about learning how to fall apart and rebuild, how to embrace imperfection and keep moving forward. To everyone who stood with me, held me up, or simply believed in me when I couldn't believe in myself thank you.

Dalu nu!

Table of Contents

Title Page

Abstract.....	ii
Dedication	iii
Acknowledgments.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	vi
List of Figures.....	ix
List of Maps.....	x

Isi Nke Mbu/Chapter One: INTRODUCTION

1.0 Context.....	1
1.01 Central Thesis of Dissertation.....	2
1.02 Roadmap for Readers.....	5
1.03 Locating myself in this research.....	7
1.1 Overview of Igbo Spirituality/Odinani in Nigeria.....	8
1.2 Literature Review: Colonization, Gender and Power in Africa.....	11
1.21 Post Colonial Legacies of Gendered Spirituality in the Nigerian Igbo context.....	19
1.22 Thinking Ahead/Cup Half Full.....	27
1.3 Thesis Chapter Outline.....	28

Isi Nke Abuo/Chapter Two: THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODLOOGY

2.0 Critical Decolonial Feminist Approach.....	34
2.01 Examining Postcolonial and Decolonial Theory.....	40
2.02 Possibilities of a Critical Decolonial African Feminist Approach.....	44
2.03 Limitations of a Critical Decolonial African Feminist Approach.....	46
2.1 Foucauldian Analysis of Power.....	51
2.12 Engaging with Foucault's Erasures, Silences and Absences.....	57
2.2 Methodology: Research Objectives and Key Questions.....	61
2.3 Originality/Rationale.....	62
2.31 Reflexivity.....	64
2.32 My Positionality.....	65

2.33 Qualitative Research Methodology: In Depth Semi Structured Interview.....	66
2.34 Critical Literature Review Through Critical Discourse Analysis.....	70
2.34 Journey Through the Research Process: Challenges, Triggers, Blind Spots, Confronting Biases and Insider Outsider Status.....	72
2.35: After Field Work: Transcribing Data Artificial Intelligence and its Challenges.....	85
2.4 Final Thoughts on Methodology.....	85
2.5 Data Analysis.....	88

Isi Nke Atọ/Chapter Three: GENDERED SPIRITUALITY AND POWER IN PRECOLONIAL NIGERIAN IGBO SOCIETY AND DISCOURSES OF POSTCOLONIAL RESIDUES.

3.0 Geo-Cultural Scope of Study: Southeast and Anioma Igbos'.....	93
3.01 Anioma: Igbos from the South-South Nigeria.....	96
3.1 Gendered Power in Igbo Nigerian society.....	97
3.2 Christianity in Colonial Igbo Communities and its Sustained Gendered Residue.....	107

Isi Nke Anọ/Chapter Four: THE PRACTICE OF GENDERED POWER IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA THROUGH MEDICINE, BLOOD, NATURE AND QUEENS.

4.0 Igbo, Anioma Women and Gendered Power.....	113
4.01 Medicine as a Form of Gendered Spiritual Power.....	125
4.02 Female Essence, Seduction, Blood and Creation as a form of Gendered Spiritual Power.....	128
4.03 Trees, Fruits and Herbs as a Form of Gendered Spiritual Power.....	135
4.04 The Naked Female Body as a Form of Gendered Spiritual Power.....	140
4.05 Omu Institution as a Form of Gendered Spiritual Power.....	145

Isi Nke Ise/Chapter Five: NAVIGATING ODINANI AND CHRISTIANITY IN POSTCOLONIAL IGBO SOCIETY, A PRACTICE OF SEPARATION.

5.0: Dualistic Fluidity.....	157
------------------------------	-----

Isi Nke Isii/Chapter Six: LOST SPIRITUAL CONNECTIONS AND COLONIAL DENIAL IN POSTCOLONIAL IGBO SOCIETY.

6.0 The Impact of Colonization on Gendered Spirituality.....	178
6.01 Loss of Spiritual Connections in Postcolonial Nigeria.....	181
6.2 Colonial Denial: A way of Reflecting the Coloniality of Being.....	197
6.3 Gendered Spirituality and its Connections to the Coloniality of Knowledge and Being.....	209

Isi Nke Asaa/Chapter Seven: GENDERED POWER THROUGH SPIRIRUAL PRACTICES THE WAY FORWARD.

7.0 Overview of Dissertation.....	215
7.1 Storytelling is Spiritual.....	218
7.2 Key Contributions of Thesis.....	220
7.3 Confronting Ongoing Coloniality Through Dualistic Fluidity and Colonial Denial.....	225
7.4 Future Research and Moving Forward	227
7.5 Limitations.....	230
7.6 Looking to the Future: Power, Spirituality and Decolonial Ambitions.....	231

Bibliography.....	238
--------------------------	------------

<i>Appendices</i>.....	266
-------------------------------	------------

Appendix A: List of younger coproducers 21-40 years old.....	266
---	-----

Appendix B: List of older coproducers 40 -90 years and beyond.....	267
---	-----

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form 40 -90 years and beyond.....	268
---	-----

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form 21-40 years old.....	272
---	-----

Appendix E: Interview Questions.....	276
---	-----

Appendix F: Ethics Approval Form.....	278
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List of Figures

1. Image 1: Photo of *Udala*/African star cherry from online source www.growplants.org.
2. Image 2: Photo of *Udala*/African star cherry fruit. Courtesy of author, Ify Okadigbo, 2024
3. Image 3: Photo of *Ogilisi*/Newbouldia leaves in the compound of one of my coproducers. Courtesy of author Ifeyinwa Okadigbo, 2024.
4. Image 4: Photo of Omu Issele-Uku, Adafo Onwordi, at her residence in Issele Uku Delta State Nigeria. Courtesy of author Ifeyinwa Okadigbo, 2024.
5. Image 5: Photo of *Omu* Okwei, (Center), *Omu* of Osaomala Kingdom in Anambra State. Photo taken in 1932 from authors (Ifeyinwa Okadigbo) family archives.
6. Image 6: Photo of Her Royal Highness, Oyebuchibe Okonkwo, *Omu* Obior, at her palace in Obior, Delta State Nigeria. Photo courtesy of the author, Ifeyinwa Okadigbo, 2024.
7. Image 7: Photo of Her Royal Highness, Oyebuchibe Okonkwo, *Omu* Obior, at her palace in Obior praying for the author with *Nzu/bentonite* powdered clay. Courtesy of the author, Ifeyinwa Okadigbo, 2024
8. Image 8: A bowl containing *Nzu/bentonite powdered clay* and *Kolanut* with Lords “hot drink”/alcoholic beverage. Photo courtesy of the author, Ifeyinwa Okadigbo, 2024.
9. Image 9: At the reception hall in the palace of the late Omu Martha Dunkwu, *Omu* Anioma. In Anioma, Photo courtesy of the author, Ifeyinwa Okadigbo, 2024.
10. Image 10: At the reception hall in the palace of the late Omu Martha Dunkwu, *Omu* Anioma, standing beside a large portrait of her in her palace in Anioma, Delta State. Photo courtesy of the author, Ifeyinwa Okadigbo, 2024.
11. Image 11: Her Royal Highness, Obi Joesphine Nwannabuogwu, *Omu* Ibusa in her palace in Ibusa Delta State. Photo courtesy of the author, Ifeyinwa Okadigbo, 2024.
12. Image 12: Image of Helen Uzoamaka Onyejekwe, *Amalunweze* (Grandmother of author) in her *Otu Odu* regalia which comprises elephant tusks worn on the wrists and ankles (1988). Photo courtesy of the author’s family archives.

List of Maps

1. 1.1- Map of Southeastern Nigeria showing Igbo communities.
2. 1.2- Map of Igboland situating Anioma communities which are located in the South-South region of Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

In northern Igbo land the most powerful deities were female (Achebe, 2005:55). Igbo women have always played the role of “superhuman”, savior, deliverer, and protector; and at the zenith of Igbo spiritual world is the genderless *Ezechitoke*, or god, who is the creator of all things (Achebe, 2005: 68).

1.0 Context.

This statement by Nwando Achebe contrast with the dominant/contemporary/colonial anthropological and missionary depiction of Igbo women as powerless and submissive (Lugard, 1922), subjugated (Best and Williams, 1993), and docile (Schipper, 2010). Achebe’s articulation of Igbo female deities serves as the scaffolding that underpins my desire to embark on this research. My work is borne out of restlessness to change the way gendered power negotiated by West African Igbo women is appreciated. It strives to find answers to complex questions about the nature of spirituality and its connections to gendered power dynamics in Igbo culture. The negative and dismissive portrayal of Igbo women and African women in general, resulted in the justification for the colonial encroachment of Africa. This encroachment remains an endemic problem, as pointed out by Okeke, et al. (2017), Igboin (2011), and Rodney (1972), who rigorously argue that it can attest to the current foundation of underdevelopment in Africa. My research plots these connections between colonization and the status of West African Igbo women, by interrogating how unique modes of power, specifically spiritual power, utilized by Igbo women, were subsequently diminished through the three-pronged colonial mechanism of western religion, western education and colonial military and political conquest. In addition, my work problematizes the binary and rigid interpretation of Igbo culture as patriarchal, abusive to women, masculinist

and “women hating”, by contextualizing the meanings and application of power, particularly gendered power. Foucault (1982) argues that we need to create a new theory of power. A theory of power that divorces itself from the current focus on legal frameworks, to center the modes of power that apply to everyday life. As such, my research posits that power exists in the quiet, the mysterious, the taken for granted, the hidden, the unorthodox, and the unexplained. The connection between mystery and power is integral to my theorization of gendered power. The assertion that power operates in ways that are not easily “visible”, measurable, or understood, makes the subject of spirituality the focal point in which I contribute to the existing theorizations of power.

1.01 Central Thesis

This thesis argues that contemporary postcolonial Nigerian Igbo and Anioma women exist in a state of dual spiritual identities of Christianity and traditional Igbo spirituality. This thesis will show how the separation/compartmentalization of both spiritual beliefs is performed as a unique form of “spiritual switching”, that allows Igbo women to express and enact their spiritual agency. I further argue that this “spiritual switching” offers them the flexibility to choose what spiritual belief they will negotiate at any given time, location and context. It also allows them to continue to practice their traditional spirituality regardless of their Christian faith and gives them the “peace of mind” of knowing that their connections to their ancestors are still active and “potent”. Most significantly, my research interrogates these unique forms of spiritual “switching” by creating a concept that I have labelled “*Dualistic Fluidity*” which problematizes the ways in which Igbo women “split” themselves into two, by practicing dual spiritual identities (Christianity and traditional Igbo spirituality) side by side but separately. This dissertation strongly argues that the dual spiritual lives of Igbo and Anioma women erroneously presented by some as signifying spiritual confusion, rather embody a strategic form of “Dualistic Fluidity” that enables them to

demonstrate power and contest colonial and patriarchal efforts to diminish women's authority. Through the data collected during my field work, I posit that the dual spiritual identities Igbo women occupy, offers a unique avenue for them to negotiate their power, spiritual heritage, agency, and respond to ongoing historical trauma. Ultimately, I argue that this freedom and agency that exists in this unique form of dual spiritual identity, is a response to coloniality and particularly the colonial imposition of Christianity in Igbo society.

The strategic and sustained demonizing of Igbo spirituality through colonial mechanisms, specifically religion, contributes to the diminished status and by extension, power of women in postcolonial/contemporary West African Igbo cultural world. The centrality of my work analyzes the complex ways in which Igbo spirituality has either sustained or declined in the face of colonial violence and manipulation. This thesis unpacks the legacies of colonization in Igbo West Africa, to specifically provide a critical interrogation of how the legacies of the colonial encounter, altered not only the enactment, but the perception, acceptance, and understanding of Odinani ¹/traditional Igbo spirituality, that were arguably sites of power for Igbo women. The three-pronged approach to colonization in Africa which includes cultural and religious domination, western education and military conquest, served as tools employed by European powers to subjugate and restructure African societies during colonial rule. Each "prong" worked in tandem to ensure not only territorial control but also psychological and epistemological domination over colonized peoples. My work

¹ The term traditional Igbo spirituality and Odinani will be used interchangeably in this thesis because they mean the same thing. In addition, "traditional" will be used rather loosely in this research to signal the originality, and uniqueness of the nature of specific spiritual or cultural Igbo practices. It is also used to signal that several practices are "indigenous" and distinct to Igbo people and was not created through western influences. I acknowledge that traditional can also be used in a derogatory way to mean the opposite of innovative or advanced, however that is not the intention in this research.

is specifically interested in how the “prong” of cultural and religious domination impacted the ability of Igbo women to negotiate and operationalize power.

Through the colonial encroachment of Igbo communities in Nigeria, *Odinani*, became altered, and destabilized. This destabilizing effect resulted in limiting Igbo women’s access to power which subsequently positioned them as secondary in their communities. Lugones (2010) argues that “the process of colonization invented the colonized and attempted a full reduction of them to less than human primitives satanically possessed aggressively sexual and in need of transformation (p:747). Her use of the word “attempted” implies that the goal of the colonialist to achieve a full reduction of the colonized was unsuccessful. My research specifically identifies how the response to the “attempted” reduction of Igbo spirituality and by extension gendered Igbo power, manifest in contemporary Igbo society. Igbo women have responded to the reality of colonial manipulation on Igbo spirituality either by embracing their traditional Igbo spirituality, divorcing themselves from it, or creating a new brand of spirituality that combines the two. My work focuses on the strategies contemporary Igbo women have adopted to embrace both spiritual worldviews at the same time, but not together.

This thesis also goes further to oppose the dominant discourse on power, by insisting that power takes on many forms and should be instrumentalized for different reasons beyond subjugation, violence, and erasure. Igbo cultural and social identities are embedded in their traditional beliefs, values, and spiritual practices. This research brings into conversation the multiple ways in which the remnant of Igbo West African communities remains scarred by the colonial encroachment. It specifically focuses its attention on how the “scarring” of the Igbo way of life was carried out through the destruction of Igbo gods and deities, spiritual associations, and ritual practices. These gods and spiritual practices were central to how Igbo people connected with each other and their

ancestors, and it has been shown that Igbo women played a central role in its enactment and sustenance (Amadiume, 1987). Therefore, my research aims to problematize how contemporary Igbo gender relations have and continue to be altered through colonial mechanisms (mostly Christian religion), that ultimately resulted in the diminishing status of Igbo women. Most importantly, my research dispels the racist colonial propaganda that Igbo traditional modes of spirituality are diabolic, barbaric and evil. My research contributes to the discourse on power, specifically gendered power, in how it is framed (or not framed) in Igbo culture, but most important it centers the unique ways it continues to be sustained in contemporary postcolonial Igbo society.

1.02 Roadmap for Readers.

This seven-chapter thesis investigates the ways in which contemporary Igbo West African women respond to the legacies of colonization which altered the practice of Igbo spirituality that was originally a unique site of power to them. This thesis identifies how the “loss” or altering of said Igbo spirituality due to the colonial encroachment, subsequently resulted in the diminishing status and power of Igbo women in postcolonial/contemporary Igbo communities of Nigeria. This first chapter which is the *Introduction*, provides an important overview of Igbo spirituality and its key components. It identifies the rationale for engaging in this research which calls for the inclusion and recognition of spirituality as a legitimate and tangible source of gendered power. It also provides a literature review on the nature of gender relations and spirituality in colonial and postcolonial African and Igbo West African society, to interrogate the ways in which the legacies of colonization altered the practice of African spirituality. Chapter two, which is the *Theoretical Framework and Methodology*, is divided into four categories. Firstly, it analyses my chosen theoretical framework which is a critical decolonial feminist approach. Secondly it traces my experiences conducting field work in Nigeria. Thirdly it introduces the four broad themes that

emerged from my fieldwork which will be analyzed in the data analysis chapters of my thesis, and lastly, it critically engages with Foucault's conceptualization of power and exposes its silences and erasures.

Chapter three titled *Gender, Spirituality and Power in Precolonial Nigerian Igbo society and Discourses of Postcolonial Residues*, provides a geo social/cultural scope of the Igbo speaking people of Nigeria. This chapter also analyzes the literature on Igbo gendered spiritual power in precolonial and colonial Nigeria, to problematize the multiplicity of Igbo modalities of power that assisted in sustaining Igbo spiritual heritage. Finally, this chapter ends with an important analysis that traces how although Christianity was introduced in Igbo land in the 19th century, it remains a powerful mechanism for female moral policing. This simultaneously contributes to limiting Igbo women's spiritual heritage and choice. Chapter four titled *The Practice of Gendered Power in Contemporary Nigeria through Medicine, Blood, Nature and Queens*, centers its analysis on the multiplicity of gendered spirituality in the contemporary Igbo world. It investigates the ways in which gendered spirituality is a negotiable source of power that departs from rigid western conceptualizations of power. Some of these unique forms of Igbo gendered power are transmitted through menstrual blood, nakedness, and the "essence" of an Igbo woman. Chapter five titled, *Navigating Odinani and Christianity in Postcolonial Igbo Land a Practice of Separation*, unpacks the accounts of my coproducers and how they practice Odinani and Christianity side by side but separately. This central chapter analyzes religious syncretism and identifies how it departs from the accounts of my coproducers in how they practice both world views. Central to the chapter is an introduction of the term "*Dualistic Fluidity*", a term I created to understand the complex and nuanced expression of both religious/spiritual world views side by side but separately.

Chapter six titled, *Lost Spiritual Connections and Colonial Denial in Postcolonial Igbo Society*, interrogates the impact of British colonization on gendered spirituality. It critically examines how the continuous residue of colonization creates distortions in the way contemporary Igbo women connect with their spirituality and themselves. This chapter also problematizes the concept of “*Colonial Denial*” which interrogates the willful and uncritical type of denial that ignores the reality of colonization and its existing legacy of coloniality. Chapter seven, which is the final chapter of this thesis, is titled *Gendered Power Through Spiritual Practices, the Way Forward*”, offers a comprehensive overview of the thesis. It identifies my contributions to gendered power, decolonizing social science research, and the place of dualistic fluidity and colonial denial in future research regarding colonized peoples particularly African women. This chapter prioritizes the place of oral history/storytelling in decolonial research and ends with some pertinent questions that reveal the complexity of anti-colonial work and the role of Igbo culture in sustaining gender inequality.

1.03 Locating Myself in this Research.

I consider the life of her late Royal Highness *Omu Okwei* (Queen Okwei), who was the merchant Queen of *Ossomari* Kingdom (located in Anambra state Nigeria) from 1935-1943 and my great, great grandmother as the motivation that piqued my interest in deciphering the meaning of power, in examining how it is exercised. Her legacy has been described as one of influence and innovation, as her prominence in business and trading with multiple African countries and Europeans in the 1920’s and 30’s is widely recorded (Uchendu, 2006; Ekejiuba, 1967; Korieh, 2010). I have often wondered how an Igbo woman in the 20th century could attain such great heights in a culture and

location that continues to be described as “completely” masculinist. I look at her pictures² and I notice that she appears “masculine” presenting particularly in her mode of dressing. Does that mean that her access to power meant that she had to perform some ideals of “masculinity” particularly in her physical appearance? If she had to perform some degree of “masculinity” in her role as Queen, were there other “masculine” roles she had to perform and what could they have been? Was her noticeable masculine physical appearance a performance or was she “masculine” in her role as Queen and outside of her role as Queen? Could she only access and negotiate power through some kind of proximity to “masculinity”? These complicated questions, in addition to my connection to Omu Okwei and my identity especially as an Igbo woman who cannot be described as “masculine” however recognizes that I have power, are some of the reasons why I focus on the concept of power.

Igbo culture has notoriously been described as “predominantly patriarchal” (Ezeifeka, 2019:384) however, data abounds as to how precolonial Igbo women negotiated and had access to “tangible” forms of power that gave them a unique status in their communities. This knowledge of the tangible form of power Igbo women had, (and still have) re-establishes the need for gendered power in Africa to be problematized. This task is important to arrive at a more nuanced and contextual appreciation of the nature of power dynamics in West Africa and the complexity of patriarchy in postcolonial Igbo society. Igbo cultural and social identities are embedded in their traditional beliefs, values, and spiritual practices. This research brings into conversation the multiple ways in which the remnant of Igbo West African communities remains scarred by the colonial encroachment. It specifically focuses its attention on how the “scarring” of the Igbo way of life was carried out through the destruction of Igbo gods and deities, spiritual associations, and ritual

² I will provide photos of Omu Okwei in the later portions of this thesis.

practices. These gods and spiritual practices were central to how Igbo people connected with each other and their ancestors, and it has been shown that Igbo women played a central role in its enactment and sustenance (Amadiume, 1987). This research also provides an analysis of how the contemporary manifestations of female leadership, authority and power can be linked to the erasure of the unique position women occupied within spiritual spaces in precolonial Igbo communities. The work of identifying and tracing these legacies speaks to the central role of the past in determining the future, and the implication of the past in the present.

1.1 Overview of Igbo Spirituality/Odinani in Nigeria.

Igbo spirituality is rooted in mystery, interconnectivity, reciprocity, fluidity and rituals. It encompasses a deeply holistic worldview in which the material and immaterial realms are intimately intertwined. According to Kamalu (1998), spirituality is not merely a belief system but a lived ontology. He posits that spirituality integrates the metaphysical with the ethical, the ancestral with the contemporary, and the individual with the collective. Traditional Igbo spirituality or Odinani is the comprehensive indigenous knowledge system and worldview of the Igbo people of Nigeria. The term "Odinani" is derived from the Igbo words "*O di na ani*," meaning "it is in the land," signifying the intimate relationship between the people, their land, and their spirituality (Kalu 2003). It encompasses cosmology, ethics, metaphysics, and environmental relations, serving as a foundation for social organization, identity, and community cohesion (Kalu 2003). Odinani is rooted in the Igbo people's worldview, and the rationale behind their worship of various deities, veneration of ancestors, as well as their masquerade phenomenon (Njoku, 2014).

At its core, Odinani is a dynamic system of understanding human existence in relation to the cosmos, the land, and ancestral lineage. The concept emphasizes balance/*ude*, and harmony between human beings and their environment, with an ethical structure rooted in communal

accountability and reciprocity (Kalu, 2003; Umeh, 1999; and Eze 2008). Achebe also describes Odinani as "deeply pragmatic" (Achebe, 1964:32), as it serves the purpose of sustaining life and order in a dynamic and reciprocal relationship between the human and the divine. He further adds that it is rooted in cosmology that recognizes the continuous interaction between the human world/*ụwa*, the spirit world/*ala mmụọ*, and the divine realm/*ala Chineke*.

Odinani encompasses four key components. Firstly, *Chi*/personal deity. In Igbo cosmology, every individual is believed to have a *Chi*, a personal spiritual “double” or guardian spirit/angel, which guides their destiny and keeps them safe. Acknowledging and aligning oneself with one’s *Chi* is a core spiritual responsibility of all Igbo people (Kalu, 2003). Secondly, *Chukwu* and the divinities. At the center of Igbo cosmology is *Chukwu*, the supreme God, who is the source of all life and moral order. *Chukwu* manifests through various *alusi*/deities such as *Ala*/earth goddess, *Amadioha*/god of thunder and justice), and *Ani*/the goddess of fertility and morality, who mediate between the human and divine realms (Eze, 2008; Kalu, 2003). Thirdly, ancestor veneration/*Ndị Ichie*. Igbo spirituality is also deeply rooted in ancestral reverence. In Igbo culture, the ancestors are believed to continue existing in the spirit realm and influence the living. Honoring them through libations, prayers, and rituals, ensures guidance, protection, and the sustenance of communal values. The ancestors significantly serve as moral exemplars and custodians of tradition. Lastly, divination and ritual practice. This component of Igbo spirituality involves divinatory practices such as *afa*³ to communicate with the spirit world and diagnose spiritual or communal problems. Ritual specialists like *Dibia*’s or *Ezenwanyi*’s (priests or diviners) play

³ *Afa* (also known as *Iha afa*, or *Ifo afa*) is a sophisticated system of divination used by the *Dibia* (diviner/healer) to access hidden knowledge, interpret events, diagnose illnesses, and provide guidance for individuals and communities. *Afa* represents a divine intelligence and an organizing principle through which the universe is made intelligible to human beings. It is believed to be a channel for accessing cosmic truth and aligning one's life with their *Chi* (personal destiny or spiritual double). See Okoro, C. (2010). *Afa divination and the Igbo quest for understanding: A philosophical interpretation*. *Nsukka Journal of the Humanities*, 18(2), 33–48.

crucial roles in maintaining spiritual balance and ensuring that the physical and metaphysical are in alignment (Okoro, 2010). The centrality of Igbo spirituality involves maintaining harmony with these four components through rituals, offerings, and moral conduct.

Ifi Amadiume (1987) also emphasizes the centrality of interconnectivity in Igbo spirituality albeit in a gendered way by highlighting the gendered and communal dimensions of Igbo spirituality. She prioritizes how rituals and roles reflect a sophisticated metaphysical order grounded in both patriarchy and matriarchal elements. The idea of Igbo spirituality encompassing patriarchal and matriarchal elements speaks to the relationship between the “metaphysical” and the “physical”. It speaks to the connection between the “seen” and the “unseen” world which contributes to the ways I problematize understandings of power. It also brings into conversation the ways in which power can be “visible” while simultaneously being “invisible” and ultimately creates an appreciation of how the concept of power (particularly gendered power), can be expanded and contextualized to fit the realities and experiences of Igbo West African Nigerian women.

1.2 Literature Review: Colonization, Gender, and Power in Colonial Africa.

“To be colonized is to be removed from history (Rodney, 1972:34), and the residue of colonization which Anibal Quijano describes as coloniality, is an “encompassing phenomenon that permeates all aspects of social existence and gives rise to new social and geo-cultural identities” (Quijano, 2010:1). Mianda (2002; 2022) argues that the strategic and sustained introduction of pervasive and widespread colonial apparatus particularly through western education (in Belgian Congo) altered the nature of gender relations in colonized communities. “In that society (Belgian Congo), the West and its values were placed on a pedestal as a model to be emulated at whatever cost, and social actors, male and female, used the resources at their disposal in their social interactions” (Mianda, 2002:145). She further buttresses the implication of western strategies of colonization

including western religion by adding that “in the minds of the colonizers, and missionaries, the purpose of school was to make boys into artists and girls into mothers of families and perfect wives by inculcating western Christian values in them” (Mianda, 2002:146). This resulted in precolonial African women becoming domesticated and removed from decision-making circles.

In addition, western religion was introduced to promote and insist on a male only god (Mbah, 2017, Amadiume, 1987, 2000; Achebe, 2005) which is attributed to the diminishing/diminished status of traditional/indigenous modes of worship. Musisi (2002) also provides an analysis of how medicine was used as a tool for achieving colonial ambitions. She argues that western medicine and healing practices were used to replace tradition/African modes of medicine and healing practices. Some of these healing practices which included spiritual elements, were dismissed as magic/unscientific and unreliable. Other avenues of colonial imposition are recorded by Tashjian and Allman (2002) Koreieh, (2001), Mianda (2022). According to Mianda (2022), “agriculture became an instrument in altering the gender complementarity and division of labor that existed in precolonial African societies. The exclusion of African women from agriculture with the introduction of cash crops which confined them in the production of agriculture of substance (for local consumption) and the establishment of extraversion of the African economy that excluded African women, became established” (Mianda, 2022:40). In addition, with the introduction/imposition of cash crops in agriculture, colonial order altered the gender complementarity and division of labor that existed in precolonial Africa (such as in Igbo communities) and turned Africa into an extroverted economy that excluded African women. Women were confined to the production of subsistence-oriented agriculture (for local consumption), thereby devaluing their production. To further buttress this point, Segato (2016), insists that the current situation in colonized nations should be viewed as ongoing coloniality.

What she means by this is that colonialized nations remain a site of continued conquest through multiple institutions particularly through the control of capital. She describes this ongoing coloniality as “coquestiality” (p:621) and posits that “we (colonized people) are going from coloniality to conquestiality with no rest or sights of arrest, or limits” (Ibid).

Maria Lugones (2010; 2008) traces the legacies of how the status of colonized women came to be categorized in contemporary colonized regions of the world (Africa and Latin America in particular) by unpacking how the ranking of inferiority was ascribed and is still ascribed to colonized women. She identifies that through colonization and the imposition of a Eurocentric gender model, “a hierarchical dichotomous relationship” (Lugones, 2010:744) between men and women was established. This dichotomous relationship justifies the global inferior category of women and sustains the “brutal access to people’s bodies through unimagined exploitation, violent sexual control of reproduction and systemic terror” (Lugones, 2010:744). This view is also supported by Quijano (2000; 2010) as he adds that these new categories of “inferiorization” were codified based on phenotype which became and remains emblematic characteristic of racial category. Lugones however critiques Quijano’s position on gender and accuses him of only seeing gender in relation to sexual access to women. She adds that coloniality goes beyond mere classification (as is the case with Quijano) but centers the sustained process of active reduction of people, their dehumanization, that fits them for the classification, and the continuous process of subjectification, that attempts to turn the colonized into less than human beings” (Lugones, 2010:745). Most unique to her position on the coloniality of gender is her assertion that the “enchantment with “woman” as a universal being, should be dropped” (2010:753). She insists that gender did not exist in precolonial worlds, and that the binary one sex model that exists today, reflects the coloniality of gender which insists on prioritizing binarism (modern vs traditional) in

its configurations. Ultimately, Lugones argues for the need for multiplicity over reductionism in issues concerning gender.

Several scholars including Segato (2016), Segato and Monque, (2021), Grosfoguel (2007), also challenge the binary and simplistic reiterations of gender prevalent in literature. However, Oyewumi (1997), like Lugones, provides what has been described by Segato and Monque (2021) as the most “extreme” interpretation. According to Oyewumi “the entire western episteme bases its categories and histories on visual modes of binary distinctions; male and female white, black, homosexual, heterosexual” (p:xii). Oyewumi uses the West African Yoruba language (specifically Oyo, Ibadan culture) as a site for her interrogation and insists that seniority not gender was used to establish social category in precolonial Yoruba society. She unpacks the place of seniority in Yoruba tradition by arguing that seniority signals more than just chronological age (although this is also important) but more importantly a person’s positioning within a kinship system. She identifies that social positioning, and identity is derived through a complex and dynamic web of social relations. She provides this way of thinking as evidence that gender has not historically been an important organizing principle in African cultures and that biology was not used to explain or establish social relations, subjectivity, or hierarchy. Oyewumi insists that unlike Europe, African cultures have not been historically ordered according to a logic of vision and asserts that there is no mark of gender in Yoruba language, and that Yoruba social institutions do not mark social distinctions in terms of anatomical difference.

Several scholars including Bibi Bakare Yusuf (2003) and Segato provide a critique of Oyewunmi’s position on gender in the precolonial world with Bakare Yusuf providing the most biting contribution. Bakare Yusuf describes Oyewumi’s position as problematic. She agrees with Oyewumi that seniority occupies a unique place in Yoruba social positioning however she accuses

her of ascribing too much importance to language, of failing to understand the nature of power, and for making too many assumptions about the relationship between language and social reality. According to Bakare Yusuf, Oyewumi is “wrong to assume that seniority is the only form of power in Yoruba culture and that different modes of power can exist and work simultaneously” (p:4). She posits that seniority should be seen as instrumental in gaining power and the fact that gender difference is not marked in the language does not mean that it is entirely absent from social reality. Bakare Yusuf insists that Oyewumi’s “refusal to complicate the workings of power is alarming” (p:5) and that her failure to suspect the potential relationship between power and language further contributes to a binary understanding of how power dynamics work. Other scholars expand on the ways in which prevailing gender dynamics were altered in West African communities through several colonial policies governing everyday life.

Mianda (2002, 2022) argues that the strategic and sustained introduction of pervasive colonial institutions through western education, the prioritizing of a Christian male centric education was recorded. This resulted in precolonial African women becoming domesticated and removed from decision-making circles. In addition, western religion was introduced to promote and insist on a male only god (Mbah, 2017, Amadiume, 1987, 2000; Achebe, 2005) which is attributed to the diminishing/diminished status of traditional/indigenous modes of worship. Musisi (2002) also provides an analysis of how medicine was used as a tool for achieving colonial ambitions. She argues that western medicine and healing practices were used to replace tradition/African modes of medicine and healing practices which were subsequently viewed as inferior. The attachment of “inferiority” to traditional/indigenous ways of knowing became a justification for the “validity” and advancement of colonization.

Lugones (2010) centers this notion of inferiority in her research where she argues that the imposition of a Eurocentric model of gender which was imposed on colonized countries, resulted in the “distinction between human and non-human” (Lugones, 2010:743). She further argues that these distinctions which ultimately contributed in the creation of a hierarchical dichotomous relationship” (p:744), labelled European bourgeois men as modern, fit to rule, and beings of mind and reason, while colonized women were judged as “bestial and thus non-gendered, promiscuous, grotesquely sexual and sinful” (p:743). These categorizations provided the “justification for the brutal access to the peoples bodies through unimagined exploitation, violent sexual control of reproduction and systemic terror” (p:744).

In reference to Black women, Badejo (1998:95) notes that “the contemporary marginality of women of African descent globally, is largely the result of externally generated factors related to enslavement and colonization”. Also, according to Nkenkana (2015:41), these legacies of enslavement and colonization can be seen through “the current ‘modern’ world system and its global order which have remained fundamentally patriarchal”. Therefore, the contemporary status of African women must be viewed as a symptom of the violent, sustained, and deliberate colonial and patriarchal erasures that have positioned African women as subordinate”.

Scholars also point to the fact that the coloniality of power brought about the over expansion of the public sphere and the subsequent domestication of women (see Musisi, Tashjian and Allman, and Mianda, 2002; 2022), which resulted in the public domain becoming an “epitome of masculinity” (Ibid:792). With the loss of the exclusive ties that governed the relationship and solidarity between men and women, the complementarity between productive and reproductive labor of colonized women came under attack, resulting in their lives and purposes remaining grossly domesticated.

“Modern, gender system could not have existed without the coloniality of power” (Oyewumi, 1997:10). She further posits that the changes brought about through the imposition of a Eurocentric model of life/culture was introduced as a “slow, discontinuous, and heterogeneous processes that violently “inferiorised” colonized women” (p:9). Falola (2005) insists that the new Eurocentric gender system was one completely informed through the coloniality of power, and stresses that developing a critical understanding between the relationship between coloniality of gender and power is significant to an understanding of the current world order.

The creation of these hierarchical power structures was institutionalized to justify and sustain the accumulation of capital, the production of surplus and to control the bodies and resources of colonized peoples. These colonial strategies are also implicit in creating new forms of gender constructions and ideologies, that have permanent effects on gender relations among colonized peoples. These permanent effects emphasize the hierarchical position of colonized men over colonized women and ascribe a permanent, dominant, and superior attribute to “masculinity” as opposed to “femininity”. This idea of masculine superiority can also be traced to the idea of god being a supreme being and as such, associated with masculinity while femininity remains associated with “followership” and submission.

The question of gender in the precolonial world has also been analyzed by Segato (2016), and Segato and Monque (2021), as they challenge the Eurocentric model of gender however in a more temperate position from Lugones and Oyewumi. Segato and Monque (2021) analyze the unequal status of women through a comparative analysis of what they label “village world” (prior to colonization) vs “state world” (during and after colonial modern intrusion). They assert that “in the village world (an arrangement that precedes colonial intrusion), gender constitutes a “rank being unequal” (p:792). This statement mirrors the position held by several Igbo postcolonial

scholars (Amadiume, Achebe and Okonjo) and speaks to the complementarity of gender in precolonial settings/village worlds. Segato and Monque's analysis seeks to explore the nature of patriarchy inherent in both eras to provide a contextualized appreciation of how patriarchy was represented in the "state world" and how the coloniality of gender can be better understood. Segato and Monque also coined the phrase "low-intensity patriarchy" (p:792), which is a rather contradictory term, to unpack how patriarchy worked in the "village world". They posit that in the village world, the relationship between men and women was complementary rather than supplementary, and that although rankings between men and women have always existed, with colonization "these inequalities grew the ranking of those already in power" (p:797) which were predominantly men.

They also contribute to an analysis of the coloniality of power by identifying the multiple ways in which colonization brought about a new category of masculinity. They identify certain avenues in which the coloniality of power can be easily appreciated, one of which is through the overinflation of men's importance in the village through their new position as intermediary to the outside world/colonial entities. Segato and Monque (2021) assert that although men gained this new position of importance, it was curtailed to defined roles and spaces. Colonized men faced emasculation, and loss of status if they ventured outside of their community and defined roles. This resulted in them exhibiting their capacity for control in the village (where they had some measure of control) to restore some of the masculinity that was slighted outside.

Scholars argue that colonization erased the political status of Igbo women, primarily by undermining their earlier economic and political power and authority. However, there is also evidence that gendered power in precolonial Igbo communities, especially power wielded by women including Queens and female chieftains, was largely spiritual and mystical (Uchendu,

2006; Kaine, 1963; Achebe, 2005; 2003, Atata, 2019; Ameachi, 2019). While my work acknowledges the on-going destabilizing effects of colonization, it also focuses on contextualizing the nature of the power that Igbo women negotiated in precolonial Igbo communities. In the time of *Omu Okwei*, the configurations of gendered power remained in its performative and ritualistic focus. The exercise of rituals to protect the realm and King, rituals to ward off environmental disaster, rituals to increase fertility, etc. was more acceptable and common. As the reality of colonization gained reach, the discourse of power changed, and spiritual and mystical modes of power diminished to accommodate more economic and political modalities. These forms of power (political and economic) gained more prominence resulting in the abandonment and dismissal of spiritual modes of power that is central to accessing and negotiating gendered power. Reclaiming its validity will provide a unique lens to the understanding and acceptance of gendered power that will contribute to the discourse of what constitutes powerful and powerlessness in the Igbo context.

1.21 Post Colonial Legacies of Gendered Spirituality in the Nigerian Igbo Context.

German historian Jurgen Osterhammel, (2015) in his book *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, provides an interpretation of colonialism that I find useful in my work. He defines colonialism as the “domination of a non-local power over a local population whose resources are exploited for self-enrichment and the consolidation of one’s power. In the process, ideological justifications are constructed based on the claimed racial or cultural superiority (white “colonial masters”) over “colonial subjects”, who are devalued as exotic-foreign or uncivilized” (p:21). This understanding of colonization, although a mouthful, considers the economic, cultural, and racial components associated with the “civilizing” mission, it is however unfortunately silent on the centrality of colonial violence and erasures that are central in achieving colonial ambitions. According to Chamberlain (2010), “in 1870 barely one tenth of Africa was under European control, but by 1914

only about one tenth Abyssinia (Ethiopia) and Liberia, was not” (p:3). Most of the devastating “scramble of Africa” took place within a shockingly short period of six years (1884-1890), with no acknowledgement or consultation of the indigenous inhabitants. The ripple effects of centuries of continuous violent plunder on the African way of life and ways of being, specifically through the erasure of spiritual modes of worship, will be prioritized going forward.

To better appreciate the enormity of the ripple effects of the colonial “civilizing” mission, Mudimbe (1988) identifies the tripartite strategies employed, through which the colonizer was able to “arrest the minds and actions of the colonized” (Olaniyan, 2000:2), in order to create the “colonizing structure” (Mudimbe, 1988:2). Firstly, through the dominance of physical space, which exemplified the loss of power, both physical and emotional. Secondly by “reforming” “natives” minds, by ascribing the mark of negative to everything African thereby causing self-loathing and the decline of self-worth. Thirdly, through economic underdevelopment and dependence, which resulted in the creation of policies to pauperize the colonies by setting all standards of trade and being the main actors and determiners of that interaction. The second (reforming natives minds) strategy identified by Mudimbe (1988), exemplifies how the erasure of spiritual modalities of power was achieved. Mianda (2024), contextualizes the arguments made by Mudimbe by analyzing his personal account of how he too was also a subject of colonial “mind reformation”. “Trained by missionaries, Mudimbe internalized the rejection of African culture and customs. During a holiday in his father’s village, he resisted his father’s wish that he be initiated to manhood through a traditional ritual, imploring his father not to take him to participate in the lessons (Mudimbe, 1991: 94)” “Like many other Africans, he rejected traditions that had become foreign to him” (Mianda, 2024:221).

Similarly in Igbo land Nigeria once Christianity arrived in 1857, Igbo traditional religion had a serious rival.

At first, the problem which Christianity presented to the traditional religion was not regarded as a serious matter by the people because conversion to Christianity at the initial stage was not an easy task because Christianity was a new religion, and something brought to Igbo nation by European missionaries...The Igbo feared that if they became Christians, their gods would bring disaster to them. Diviners and medicine men reported that the divinities were angry because of the new religion and warned that nobody should join the missionaries. Others refused to embrace the new religion because they thought that the missionaries wanted to destroy their culture. Despite these reasons and threats, Christianity began to win converts in Igbo land. They had village church-school teachers called church agents. These agents were very active in molding the attitude of the converts, especially the young, toward the traditional society (Okeke, et al. 2017:4).

[...] at different times and places, there were face-to-face encounter with Christians and traditionalists, because the early Christian missionaries behaved like social revolutionaries. They plunged into the condemnation and eradication of traditional religion. Traditional music and song, drama, and dance were totally denounced as bad and immoral. Statues, images, and emblems of remarkable artistic work and aesthetic merit were wantonly destroyed by some of the overzealous converts as idols and works of the devil. The missionaries were not prepared to face traditional religion. These acts set the stage for conflicts, which soon ensued between the Christians and the traditionalists (Okeke, et al. 2017:5).

Ultimately Christianity prevailed as can be appreciated in the quote below from Toyin Falola's (2023) book chapter titled *Decolonizing African Religion*.

Colonialists, who did not understand the social and spiritual essence of African traditional religion,⁴ (ATR) and disparaged it as too crude to be responsible for societal advancements. They offered religious alternatives that were incapable of making social or spiritual contributions that could

⁴ The term African Traditional Religion is used as an umbrella term to describe the religious and or spiritual belief systems of indigenous Africans. According to Awolalu, (1976), ATR as the indigenous religious beliefs and practice of Africans. He further describes it as "the religion which resulted from the sustaining faith held by the forebears of the present Africans, and which is being practiced today in various forms and various shades and intensities by a very large number of Africans, including individuals who claim to be Muslims or Christians" (p:1). I choose not to use the term ATR in my work because of the inclusion of religion in ATR. My work distances itself from religion because I choose to prioritize spirituality and the "unstructured" nature of spiritual belief systems in Igbo culture. Note- some scholars use the term religion and spirituality interchangeably, I however insist on highlighting their distinction.

sustain the development of the African people. The real decline in the moral and philosophical standards of Africans is connected to the religions that they practice. It is not that other religions are inherently weak or morally delinquent, but they are incapable of shouldering the ideological responsibilities that ATR had previously managed (Falola, 2023:561).

The task of tracing the legacies of colonization through the impact on Igbo women, requires an attention to the multiple colonial institutions and policies that were established to villainize and criminalize traditional African spirituality. The current African anti-colonial literature is awash with the economic, political, and cultural impact of colonization. The implication is that an analysis into the effect of colonization on African spirituality is often presented as an “add on”⁵ or through an analysis on its impact on African culture. Christian conversion and the introduction of western education remain the two strongest avenues through which the enactment of gendered spirituality was stifled. Falola’s (2002) book titled “*Africa: Colonial Africa, 1885-1939*”, he addresses the symbiotic relationship between colonial governments and Christian missionaries. He explains it perfectly by arguing that:

Missionaries provided geographic and cultural information, weakened indigenous states, undermined indigenous culture, and enforced colonial law, while Christianity came to represent the supernatural source of the white man’s power and assisted in delegitimizing indigenous sources of supernatural power such as kingship, chieftainship, and priesthood (p:103-104).

This two-pronged approach worked simultaneously to colonize the minds and bodies of African people which ultimately resulted in the veneration and acceptance of Christianity and European modes of worship. This acceptance of European modes of worship gave way to new forms of

⁵ The literature on Igbo spirituality is not as robust as other West African modes of spirituality. For example, Yoruba spirituality has a fully established literature that spans beyond the Africa continent. See Dorsey, L. (2020). *Orishas, Goddesses, and Voodoo Queens: The Divine Feminine in the African Religious Traditions*. Weiser Books

patriarchal relationships that centered the supremacy of a masculinist ideology of God that completely devalued the African configuration of a genderless and or female god. It altered not only the relationship between precolonial men and women, but also the enactment of traditional African spirituality.

van Allen (1997) also points to colonization as the reason for the inability of Igbo women to enact spiritual power. She argues that the Europeans could not comprehend the ideology of gendered power and as such, systematically worked to tame, erase, and devalue it. The Europeans found the Igbo cosmology of the female god questionable and through the introduction of Christianity, the centrality of the one “supreme male god” was established. Through the violence of colonial encroachment and the subsequent and sustained decline of the status of Igbo women, new forms of gender ideologies were introduced, new religions and modes of worship were demanded, and the traditional and life affirming construction of African spirituality was criminalized and villainized. This villanization/criminalization of African spirituality altered the ability of Igbo women to enact spiritual power for fear of punishment. Amadiume (1987; 2000).

In his most recent work “*Decolonizing African Religions*” Falola (2023) elaborates on the above points in this quote below:

[...] missionaries labeled African acts of worship as demonic, characterizing African traditional religion (ATR) places of worship as evil abodes where spiritual beings were invoked for sinister reasons. Those who served as mediators between ATR and the people were taunted as agents of evil who were solely interested in leading people astray—away from the Christian, kingdom of God. The Christian God was upheld as the supreme cosmic power—one that the West tried to foist upon the nonwhite world...African religious systems were subject to baseless accusations and derided for being uncouth. Although Europeans initially asserted that African religion was inherently evil, comparative research has established that African traditional religion and Western religion share similar values, beliefs, and mores (p:539-540).

Other scholars including Achebe (2005, 2003) identify the colonial encroachment and the decline of the notion of a genderless god as evidence that point to the legacies of colonization. She argues that the rigidity of European conceptualizations of gender which insists on a singular male only Christian god, created a fundamental shift in the spiritual world view of the Igbos. The Igbo's who historically believed in a multiplicity of female and genderless gods, now had to grapple with this new form of spirituality that was singular and rigid. This rigidity meant that Igbo women who had always had the ability to "switch" between genders, for example by being female husbands, occupying the powerful and influential role of *Omu*, and enjoying central political positions as the *Ekwe*⁶, now experienced a limited political and social capacity which stifled their position and status. The central positions they held at the center of many spiritual practices, cults, and associations were systematically and violently devalued and replaced. The "new" singular male god was ultimately positioned as "the only god" which resulted in the ideology of a genderless and or female god losing all validity in colonial and contemporary Igbo world view. Igbo women also lost their position as spirit mediums, and convenors of dispute resolution. All spiritual and political women organizations (for example the *Otu Omu Ada*) lost all its prestige, as colonial rule began to replace their political and religious functions. The decline of gendered spirituality and by extension power is also recorded through the introduction of clinics and foreign drugs (Musisi, 2002)⁷. These western drugs began to displace the need for rituals and healing sacrifices that were mostly carried out by women. The place of Igbo women as healers, diviners and nurturers began

⁶ The *Ekwe* title is the highest Igbo female title and *Ekwe* title holders have veto and decision-making rights in Igbo communities. See Amadiume I. (1987). *Male daughters, female husbands*. London: Zed Books.

⁷ See Musisi, N. (2002). The politics of perception or perception of politics? Colonial and Missionary Representation of Baganda Women, 1900-1945. In J., Geiger, S., and Musisi, N. (Eds.), *Women in African Colonial Histories*. Indiana University Press (p-96-116).

to be questioned and challenged as people began to embrace the new western religion and ways of healing.

As Igbo women began to be confronted with the colonial incursion, some of them found themselves conforming to this new way of life. Conversion was done under duress, as the entire social and cultural worldview of Igbo society was undeniably and permanently changed (Achebe, 2011). Over time the influence of colonialism and modernity diminished the relevance of African spirituality, and it continues to be viewed as pagan, barbaric and dangerous (Falola, 2002). However, as the era of colonization came to an “end”⁸ the viability of African traditional religion and practices although significantly diminished, (especially in its original formation) has still shown considerable resilience. According to Olupona (2002), African spirituality continues to evolve in ways that attests to the overlaps of masculine and feminine mystical power.

In contemporary Igbo society, the naked female body (particularly that of a mother) remains a site of power, danger, and authority (Achebe, 2005). It has been instrumentalized in times of war or conflict, to get the attention of society and to express grave displeasure. It is believed that a mother would only expose her nude body in times of great desperation and send a “strong message”⁹. In the unfortunate circumstance that a mother appears nude in public, Igbo traditional belief insists that failure to comply with her request will result in grave circumstances (Turner and Brownhill, 2002). Other expressions of the presence of contemporary gendered spirituality can also be appreciated through the Igbo cultural belief that women have a special ability to lay curses

⁸ “End” appears in quotation marks to signal the ambiguity of colonization coming to an end see Tamale (2020).

⁹ It is believed that the exposure of the naked bodies, and most particularly their vaginas, could lead to actual demise. In much of Africa, women throw off their clothes in an ultimate protest to say, 'this is where life comes from, I hereby revoke your life.' Nakedness by elderly women is used in extreme and life-threatening situations (p:139)- see Turner, T and Brownhill, L. S. (2002). Women's oil wars in Nigeria. *Labour Capital and Society*, 35(1), 132–164.

(Babatunde, 2022). This belief is connected to the Igbo world view of witchcraft, and the belief that witches are more “powerful” than wizards (Atata, 2019). Women are still believed to be closer to nature particularly because of their ability to birth children. It is important to note that this supposed “closeness” to nature is widely viewed as controversial by several African scholars including Oyewunmi (1997), Arnfred (2011) and Tamale (2020). They reject such essentialist ties between African women and nature and insist that it has been historically used to frame African women as primitive, emotional, instinct driven, less evolved than European women, thereby justifying their marginalization. They call for decolonial, historical, and culturally specific frameworks that affirm African women’s full humanity and complex social roles.

Other aspects related to Igbo spirituality include their reverence in ancestors (ancestor worship) which continues to be practiced and accepted in Igbo cultural life. Certain cultural practices such as polygamy, funeral ceremonies, culinary traditions, and the use of “magic” by Christian priests (Vellem, 2014), are also still in practice in contemporary Igbo everyday life. Let me quickly point out that some scholars (Bennett 2008; Aiyedun and Ordor 2016) have critiqued African traditional spirituality and labelled it as patriarchal. They argue that African spirituality and traditional practices also had patriarchal tendencies and fostered the discrimination of women. Aiyedun and Ordor (2016) add that the framing of African spirituality must account for the nature of patriarchy in most African cultures and how it impacted the empowerment and or independence of African women. This view is also echoed by Uchendu (2006) who insists that gendered power and spirituality in the Igbo context must be understood through an analysis of what she labels as “performing masculinities” and the “shifting notion of gendered power” (p:35). Uchendu argues that in precolonial Igbo culture the attainment of power by women could only occur when women “transformed” into men and discarded their feminine attributes. She provided this analysis by

unpacking the nature of power Igbo Queens/*Omu*'s possessed and insists that power was gendered as masculine in Igbo culture. Ikime (1967), also provides a critical understanding of the nature of Igbo gendered power and insists that any interpretation that positions Igbo precolonial women as having autonomous power is not only an exaggeration of the nature of Igbo gendered power but a misread of Igbo culture.

1.22 Thinking Ahead/Cup Half Full.

The great historical tragedy of Africa has been not so much that it was too late in making contact with the rest of the world, as the manner in which that contact was brought about; that Europe began to 'propagate' at a time when it had fallen into the hands of the most unscrupulous financiers and captains of industry; that it was our misfortune to encounter that particular Europe on our path, and that Europe is responsible before the human community for the highest heap of corpses in human history (Césaire, 1972: 23).

In the last few years, several revisionist publications have underplayed the disastrous impact of colonial histories and attempted to justify colonialism and its violence (Calderisi, 2006; Ferguson, 2003; Gann and Punigan, 1967). Research projects were also conducted, to interrogate the “ethical” contributions of colonialism and empire (Parashar and Schultz, 2021) as uncritical arguments were made to position colonial violence in a benevolent character. Economists and Rhodes Scholar Robert Calderisi claim that colonialism left useful legacies in infrastructure, governance, and institutions. Him and others that think like him, insist that the challenges facing contemporary Africa can be attributed to African post-independence leaders for not building on the legacies and opportunities brought about by colonization. Others including Soothill (2007) suggests that some Christian missions and colonial era institutions created new opportunities for women (especially in education), which she describes as beneficial. Both Calderisi and Soothill ignore the prevailing societal structures that existed in these communities prior to colonization while reiterating the centrality of white supremacy in colonial ambitions.

The multi-pronged approach of western education and Christianity worked to simultaneously challenge and devalue the important life affirming role of female deities' gods and spiritual mediums. Through an interrogation of the literature and rigorous field work, evidence of how the devalued status of gendered spirituality can be clearly identified. It is responsible for the subsequent and continuous decline and erasure of not just the enactment of gendered spirituality, but most importantly the status and central position of women in Igbo cultural worldview. This imposed world view can be witnessed through the various discriminatory attitudes towards Igbo women in contemporary Igbo cultural and social life, but mostly towards the erasure, practice, and acceptance of Igbo spirituality in contemporary Igbo society. The legacy of colonization on African spirituality still endures as Christian fanaticism and the relentless spread of Pentecostalism remains predominant in contemporary Igbo society¹⁰. The resilience of traditional modes of traditional Igbo spirituality can be clearly appreciated in the many unique modalities of contemporary pseudo-Christianity seemingly “imitating” traditional modes of spirituality particularly in its forms of worship, singing and rituals and messaging¹¹.

1.3 Thesis Chapter Outline

Chapter One: Introduction.

This thesis is divided into seven chapters including the introduction and conclusion. The introductory/first chapter introduces the central topic of my research which addresses the ways in which gendered power and spirituality are intertwined in Igbo cosmology. My work positions colonization as responsible for the diminished status and position of Igbo women in postcolonial

¹⁰ Ezeanya, O. C. P., and Enweonwu, O. A. (2022). Seed of Christianity in Traditional Igbo (African) Culture: Need for Intercultural Evangelization. *Indiana Journal of Arts & Literature*, 3(1), 13-23.

¹¹ Olupona, J. K. (ed.) (2000). *African Spirituality: Forms, Meanings and Expression*. Crossroad publishing house: New York. Olupona interrogates how contemporary forms of Christianity tends to imitate traditional modes of worship particularly in the use of symbols and its preference for communal settings.

Nigeria due to its demonizing of Igbo spirituality and by extension Igbo gendered power. This first chapter also provides an overview of Odinani/Igbo spirituality, its components and key philosophy. It also engages with my “why”, as I locate myself in this research and provides a literature review to analyze how the nature of colonization, gender, and power, in Africa is taken up in literature. This literature serves to center the analysis by multiple scholars that interrogate the impact of colonization on African women to show how colonization affected women specifically. The introductory chapter ends with a brief preface of what to expect in the subsequent chapters of this thesis.

Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework and Methodology.

This chapter is divided into two sections and outlines the theoretical framework and methodology employed in this research. The first section provides the research objectives and engages with the theoretical framework of this research which is a critical decolonial feminist approach. This chapter also analyses my research methods, which consists mostly of semi structured interviews, to find nuanced meaning to the nature of power, specifically Igbo gendered power through spirituality. It also engages with the objectives, possibilities and limitations of a critical decolonial feminist approach as it insists that traditional Igbo culture must be viewed critically to avoid romanticizing precolonial Igbo culture. Central to my theoretical framework is the focus on power that structures the relations between the ways in which the status of Igbo women changed through several colonial techniques particularly Christianity. The second section of this chapter outlines the methodology and research design of my research. It incorporates qualitative research methodology of in-depth semi structured interviews, and storytelling to answer my research questions. I draw on decolonial feminist epistemologies and ontologies which dismisses the western hierarchical research design with the objectives, to learn about Igbo women’s,

experiences, realities, and worldviews. Significant to this chapter is my engagement with the Foucauldian theory to power. I problematize Foucault's assertions, and identify the gaps, silences and erasures, found in his conceptualization of power and accuse Foucault of "invisibilizing" the unique modalities of power negotiated by African women which must include spirituality. Chapter two further analyzes and problematizes my encounter with "the field", particularly by identifying the challenges, triggers, biases and insider outsider positionality of doing field work in "my community". It concludes with an identification of my key findings to show how gendered power through spirituality is complex and remains ever evolving in the lives of contemporary Igbo women.

Chapter Three: Gender, Spirituality and Power in Precolonial Nigerian Igbo Society and Discourses of Postcolonial Residues.

This third chapter locates the Igbo speaking people by providing a geo cultural scope of where they are located in Nigeria. This chapter also goes on to explore the nature of Igbo gendered spirituality and its connection to power in the Igbo context more specifically. It further analyzes the different modalities of how gendered power in precolonial Igbo communities existed. This diversity in the modes of power speaks to the multiplicity of Igbo traditional gendered power and the fluidity of Igbo gender constructions. It also underscores the unique and central position women occupied in precolonial Nigeria as "female husbands" Queens, and female gods. This chapter ends with an important analysis of how the advent of Christianity in Igbo land contributes to postcolonial discourses of gendered respectability. More specifically it looks at how Christianity imposed a new kind of womanhood that elevated Victorian standards of femininity, while simultaneously demonizing precolonial Igbo forms of womanhood.

Chapter Four: The Practice of Gendered Power in Contemporary Nigeria, Through Medicine, Blood, Nature, and Queens.

This chapter signals the beginning of my interrogation with my coproducers¹². It brings into focus the ways in which Igbo women construct gendered spiritual power in contemporary Igbo society. Gendered spirituality is constructed through an interrogation of the “essence” of Igbo women which is closely associated with seduction. It is also constructed through their blood, specifically menstruation, through objects in nature, like herbs, fruits, and trees. Other ways in which gendered power is constructed are through motherhood, and lastly through her role as Queen/*Omu*. Through the conversations with my coproducers, the construction of contemporary Igbo spirituality and its connections to gendered power continues to evolve and “shift” to the demands of modernity in postcolonial Nigeria.

Chapter Five: Navigating Odinani and Christianity in Postcolonial Igbo Society, a Practice of Separation.

Chapter five positions itself as the central chapter of this research as it utilizes a concept I developed namely “Dualistic Fluidity”, to interrogate the ways in which Igbo women practice two spiritual beliefs side by side but separately. Dualistic fluidity allows for a nuanced interrogation of

¹² I use the term “co-producers” instead of the more popular term respondents or participants, because it aligns with my decolonial initiatives which insists that everyone is a knowledge producer and that the stories and experiences of Black women are valid. American scholar and activist Patricia Hill Collins¹² has written extensively on the idea of concrete/lived experience and what constitutes knowledge in Black theorizing and Black feminist thought. She insists that “concrete experiences are used as a criterion of meaning” (Hill-Collins, 1989:760) and goes on to stress that the notion of concrete knowledge can be derived from the daily lives of Black women. “Black women’s centrality in families, churches, and other community organizations allows us to share with younger, less experienced sisters our concrete knowledge of what it takes to be self-defined Black women” (Hill- Collins, 2000:260). It is because of this appreciation of what constitutes knowledge making, and the value of personal experiences, that use the term coproducers in this thesis. See Collins, P. H. (1989). “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought. Common Grounds and Crossroads: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in Women’s Lives.” *University of Chicago Press*. 14(4):745-773.

how colonization creates people that exist in dual spiritual identities, and how contemporary Igbo women navigate that reality. This chapter also explores the concept of religious syncretism and how it departs from the reality of my coproducers who are not “mixing religions” or creating a hybrid religion. The discourse in this chapter will help to enrich conversations surrounding the way in which people with colonial histories confront and make sense of the somewhat contradictory aspects of their lives that have been made complex due to colonization.

Chapter Six: Lost Connections and Colonial Denial in Postcolonial Igbo Society.

This chapter examines multiple important aspects of this research. It starts off by investigating the impact of colonization on gendered spiritual power, particularly in how it continues to manifest in contemporary Igbo society. It then goes on to interrogate how colonial policies result in a loss of spiritual connections and how that “loss” inadvertently results in some form of colonial denial. Like the chapter before it, I develop a term named “*Colonial Denial*”, which encompasses the willful, blatant, uncritical, denial of colonization and its sustained afterlives. The existing literature on denial is analyzed through the lens of the settler/colonialist. My contribution to the discourse on denial is performed through the lens of the colonialized, in this case through the lives and experiences of Igbo women. In addition, the concept of colonial denial can be used to understand the complex ways in which people with colonial histories reconcile with the reality of colonization by diminishing, ignoring and even praising its effects. Colonial denial could also be used to problematize how denial is utilized as a coping mechanism, and a form of resistance to colonial epistemic violence.

Chapter Seven: Gendered Power Through Spiritual Practices, the Way Forward.

The conclusion of this thesis draws on the material from the previous chapters and identifies that an inclusion of the centrality of traditional modes of Igbo spirituality, is what is missing from conversations about power, femininity, strength, and female empowerment. This chapter identifies the significance of African oral traditions in retelling, reliving, and reinventing African histories. It goes on to identify the key contributions of this research and highlights the central need for the inclusion of culturally relevant frameworks to understanding power dynamics in Africa. This final chapter goes on to identify the limitations and avenues for further research in this emerging discourse of gendered power and the next steps. Ultimately, this chapter synthesizes all the previous chapters and brings into conversations the need for African decolonial projects to prioritize a holistic and multifaceted approach that understands the status of African consciousness, African personhood, and humanity and the centrality of African spirituality as a life-giving reality.

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

“He carried the Bible; the soldier carried the gun; the administrator and the settler carried the coin. Christianity, Commerce, Civilization: The Bible, the Coin, the Gun: Holy Trinity.”
— *wa Thiong’o, Petals of Blood.*

All research owes its scientific credibility to the rigor and coherence of its approach. This is the subject of this second chapter that analyses my chosen theoretical framework, which is a critical decolonial African feminist theory. This chapter tackles three broad aspects of this thesis. Firstly, it analyses the theoretical framework, secondly, it recounts my journey through the field work phase, and thirdly, it introduces the themes that were developed in the data analysis timeline of this research. To analyse the theoretical framework, the central arguments, tensions, limitations and possibilities of a critical decolonial feminist approach are identified and problematized. This chapter also places decolonization and post colonization in conversation with each other because literature that interrogates colonisation in Africa mostly appears as a postcolonial critique. The need for an engagement with both concepts is to expose the utility of a decolonial approach as opposed to a postcolonial approach in my research.

Secondly, this chapter identifies my “journey” through the field work phase and places my experiences into four categories namely, challenges, blind spots, confronting biases and insider outsider status. These categories help to unpack my experience as a researcher exposes the complexity of social science research and the fragility of an insider outsider positionality. The other phase of this chapter, which is the data analysis section, introduces the four broad themes that were developed from my interviews with my coproducers. Finally, and central to this chapter is my engagement with the Foucauldian approach of power. Foucault posits that power is insidious,

that it modifies, and that its serves to subjectify people. This chapter problematizes Foucault's central arguments and identifies areas where my research departs and coalesce with his. Most significantly, I identify the ways in which western conceptualisations of power (specifically Foucault) erase and silences the nature of power in Africa particularly gendered power, and highlights its patriarchal, masculinist and rigid inclinations. Ultimately arguing for an appreciation and inclusion of understandings of power that includes spirituality and other "less obvious" frameworks.

2.0 Critical Decolonial Feminist Approach

According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013), "colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the 'native's' brain of all form and content" (p:27). What it truly does according to Fanon (1961), is that it "turns to the past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it" (p:210). It is this attempt at "fixing" colonial destruction that pinpoints the centrality of decolonial ambitions. A critical decolonial African feminist approach attends to the task of reinterpreting history with a critical look towards modernity to fully expose the profound and gendered implications of colonization and its many afterlives. According to Mianda (2022),

The aim of the African decolonial perspective is by no means to delve into the past to lock ourselves into it as a source of salvific values for African women. Rather, it's a matter of looking critically at the past to identify the signs of patriarchy resulting from the habits and customs on which coloniality of gender draws to consolidate the inferiority of African women. Lessons thus learned in this way will serve us to re-evaluate or reassess the situation and to inscribe ourselves as Africans women in the present, to sharpen our energies to face the future. It's appropriate to look back at colonization and tradition to analyze their impact on the situation of women, so as to take the measure of their ignored contribution, and on the other hand, to examine the commitment of these women as active participants in the building of Africa in this context of globalization. (35-37).

Decolonial feminism is as a critical framework that examines how colonialism has and continues to shape and influence gender constructs, intersecting with race, class, and sexuality. Mendoza (2015; 2016) and Lugones (2010), describe decolonial feminism is an approach to feminist thought and praxis that critiques how mainstream and western feminist theories have often ignored or marginalized the experiences and epistemologies of women in the global south. They contend that it is an approach that emphasizes the intersections of colonialism, racism, and patriarchy, as it seeks to delink from Eurocentric knowledge systems while centering subaltern, Indigenous, and Afro-diasporic ways of knowing and being. More specifically, María Lugones (2010) defines decolonial feminism as a “feminism that does not presuppose the universality of woman or gender but interrogates the very construction of gender under colonial rule” (p:742). She emphasizes that colonialism imposed a hierarchical, binary gender system that was racialized and heteronormative, replacing the more complex and communal gender systems of many Indigenous and African societies. She adds that “the modern/colonial gender system is a colonial imposition and remains a crucial part of the colonial project” (Ibid: 746). More specific to the case of African women, Tamale (2020) defines decolonial feminism as “a liberatory practice that aims to dismantle colonial structures, epistemologies and values that continue to oppress African women, queers and other marginalized groups, while reclaiming and revalorizing Africa’s own gendered knowledges and traditions” (Ibid:12).

This perspective challenges the universalist assumptions of mainstream feminist theories by highlighting the unique experiences of women and marginalized genders in colonized and formerly colonized societies. Lugones (2010) also introduces the concept of the colonality of gender, arguing that colonial powers imposed a binary and hierarchical gender system that dehumanized colonized peoples. This imposition disrupted existing indigenous gender systems, enforcing

European norms that served colonial interests. She emphasizes that decolonizing gender is a "praxical task," (Ibid:746) involving a critique of racialized, colonial, and capitalist gender oppression as a lived transformation of society. Tamale (2020) emphasizes the centrality of praxis in decolonial ambitions by arguing for the urgent and active dismantling of colonial and neocolonial structures that have shaped gender, knowledge, and power in the African continent. This "dismantling" will entail a radical reorientation toward African metaphysics, oral traditions, communal ethics, and ancestral philosophies as sources of feminist theory and praxis.

I employ this approach in my research because it provides a framework for the understanding of current trends, (for example the diminished status of gendered spiritual power in Igbo communities), while simultaneously tracing said trends to the past encounter with colonization. It also places considerable emphasis on centering the voices from the margins by critiquing the androcentric and misogynistic character of modernity. This approach uses several techniques some of which include imagination (Tamale, 2020; wa Thiongo, 2009), revolution (Fanon, 1961), education (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013, Mianda, 2002, 2022), and the transformation of the social especially through resistance (Lugones, 2008, 2010), etc., to fill the gaps of colonial erasure, and ultimately champion diverse efforts that prioritize the humanity of colonized peoples especially women. In doing so, my research is situated in the extension of decolonial thought which was founded in the modernity/coloniality dialogues between prominent Latin American scholars, like Mignolo, (2007; 2009; 2011) Escobar, (2007; 2010), Dussel and Ibarra-Colado (2006), Quijano, (2000; 2007) among others. The school of decolonial feminism emerged as a "revisionist philosophy which identified the need to think beyond the bounds of modernity and its links to Eurocentric thought" (Tlstanova, 2010:19). Manning (2022) describes decolonial feminism as an emerging theoretical approach led by Lugones (2008; 2010), that centers on decolonial theory with

a particular attention to the racial/gendered feminist context. Scholars like Bhabra (2014), Lugones (2010), and Schiwy (2007), have also added that decolonial feminism centers debates associated to coloniality/modernity, gender, and global south indigenous identity, while providing a space for the voices and experiences of marginalized ‘othered’ women.

According to Nkenkana (2015), the instrumentality of a decolonial feminist way of thinking prioritizes the centrality of feminizing gender in history. Lugones (2008), adds to this point by insisting that “without such a gendered interpretation of history, we stand the risk of “centering our analysis on the patriarchy; that is, on a binary, hierarchical, oppressive gender formation that rests on male supremacy without any clear understanding of the mechanisms by which heterosexuality, capitalism, and racial classification are impossible to understand apart from each other” (p:186-187). Mianda (2022) further buttresses the implication of western strategies of colonization including western religion by adding that “in the minds of the colonizers, and missionaries, the purpose of school was to make boys into artists and girls into mothers of families and perfect wives by inculcating western Christian values in them” (Mianda, 2002:146). Centrally, employing a decolonial praxis is important in helping to delve into the past to retrace the genealogy/history of how coloniality of gender and power brought Eurocentric gender values to colonial Africa. African decolonial feminism exposes how African women's status was devalued which ultimately allows us to better understand their present as a fractured locus while assisting us to confront lessons from the past that would/could inform the path to the future of African women.

It is important to note the following three points in relation to the literature on decolonial feminism. Firstly, decolonial feminist scholarship is not limited to the Latin American context. An important portion of the scholarship arises mostly from India, Latin and North America. These locations have

given rise to thinkers such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Maria Lugones, Jennifer Manning, Eve Tuck and many others. In addition, decolonial scholarship from Africa in the last three decades continue to gain momentum and has been influenced scholars like Gertrude Mianda, Sylvia Tamale, Toyin Falola, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Ngugi wa, Thiong'o, George Dei, Achille Mbembe, Akhona Nkenkana, Valentin Yves-Mudimbe, who remain committed to creating scholarship that reflects the African context. Secondly, I also recorded that the use of the term “decolonial” or “decolonization” is more visible in Latin American scholarship than African scholarship. This noticeable absence of discourse emanating from Africa was surprising given that Africa still bears the multiple imprints of colonial legacies. It is important to acknowledge that decolonial research exists and has always existed in African studies. Within African studies scholarship that centers the need to decolonize the African consciousness, and their overall way of life is vastly popular as scholars like Garvey, Nkrumah, Rodney, wa, Thiong'o have written extensively on these matters. However, the use of the term decolonization as a theoretical framework is not as popular in African discourse as it is in Latin American scholarship. Understandably the popularity of decolonization as an anticolonial framework gained popularity in the 1990's and early 2000's.

Thirdly, a decolonial approach is often used interchangeably with a postcolonial one thereby obscuring its meaning. A postcolonial approach focuses mostly on identifying the cultural biases of history, recovering subaltern histories, and writing histories/from “below” (Spivak,1988:271). A decolonial approach on the other hand employs a more radical ideology as it goes beyond recording history but rather prioritizes praxis and seeks to displace the mechanism that created and maintained the subordinated/minoritized (Tamale, 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013 and Grosfoguel, 2011; 2007). Decolonial feminism seeks an epistemic break from Eurocentric frameworks. It

emphasizes the recovery and validation of indigenous and non-western epistemologies, aiming to reconstruct subjectivities and social relations disrupted by colonialism (Bhabra, 2014).

2.01 Examining Postcolonial and Decolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory emerged in the late 20th century as a multidisciplinary field that interrogates the cultural, political, and historical legacies of colonialism and imperialism. It critiques the narratives constructed by the colonial powers and seeks to amplify the voices, histories, and experiences of formerly colonized peoples. Drawing from literature, history, anthropology, cultural studies, and political theory, postcolonial theory is both a mode of critique and a project of recovery and resistance (Bhabra, 2014). Key thinkers such as Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and Frantz Fanon have shaped the field by analyzing the mechanisms of colonial domination (Fanon, 1961), subject formation (Spivak, 1988), and cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994).

At the heart of postcolonial theory is the critique of colonial discourse, defined as the system of knowledge production that constructs colonized peoples as inferior, exotic, or primitive. Edward Said's (1978) *Orientalism* was seminal in establishing this approach, showing how European texts, travelogues, and academic writings portrayed the "*Orient*" not as a real place but as a discursive construct that justified colonial domination. According to Said, "the Orient was almost a European invention... a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories, landscapes, and remarkable experiences" (Said, 1978:1). He further argued that "knowledge and power were co-constitutive, as institutions such as literature, historiography, and anthropology helped entrench imperial ideologies" (Said, 1978:12–13). This process of "othering" and dehumanizing colonized peoples contributed to "naturalizing" and justifying imperial conquest.

This line of critique by Said, was extended by Spivak (1988) in *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, where she interrogates whether the oppressed (“Subaltern”) can ever be truly represented in dominant discourses. She argues that:

well-meaning attempts to “give voice” to the Subaltern often reproduce epistemic violence, as the subaltern’s knowledge is reinterpreted through colonial and elite frameworks and attempts to represent the Subaltern often result in further marginalization. As these representations are filtered through dominant epistemological frameworks that fail to capture the subaltern's lived experiences (Spivak, 1988:286-86).

This notion argued by Spivak concerning the “inability of the Subaltern to speak” is one that I acknowledge but also challenge.

Several decolonial scholars, including Mendoza (2015), insist that the Subaltern speaks in different movements and collective expressions, but that they are usually ignored by western academia. Anthropology Professor Saba Mahmood challenges Spivak’s argument on the “inability of the Subaltern to speak”, by insisting that Subaltern agency may not take the form of resistance, but it is still a form of subjectivity. African scholars like Oyewumi (1997) have implicitly critiqued Spivak’s arguments by insisting that her analysis often misreads African realities by imposing Eurocentric assumptions especially about gender, modernity, and voice. She argues that “gender cannot be assumed as a universal organizing principle; and that it must be historically and culturally situated” (Oyewuni, 1997: xiii). She resists the silencing narrative that underpins much of Western theory, and insists that African women have always spoken, though not always in forms legible to Western academia. Spivak's reliance on Western philosophical frameworks, such as deconstruction and poststructuralism, is equally critiqued by the likes of Mignolo (2007) and Viswanathan (1994), where they accuse her of perpetuating Eurocentric modes of analysis. They add that by engaging primarily with Western thinkers, Spivak may inadvertently marginalize

indigenous epistemologies and alternative ways of knowing that originate outside the Western canon.

Decolonial theorists often agree with Spivak's critique of how Western intellectual traditions perpetuate epistemic violence, the erasure or misrepresentation of knowledge systems outside of the Euro-Western canon. However, they fundamentally argue for the necessity of delinking from Western epistemological dominance to genuinely address the concerns of the subaltern (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). Mignolo (2007) argues that colonial world system privileges European ways of knowing. He writes, "The subaltern cannot speak because the conditions of enunciation are not just discursive but geo- and body-political" (Ibid: 450). In this way, he expands Spivak's argument to include coloniality as a structural condition that silences the subaltern. Aníbal Quijano (2000) and Maldonado-Torres (2007) argue that Spivak, though radical in her critique of power, remains entrenched within Eurocentric epistemologies. Maldonado-Torres argues that true subaltern voice requires a "decolonial turn that affirms other modes of being and knowing beyond critique alone" (Maldonado-Torres, 2007:252). The argument for a "decolonial turn" is significant to the ways in which this thesis prioritizes the role of decolonization as a critical theoretical framework. I acknowledge that although indigenous knowledges have been and continue to be misrepresented, and ignored, however the decolonial turn my work prioritizes, is grounded in praxis, and in the lives, realities, and experiences of Igbo women who have been "othered" but can speak.

According to Mignolo (2009), decolonial theory centers epistemic disobedience and a refusal to engage solely within Western paradigms. He insists that decoloniality is about "delinking from the colonial matrix of power and building knowledge from the experiences and worldviews of those historically excluded from modernity" (Ibid:163). This involves a shift from "critique, to a reconstruction beyond Eurocentric logic as decoloniality is not only a theoretical stance, but a form

of epistemic justice rooted in historical struggles” (Ibid: 453). Perhaps the most profound difference between postcolonial and decolonial theory lies in the question of praxis.

African decolonial scholars like Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni frame praxis as a fundamental tool in the decolonial struggle. For Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018):

...decoloniality is not simply a conceptual project but an ethical, political, and epistemological project rooted in the praxis of liberating knowledge from the clutches of colonial modernity. The most urgent task of decolonial theory in Africa is epistemic freedom, freedom to think, theorize, interpret, and imagine from African ontological positions. This requires not just critique but the construction of African-centered institutions, pedagogies, and modes of governance that reflect the lived realities and cosmologies of African people (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018: 20).

Decolonial theory therefore aligns more closely with collective self-determination, emphasizing the recovery and valorization of Indigenous, Black, and subaltern knowledges. While postcolonial theory and decolonial theory both critique the enduring effects of colonialism, they diverge in origin, method, epistemology, and political commitment. Postcolonial theory often remains at the level of discourse analysis and critique (Maldonado-Torres, 2007), while decolonial theory is more activist oriented, aiming for liberation and reconstruction (Tamale, 2020). Postcolonial theory, though valuable for its cultural critique, often operates within the paradigms of western thought, decolonial theory, by contrast, offers a radical rethinking of power, being, and knowledge. It challenges us to envision and enact alternative futures rooted in epistemic justice, and the undoing of coloniality in all its forms (Mignolo, 2007 and 2009). “Postcoloniality and decoloniality are only made necessary because of the depredations of colonialism, but in their intellectual resistance to associated forms of epistemological dominance they offer more than simple opposition they offer, the possibility of new geopolitics of knowledge” (Bhabra, 2014:120).

2.02 Possibilities of a Critical Decolonial African Feminist Approach

We cannot claim to commit towards advancing the position, integrity, identity, and power of women in the African continent without a conscious, deliberate, and consistent dismantling of the structures and legacies of our colonial past. The possibilities of a decolonial feminist approach in my work demands that firstly, this research establishes the impact of the colonial encroachment and its legacies on the histories and contemporary gender constructions of Igbo women. Secondly, it acknowledges the centrality of dismantling said legacies through revolution, the retelling of Igbo gendered history, and the centering of the voices of the colonized. According to Manning (2021), decolonial theorists argue that the idea of the universality of a western ontology is based on the displacement of those in the global south from the effective history of modernity. By so doing, “history and ‘modernity’ became a product of the west, thereby displacing the actions, ideas, and knowledge of those in the global south” (Manning, 2022:44). As a result, western modernity created the “other” which is a person that does not fit the profile of modernity and whose cultures are considered non-modern (Spivak, 1988). As a theoretical approach, critical decolonial African feminism, insists that beyond the lingering effects of historical colonialism, active forms of colonial domination continue to operate in society at various levels of transparency. Some of these lingering effects range from institutionalized sexist racism and anti-indigenous cultural bias to apartheid, discriminatory public policy, and neoliberal economics (Mendoza, 2015; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Nkenkana, 2015).

A critical decolonial African feminist approach foregrounds the gendered implication of colonization on culture, knowledge, education, economics, sexuality, religion, social economic and political structures, law, health, and well-being (Tamale, 2020). It also attends to the task of reinterpreting history with a critical look towards modernity to fully expose the profound and

gendered implications of colonization and its many afterlives (Manning, 2021). Tamale (2020) also adds that it goes beyond critically looking towards modernity but aims at moving forward to more equitable gender relations. It provides a framework for the understanding of current trends, (for example the diminished status of gendered spiritual power in Igbo communities), while tracing said trends to the past encounter with colonization.

Other aspects that are centered in a decolonial African feminist approach, is the profound skepticism to universalistic ideologies such as notions of sisterhood and a common oppression of women. These contributions are made by several African scholars including Oyěwùmí (2003), Ogunديpe (1994), Nnaemeka (1998;2004), Acholonu (1995), Thiam, (1986). Salo (2005). They critique these discourses of “sisterhood” as being disingenuous and false and that the idea of a “universalistic” approach to the experiences of women originates from the westernized ideology of gender which seeks to collapse the experiences of women from the global south. Wane, et al. (2002) also adds to this critique of female universality, by insisting that it is also very important to remember that there is no homogeneous African female identity, and that the diversity of the African women must be celebrated to successfully produce a transformative agenda in African societies for African women.

Ultimately, the possibility of a critical African decolonial feminist way of thinking prioritizes the centrality of feminizing gender in history with an emphasis towards dismantling discriminating systems while creating structures that center the lives of African women. This focus on feminizing gender is acknowledged by Lugones (2008) as she insists that “without such a gendered interpretation of history, we stand the risk of “centering our analysis on the patriarchy; that is, on a binary, hierarchical, oppressive gender formation that rests on male supremacy without any clear

understanding of the mechanisms by which heterosexuality, capitalism, and racial classification are impossible to understand apart from each other” (Lugones, 2008:186-187).

2.03 Limitations of a Critical Decolonial African Feminist Approach.

Centuries of imperial brutality, decades of colonialism, and eventual coloniality after the attainment of independence have had a profound impact on every aspect of African history. The effects on African social, economic, political, cultural, religious, and even intellectual life have been devastating to say the least. Intellectual colonialism has been perpetuated by the domination and eventual coloniality of the mind (Falola, 2023:276).

In the global south, decolonization that is aimed at “liberating” colonized peoples and “destroying” imperial power, has only succeeded in pushing the physical empire to the background but failed to deal effectively with the metaphysical empire Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013). The argument that decolonial ambitions can sometimes appear “superficial” or “idealistic” as it fails to critically confront what Ndlovu-Gatsheni describes as the “metaphysical empire” has been made by several scholars. Velez (2019), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013), Falola, (2023), Grosfoguel (2011; 2017) and other scholars, posit that a fundamental challenge or limit in the actualization of decolonial ambitions is tied to the complex and all-encompassing relationship between colonized nations to their colonial past, as Africa is still at the mercy of global imperial designs which has resulted in them not being able to take full charge of their own fate. Scholars like Grosfoguel in particular, consistently describe decolonization as a “myth” and an “Illusion”. Grosfoguel goes on to argue that “the mythology of the ‘decolonization of the world’, obscures the continuities between the colonial past and current global colonial/racial hierarchies and contributes to the invisibility of ‘coloniality’ today (Grosfoguel, 2011:1-38). This argument made by the Latin American Sociologist, emphasizes the very challenge and complexity of pursuing decolonial ambitions in and outside of academia.

To recall Rodney's ¹³ position (which expands on the point made by Grosfoguel), he argues that the consequences of colonialism are mostly apparent in Africa's economic reality and that the transatlantic slave trade and subsequent colonization of Africa extracted African resources and used them to fuel the industrial revolution in Europe while relegating Africa to the status of a captive market. This economic reality can be witnessed all over Africa today where we are experiencing a new form of "recolonization"¹⁴ championed by the Chinese. The reality of some form of African recolonization from outside the West is not a new phenomenon. Ali Mazrui, a prominent Kenyan scholar known for his provocative and insightful work on African politics and culture, wrote an influential essay titled "*The Recolonization of Africa: A Strategy for Stability?*". In this essay, he critically reflects on China's contemporary role in Africa and provocatively suggests that some form of "benign recolonization" (Ibid:44), might be beneficial to "stabilize" Africa. He further adds that "Africa may be entering a phase of global governance in which some elements of sovereignty are ceded to outside powers in exchange for peace, order, and development" (Mazrui, 1994:341). This view on the role of China as benign and beneficial to the attainment of stability in Africa, sounds uncomfortably like the justifications and rationale for colonization.

¹³ Rodney, W. (1972). *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. London, UK: Verso.

¹⁴ The concept of "recolonization" in the context of China's engagement with Africa refers to the idea that China's growing economic, political, and cultural influence may replicate patterns of historical colonialism, leading to new forms of dependency and control. This perspective is part of a broader debate on whether China's involvement constitutes neocolonialism or represents a model of mutual development. See Rapanyane, M. B. (2023). China's international relations with Africa: A comparative analysis of neo-colonial practices in Angola and the DRC. *Journal of African Foreign Affairs*, 10(1), 51.

Falola (2023), provides a much-needed critical interrogation of the nature of Chinese involvement in Africa by identifying how the Chinese are capturing many African indebted countries through strict economic sanctions. “Financially strategic places in indebted African countries are claimed as collateral to ensure payment of debts” (Ibid:279). Smith and Jeppensen (2017) use the Zambian case study as an example of the nature of China’s grip on the economic sector of African states. “Chinese companies are putting pressure on the Zambian finance ministry to avert further delayed payments or defaults on their loans. However, Chinese companies are refusing to restructure existing debts and are instead seeking fresh collateral in case of default” (Smith and Jeppensen, 2017:3).

The same report claims that China is looking to liquidate the sale of *Konkola* copper mines and Glencore’s Zambian operation *Mopani*, (Zambia’s largest producer of copper) making it easy for China to gradually take over the country’s economy. Other examples abound throughout Africa and concerns about how people that have been colonized can “rise” above the status of subjugation to live differently seems idealistic given the current political and economic milieu in the continent. This challenge to decolonial ambitions (negotiating the existing dependence on the west and the east), remains a lifelong struggle for Africans as the structures that were created to advance colonial violence are still in practice today.

The application of decolonial feminism remains under scrutiny as many arguments against its utility can be connected to critiques emanating from feminism and its “shortcomings”. Feminism has been accused of promoting an unhesitating sorority among women, while concealing the nature of violence that exists between global south and global north women (hooks, 1984). According to Velez, (2019) decolonial feminism in the U.S. and Latin American contexts are deeply influenced and shaped by the work of black feminisms, especially the works of Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and

many others. However, Shireen Roshanravan (2014), argues that although there is a significant presence and utility of black feminist scholarship in decolonial scholarship from Latin America, there unfortunately still exists a homogenizing tendency of superficial engagement that glosses women of color scholarship as a unified genre of thought” (p:41). These tendencies can be attributed to the “deep and sometimes incompatible differences as well as productive tensions within women of color feminist theory” (Ibid). These “tensions” have also been identified by Valez (2019), and she provides a linguistic critique of Lugones who she has accused of “unwittingly distancing herself from theories of intersectionality and, in so doing, the intellectual labor of black feminists” (p:392). Valez further explains that this “distancing” of the experiences of black and indigenous women in scholarship, tends to appear through the separation of experiences from systems of oppression, particularly when talking about gender, race, and class. For example, Eve Tuck and Yang (2012), argue that when analyzing indigenous movements, “the ethnic dimension is considered the only way to study the problems of indigenous women” (p.8), which ultimately results in an inaccurate and reductionist understanding of the experiences of women that inhabit the intersections of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism.

While I muse over the “push and pull” that can exist in decolonial theorization, activism, and the ways to reconcile the past with the present, Grofosguel (2011) presents several important questions that further complicates decolonial aspirations. He raises several critical questions that require close attention.

How can we overcome the Eurocentric modernity without throwing away the best of modernity as many third world fundamentalists do?” Modernization is part of globalization, and although it began with the colonialist voyages of the Middle Ages and their consequent triangular trade, the impact since then has been felt by social, cultural, economic, political, cultural, and religious institutions in Africa and the rest of the world. Should one completely abandon a long-running process to stop its perceived negative impacts when that means losing benefits? Such benefits

have included women's liberation from patriarchal constraints, offering more options for marriage, relationships, and participation in the workforce; the advent of the internet, which offers new opportunities to Africans; and the spread of industrialization and labor-saving devices (Grosfoguel, 2011: 6).

I insist that we pay close attention to the questions that Grosfoguel outlines above. Firstly, I will freely acknowledge that indeed, modernity, which is a 'sibling' of colonization, has brought about many pivotal advancements that continue to advance mankind, but at what cost? Grosfoguel's question concerning how we can overcome Eurocentric modernity without throwing away the best of modernity as many third world fundamentalists do, is an important one. In my intellectualizing over the "push and pull" of decolonization, I realize that the focus must reside on problematizing not only the "gains" of modernity (as he outlines) but also on the meanings of modernity and how it was and is achieved. The focus should be on who determines what is "modern" and how such determination is made. Is it made at the destruction, subjugation and erasure of others? Is it reinforced by the constant subjugation and erasure of others? Can one really enjoy the "gains" of modernity if one is a victim to it? Has modernity really brought about "social, cultural, economic, political, cultural, and religious institutions in Africa and the rest of the world"? And if it has, at what and whose expense?

The second question that Grosfoguel posits concerns the idea of "completely abandoning a long-running process to stop its perceived negative impacts when that means losing benefits" (Ibid:6). It is interesting that he uses the term "perceived negative impacts" as though the negative impacts of colonization and subsequent modernization are imaginary. To this I respond by arguing that things must be "abandoned" as they no longer serve the interest of the people. Colonization and subsequent modernity must be abandoned when it is sustained and reproduced by the continued

subjugation of minority groups. It must be abandoned since for it to achieve said “gains” power must constantly remain in the control of a particular few. Ultimately, the goal is not to “overcome” modernity, but rather to change the key actors that hold all the power and access to modernity and to change the narrative of what “modernity” entails”. However, attention must be applied in changing modernity’s “key actors”. We, who are part of decolonial efforts, must be cautious not to reproduce new colonialisms and imperialisms. A more inclusive and sustainable brand of modernity demands diversity in its actors, its application, acceptance, and reach. The power dynamic that is central to colonial violence must be dispersed and disrupted.

2.1 Foucauldian Analysis of Power

Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power... individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application (Foucault, 1980:98).

Before I begin this section of my thesis, I will briefly recall what my central research objective is. This research fundamentally challenges the western conceptualization of power, especially gendered power, and insists that power is not limited to the appearance of domination, violence, erasure, and subjugation. “The Exercise of power is not simply the relationship between partners, individuals of a collective, it is a way in which certain actions modify others” (Foucault, 1982:788). This quote by Foucault introduces some of the ways in which power through spirituality can be explored especially with regards to how “actions” through the colonial encounter altered and diminished the spiritual modalities of Igbo gendered power. Foucault’s work on power spans over four decades, and his position on power changes quite significantly in the latter years of his writing

(McNay, 1992). In the early phases of his work, he prioritized the individualistic and agentic qualities of power. In this stage, Foucault was mostly concerned with power that applies to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize, and which others must recognize in him (Foucault, 1970). In these early years, his focus was not to analyze the phenomenon of power, but rather to create a history of the different modes by which in our culture, human beings are being made into subjects. In simple terms, his early investigation into power was focused on how power is exercised and what happens when individuals exert power over others (Ibid:1970 and 1980).

His analysis of power expanded to include an analysis of self as opposed to bodies (McNay, 1992). This methodological shift has endeared him to some feminist researchers including Taylor, (2011), and McNay, (1992), who agree that “women’s oppression should not be reduced to essentialism or biologism” (McNay, 1992:11). As a quick side note it is important to remember that Foucault’s work on power was done in a time when people no longer saw power as something tangible and centralized like in the time of the monarchy. Power was becoming more distributed and questioned, particularly in Europe, and with the decline of many European countries during World War II, the question of rationality was beginning to be questioned. Foucault conceptualization of power also speaks to the insidious way power becomes “naturalized” or “normalized” thereby making it very difficult to challenge (Foucault, 1980). I understand how the exertion of power can possess an insidious nature; however, I am doubtful that the colonial encroachment was insidious in its application. How was the exertion of colonial power done in an insidious way? How was the imposition of Christianity and several institutions to criminalize and erase African spiritual modalities of power normalized? I insist that the erasure of African modes of spiritual power could

not have been carried out insidiously but through violence and through clearly noticeable strategies.

Foucault provides many important contributions to the theorization of power, but central to my research is this idea of the “subjectifying” nature of power and the idea that power is not a “property” that belongs to certain groups of people. Foucault’s conceptualization is concerned mostly with how human beings transform themselves to become subjects. He is concerned with who a subject is, and the processes by which a person becomes a subject (or makes themselves) whether voluntarily or through duress. In his work, he identifies two types of subjects. Firstly, a person that is “subject” to someone else’s control and secondly through one that is dependent or tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge (Foucault, 1980). Here a person is made a subject by being objectified externally through an institution, or by being subjected themselves where they internalize the messaging. In the second strategy, they believe themselves to be acting independently; however, they have been motivated by non-obvious forms of control without knowing it. Many aspects of his articulation of power make sense to my work.

This idea that a person can be objectified externally through an institution is connected to the way in which Christianity is used as a tool of control. The second point that Foucault makes about aspects related to the insidious nature of “turning” one into a “subject” is where our opinions depart. According to Foucault, the insidious/nonobvious control becomes very natural and normalized thus making it very difficult to challenge. In many ways the imposition of Christianity in colonial and postcolonial Igbo communities was obvious and “non-obvious”, as the push to discard traditional modes of worship and spirituality in order to embrace Christianity, was done in a way to appear “normal”.

Like Foucault I am interested in how power is enacted to subjectify and transform. How did the colonial encroachment of the Christian god not only subjectify Igbo precolonial women, (and continues to subjectify Igbo contemporary women) but Igbo spiritual practices? I am interested in investigating how through the introduction of the Christian male god, all Igbo “gods”, particularly female goddesses, became associated with evil, and their modalities of power became criminalized, and erased. In addition, it has been established that through the introduction of a “supreme” male god and the belief that all “supreme beings” can only be male and not female, this also contributed to the dilution of the efficacy of female gods¹⁵.

The second position by Foucault that is also of interest to me is his assertion that power should not be understood as a property that belongs to certain people. Foucault insists that, “it is misleading to think of power as property which could be possessed by some/class of people and not others, that it is better to think of it as a complex shifting field of relations in which everyone is an element” (Foucault, 1977: 21). On face value I recognize and agree with what Foucault argues by this statement, however his assertion requires a critical reading and must be applied in the context of colonization. This statement brings up broader discourse about who has the freedom, choice, and agency to enact power. However, to speak to my work more directly, if power is not the property of a certain group of people, why is the power dynamic of the dominant (American/European) always ascribed a higher status than the dominated (Africans/minoritized) peoples? Why are traditional modes of power seen as questionable and intangible as opposed to Euro American models? Foucault’s contribution that power is not the property of certain groups of people has

¹⁵ Amadiume I. (1987). *Male daughters, female husbands*. London: Zed Books

gained him several critiques from Fraser (1981), Sawicki (1986, 1991), Hartsock (1989) and many others.

Sawicki has accused him of “writing from the position of the dominated” (Ibid: 25) and further argues that Foucault fails to recognize that the very nature of power dynamics insists that the allocation of power will always be imbalanced to favor some and put others at the disadvantage. Some of the most biting critiques of Foucault’s theorization of power come from Nancy Fraser, American philosopher, critical theorist and feminist. She acknowledges the important work that Foucault has done and his contributions of power, especially through an analysis of the early stages of modernity. She also identifies that his work is rich in providing an adequate description of the modern mechanisms of power and that Foucault genealogy of power allows phenomena such as family, sexuality, school, medicine to be categorized as political. However, she faults his lack of normative clarity as a huge weakness in his work and is quoted as saying that Foucault work is not free of “difficulties”. More specifically, she accuses his theorization of not providing an analysis of how to interpret domination, and subjection. She claims that he is ambiguous on the things he calls power thereby causing normative ambiguity.

Other controversial points made by Foucault, which are also criticized by Fraser, are connected to his assertion that power is essentially not repressive but productive because if power were repressive, it would have such a strong grip on us, and we would not continue to obey a purely repressive and coercive form of power. To this point I insist that Foucault fails to recognize just how strong a grip colonial imposition has and continues to have on the lives and realities of the colonized peoples. This strong grip is responsible for the almost absolute acceptance and normalization of all things foreign (western religions in particular) in place of all things traditional or indigenous. Foucault also argues that disciplinary power was not invented by the dominant

class, that it originated outside this class but once it revealed its utility, it was taken up by the dominant class. To this statement I insist that disciplinary power was indeed invented by the dominant class and that once it revealed its utility, the people “outside this class” (as he puts it) instrumentalized it for their own purposes, thereby creating new forms of “smaller” hierarchies for themselves. A simple example can be seen in the way colonial administrators (who were in the dominant class) imposed structures to demand adherence to Christianity. This process required them to enlist the support of people outside the dominant class, (warrant chiefs, etc.) etc. to enforce the new religion through several forms of domination

Other critiques that target Foucault’s dismissal of the need for resistance are argued by the late Nancy Hartsock (1989) as she labels Foucault’s work on power contradictory. She claims that despite his obvious sympathy for those who are subjugated, he writes from the perspective of the dominated. She goes on to accuse him “of criticizing the confessional but not religion” (Ibid:166) and insists that he calls for resistance to the systems of power relations but is vague on what resistance means. She adds that he places emphasis on resistance and not transformation and argues that this is because of his profound pessimism and his belief that transformation is to extend one’s participation in the present system. Most significant to Hartsock’s critique of Foucault is her argument that systematically unequal relations of power ultimately vanish from Foucault’s account of power. “Unfortunately, because Foucault focuses on the colonizer who resists, systemic power relations vanish from his work” (Ibid:167). The silencing of systemic power relations from Foucault’s work exemplifies the nature in which western theorization of power is constructed in which the multi-faceted nature of power which can inadvertently cause oppression is dismissed.

The utility of Foucault’s conceptualization of power in this thesis resides in the complex ways in which he prioritizes the importance of relationships in the enactment of power. Foucault's notion

of power is multifaceted, emphasizing its pervasive nature and its role in shaping knowledge, discourse, and subjectivity. His conceptualization of power, although not gendered, allows for an interrogation of how power is framed not only in the west, but also in the social sciences. I acknowledge the ways in which Foucault's theorization of power can be utilized in my research on gendered power. Firstly, because of his understanding of power as a relationship, his articulation that power serves to modify others, by affecting their immediate everyday lives, and lastly in his contribution of the way in which power is responsible for "subjectifying" people. Like Foucault, my work is interested in why we study power, but unlike Foucault, I am interested in how a theory of power can be created for colonized women of Africa. Most central to my work is identifying the ways in which African spirituality can be a "tangible" site of gendered power for Igbo women. Like Hartsock, (1989), I do not find that the current theories of power that exist to be useful for women or other oppressed groups. I believe that the need to understand how power works is fundamental in the creation of a usable theory of power and that a theory of power for women is one that must call for change and participation in altering power relations. A view that is very different from Foucault's passive talk of resistance and no transformation.

2.12 Engaging with Foucault's Erasures, Silences and Absences.

Several African scholars including, Oni (2018), Oyěwùmí (1997), Oduyoye (2004), have critically engaged with Michel Foucault's theories of power, highlighting its limitations in capturing the complexities of African societies, African women's experiences, and indigenous forms of power particularly spirituality. Oyěwùmí critiques Western feminist as well as Foucault, for imposing Eurocentric gender constructs onto African societies. She argues that Foucault's focus on institutional power and disciplinary mechanisms, completely overlooks the centrality of spirituality and indigenous belief systems in Africa. She further argues that it inadvertently

dismisses the role of concepts like witchcraft and spiritual sovereignty, erasing its crucial roles in societal governance and individual agency. She posits that these unique forms of power that are deeply embedded in African cosmologies, challenge Foucault's secular and materialist conception of power, and that by ignoring these dimensions, Foucault's framework fails to capture the full spectrum of power dynamics in African societies.

Similarly, Philosophy Professor Peter Oni in his article, *Seeing Foucault's Theory Through African Lenses: The Discourse on Sex, Gender and Power* (2018), offers his own critical examination of Foucault's conceptualization of power. He highlights that “Foucault's theories are silent on the spiritual and communal aspects of power that are integral to African cultures” (Oni, 2018:20). He insists that in “many African societies, power is not solely exercised through institutional mechanisms but is deeply embedded in communal relationships, spiritual beliefs, and traditional practices and that focusing predominantly on western institutions like prisons, schools, and hospitals, Foucault's analysis inadvertently marginalize these alternative forms of power” (Oni, 2018:22). Central to Oni's critique is his insistence that “Foucault does not fully consider how colonialism and western ideologies have reshaped gender relations in Africa specifically in how colonial interventions imposed rigid gender binaries and patriarchal structures, disrupting indigenous systems where women often held significant power and autonomy” (Ibid:22). This point made by Oni is at the heart of what my work argues, as the rigid western gender system that was imposed in colonial Nigeria contributed to the maligning of Igbo gods who were multigendered and diverse.

Oduyoye like Oni (2018), and Oyěwùmí (1997), also challenge the silences and erasures found in Foucault's work on power. She describes his work as patriarchal, hierarchical, and individualistic. She further emphasizes that in “African societies, power is not merely about dominance or control

but is deeply embedded in communal relationships and mutual responsibilities” (Ibid: 71). She posits that Foucault ignores the interconnectedness that defines African communities because in her view, “true power arises from partnership and reciprocity within the community, where both men and women contribute to the well-being of all members” (Ibid:84). Central to Oduyoye's critique is the role of spirituality in empowering African women and she contends that indigenous spiritual practices and beliefs are a source of strength and agency for African women. Other discourses related to how power should be understood as “invisible” is contextualized by Hengehold (2009). She critiques Foucault’s emphasis on visible, institutional forms of power, arguing that they ignore the significance of invisible or spiritual forces in shaping subjectivity and sovereignty in African contexts. She explores how beliefs in witchcraft and the occult function as discourses that shape political and social relations in Cameroon and further argues that "power involves the capture of an individual’s or community’s imagination as well as their visible, tangible bodies" (Ibid:1). This assertion underscores the need to consider how cultural narratives, and spiritual beliefs contribute to the exercise of sovereignty, particularly in postcolonial societies where traditional and modern structures coexist.

Like the scholars above, Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), also offers a reinterpretation of power that departs from western top down understandings of domination. He conceptualizes power as something that is not merely imposed by dominant institutions but is also actively negotiated, resisted, and subverted by ordinary people through everyday practices. While Foucault focuses on how power shapes subjectivities from above, de Certeau examines how ordinary people subvert power from below, through walking, storytelling, shopping, or other mundane activities. He explores how power operates in modern society not merely through institutions and discourses, as Foucault argues, but through the subtle, everyday actions of ordinary

people. A key distinction between Foucauldian analysis of power and de Certeau, lies in his conceptualizations of resistance. For Foucault, resistance is immanent to power, it is “everywhere” because power is everywhere (Foucault, 1980). However, according to Fraser (1981), his ubiquity renders resistance ambiguous; and stands the risk of reproducing the very systems it seeks to oppose.

The critiques identified, collectively highlight the need to contextualize Foucault's and other western theories of power within African epistemologies. Acknowledging the centrality of spirituality, communal relationships, and indigenous/traditional knowledge systems, allows for a nuanced understanding of the ways gendered power dynamics are shaped and sustained in Africa. This thesis therefore challenges the universality of Foucault's frameworks and calls for a more nuanced and contextual understanding of power that incorporates diverse African epistemologies. It also exposes the silences and erasure in western framings of power and insist on the importance of African women theorizing from their lived experiences. It ultimately challenges the rigid depiction of power through institutions and other “visible” mechanisms and posits that gendered power is invisible and sometimes intangible, and that it resides in the complexities and diversity of the ways Igbo women live and interact with themselves and the cosmos. A decolonial reading of Foucault requires an interrogation of the silences in his work, his neglect of colonialism, race, and epistemic violence. Such a reading repositions Africa not as a footnote to western theory, but as a primary site of knowledge production and resistance. By putting Foucault in conversation with African feminist scholars like Oyěwùmí (1997, 2021) and Amadiume (1987), and decolonial theorists like Mignolo (2011) and Mbembe (2019), we begin to craft a more ontologically plural understanding of power, one that takes seriously the afterlives of empire in the organization of knowledge, identity, and the spiritual. Ultimately, a decolonial reading of Foucault would note that

while he understands how modern power disciplines bodies, he does not sufficiently theorize how race, colonialism, and religion shape that discipline.

2.2 Methodology: Research Objectives and Key Questions.

My research aims to trace the utility and recovery of traditional modes of gendered spirituality in southeastern Igbo communities. It explores especially two gendered ritual performances: *Igba Afa* and *Itu Aja*, which can both be fully understood only when examined in connection with other rituals that give them their full meaning and provide important context. Igbo spirituality/Odinani refers to the indigenous belief systems, cosmologies, and practices of the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria. It is rooted in a worldview that emphasizes interconnectedness between the physical and spiritual realms, communal responsibility, and ancestral reverence. It is critical to note that an interrogation of Igbo spirituality/Odinani cannot be performed separately in rigid “boxes”. It must be understood as existing as intricately complementary in nature to one another and with other forms of Igbo spirituality. *Igba Afa*, is a ritual that gives women the ability to “see” beyond the physical to ward off sickness or misfortune, and to attract prosperity, and love. It is also used to “see” into the past, present, and future, to interpret, prevent or explain mysterious events. The second ritual, namely *Itu Aja*, is a sacrifice exercised to protect the realm from war, hardship, and drought/famine and to appease the gods. Most importantly, the exploration of several spiritual rituals provides an interpretation of how spirituality was instrumentalized by Igbo women in precolonial and colonial Igbo communities, particularly in how it created a distinct form of gendered power that was unique to women. An examination of specific rituals also allows for an

examination of how modes of Igbo gendered spirituality currently take form and how these forms of spirituality are utilized in current “postcolonial”¹⁶ Igbo communities.

Given that, my research asks the following questions:

- 1- In what way is African gendered power through spirituality, problematized, constructed, and sustained, in contemporary and historical accounts of Igbo West African women.
- 2- How can the contemporary practice of spiritual rituals serve as a lesson to Igbo women and by extension African women, to reconnect with their spirits and ancestral power which they “lost” through westernization?
- 3- In what ways does the legacy of colonization alter the contemporary practice of Igbo rituals such as *Igba Afa* and *Itu Aja*?
- 4- Finally, how can spirituality as a site of gendered power, be contextualized to capture the spirit of Igbo (African) women and facilitate its replicability in other locations?

2.3 Originality/Rationale

Research on the impact and legacies of colonization in the Africa continent, is often positioned mostly through an analysis on long-term post-colonial developments, mostly through an economic and or political perspective. Examples include the works of Makandawire (2001) in Malawi, Chuku (2009; 2015) in Nigeria, Lopes (2018) in Guinea-Bissau, and Cheru (2002) in Ethiopia. By focusing on African gendered spirituality, this thesis will provide an appreciation of the pivotal role of Igbo spirituality and its connections to the Igbo cultural way of life, ways of being and ways

¹⁶ I use air quotes to describe postcolonial to signal the illusion that African states became truly independent and free from colonial domination after decolonization in the mid-20th century. While many African countries formally gained independence, scholars argue that colonial power structures, economic dependencies, epistemic hierarchies, and global systems of inequality persisted, producing what some call *neocolonialism*. See Rodney, (1972); Nkrumah, (1965); Falola, (2024), Mamdani, (2020).

of becoming. It also opens the conversation to discourses related to the need to decolonize knowledges on African women and the African consciousness, as the growing acceptance, desire, and knowledge for traditional modes of worship and healing, continue to gain momentum¹⁷. This work also exposes how the abandonment of Igbo women and their connections to their ancestors has “real life” impacts in their place in society and their overall wellbeing in contemporary Igbo society.

This research also provides an analysis of how the contemporary manifestations of female leadership, authority and power can be linked to the erasure of the unique position women occupied within spiritual spaces in precolonial Igbo communities. The work of identifying and tracing these legacies speaks to the central role of the past in determining the future, and the implication of the past in the present. Mostly, this research is innovative in the way it points out the gaps that exist in the literature regarding an in-depth analysis of spiritual and or performative forms of gendered power (in the Igbo West African context) that speak to how different forms of agency and performance enact power. Ultimately, this thesis challenges the widespread depictions of most African women as powerless and oppressed by documenting:

1. The ways in which Igbo women’s power was manifested in precolonial society.
2. The impact of colonialism and on-going coloniality on Igbo women’s power.
3. The ways in which Igbo women have renegotiated their positions in the current period and
4. How spirituality is taken up as a mode of negotiable gendered power in contemporary Igbo society.

¹⁷ See Dorsey, L. (2020). *Orishas, Goddesses, and Voodoo Queens: The Divine Feminine in the African Religious Traditions*. Weiser Books

It seeks to show that power is enacted without oppression, victimization, or domination. Foucault (1977) insists that contemporary theorizations of power are not only limiting, but inadequate. On this point I completely agree with Foucault. He further argues that the literature on power continues to present power only through legal modes, which implies that power must be legalized or institutionalized. He argues instead for the broadening of the understanding of power beyond institutions, to center how multiple forms of power apply to everyday life. He further posits that power is not simply a relationship between people but an instrument that is used to “modify the actions of others” (p:31). It is this idea of power “modifying” others/women, that this research aims to center, as my work focuses on how the colonial encroachment resulted in permanently modifying the practice of gendered spiritual practices that ultimately led to the “demise” of gendered spiritual modes of worship that women utilized to enact power. However, the “demise” of such gendered spiritual power is not in complete demise as gendered spiritual power continues to modify others through the activities of the *Omu* and other Igbo women who practice it in various (albeit different from its original configurations) modified ways.

2.31 Reflexivity

In doing this very important work of tracing the implication of the colonial encroachment and investigating the ways in which contemporary Igbo women “adjust” and reinvent “old” spiritual practices, I realize that I must be mindful in my representation of the various concepts in my work including Igbo gendered spirituality, Igbo women, and precolonial southeastern Igbo community. I do not intend on romanticizing precolonial Igbo communities or depict Igbo culture or elements of Igbo spirituality as non-discriminatory. The ambition of this research is to provide a robust analysis of traditional Igbo spirituality untainted by the colonial influence of modernity, to ultimately provide a nuanced reading of Igbo gender relations. This research acknowledges that

gender discrimination existed in precolonial Igbo communities, however it emphasizes that the nature of gender discrimination took on new meaning with the introduction of colonization. This “new meaning” can be located through the various colonial policies that diminished the contributions and status of Igbo women especially in relation to their social capability and freedoms. Lastly and most importantly, in my research, I have been entrusted with retelling the stories of women. This is an immensely overwhelming and humbling responsibility as caution will be ensured to avoid reproducing colonial rhetoric. As one of my coproducers Chika rightly pointed out, “storytelling is spiritual and the task of retelling it must be done in a way that closely represents the meanings, emotions and expectations of the storyteller”, this statement is my guide in unpacking the important stories from my field work.

2.32 My Positionality

Situating “my place” is essential in better understanding why this work is not only personal but important. “The field” is a space open to a fluidity of experiences and as a “daughter of the soil” I felt that the field was “open” to me. The fact that I am from *Onitsha* in *Anambra State* (a state in southeastern Nigeria), and familiar with the geographical milieu of my research, made my entry into the physical and ideological “field space” easier. In addition, the presence and connections of my immediate and extended family, and the fact that I am a native speaker of Igbo language, also enabled me to establish a cordial relationship with my coproducers¹⁸ and eased my interaction

¹⁸The preference for the term “coproducer” as opposed to more familiar terms like participant or respondent is explained in detail in chapter one. I use the term “coproducer” to exemplify the decolonial nature of my work as the central philosophy of decolonial research rests on the validity of the stories, lives and realities of the people that so generously shared their stories with me. Without them, this body of work would not exist. Collins, P. H. (1989). “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought. Common Grounds and Crossroads: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in Women’s Lives.” *University of Chicago Press*. 14(4):745-773.

especially in the conducting of interviews. To Igbo people, I am their daughter seeking to understand and document the tradition of her motherland for the benefit of her people.

My positionality as an Igbo woman from southeastern Nigeria, underscores the importance of this work because I have constantly challenged that perception that African women (and Igbo women in particular), are by their “nature” powerless. In an exercise of self-reflection, I have never described or seen myself as powerless although I admit that there are times when I have questioned the nature of power I exercise and how it can best serve me. In general, I have struggled with the argument often made in society that gendered power is subject to the limits of the men in society, or the men in the lives of women. In other instances, I find the belief that gendered power is an illusion, a myth, and is untenable, to be incredibly misinformed and simply wrong. Scholars like Egodi Uchendu¹⁹ believe that gendered power requires a woman to not only appear masculine and dominant, but that to attain power, she must fit into the mold of how masculinity operates. I have personally negotiated traditionally masculine spaces in my personal and career life and have discovered that an understanding of self is vital in accessing and “activating” one’s gendered power. This gendered power could appear in many ways, whether its tapping into one’s “femininity” or being confident and content in one’s “skin”. The addition of a spiritual component in this research grounds the way in which power can be unpacked, framed, and instrumentalized. It also sets gendered power apart from other more mainstream ideologies of modern-day masculinist modes of power.

¹⁹ Uchendu, E. (2006). Gender and Female Chieftaincy in Anioma, Nigeria. *Asian women (Seoul, Korea)*, 17–46

2.33 Qualitative Research Methodology: In-depth Semi Structured Interviews.

The findings that allow me to write this thesis are obtained from a critical literature review, and the field work I conducted in Igbo communities in Nigeria for over six months in 2024. The first stage comprised a critical literature review which lasted for over a year and was completed after Ethics Approval²⁰ was granted. The first stage, which is a critical literature review, was analyzed through the backdrop of a critical discourse analysis. My research utilizes a qualitative methodology using open ended semi structured interviews. According to Knott et. al (2022) “semi-structured in-depth interviews are a qualitative research method that follows a deceptively familiar logic of human interaction: they are conversations where people talk with each other, interact and pose and answer questions” (p:1). It is for this conversational quality that I decided to center the in-depth semi-structured interview style as a method of inquiry. “Conducted conversationally with one respondent at a time, the semi structured interview employs a blend of closed-and open-ended questions, often accompanied by follow-up why or how questions” (Adams, 2015:493). This research is particularly biased to the semi-structure interview style because of the nature of my research as it will allow for the dialogue to meander around the topics and delve into totally unforeseen issues, rather than “adhering slavishly to verbatim questions as in a standardized interview” (Adams, 2015, 494).

According to Ritchie et al. (2003), sample sizes for qualitative research are generally much smaller than those used in quantitative research. They insist on this point by arguing that there is a point of diminishing return to a qualitative sample and that more data does not necessarily lead to more information. They also add that “frequencies are rarely important in qualitative research, as one

²⁰Ethics Approval was granted by York University Toronto Canada.

occurrence of the data is potentially as useful as many in understanding the process behind a topic” (Ibid:79). This idea of frequencies in qualitative research is also argued by Crouch and McKenzie (2006) as they posit that central in qualitative research is the goal of “meaning making” and not generalized hypothesis statements. It is for the reasons outlined above that I selected a sample size of twenty co-producers. As my work is interested in “meaning making”²¹, my sample size is organized in a way that ensures that I capture the most pertinent issues of my research. In addition, a sample size of twenty is manageable, and achievable, (given the nature and time frame of my research) and most importantly, signals the beginning of my lifelong research into my ambitions to decolonize African spirituality.

According to Sandelowiski (1995), “when qualitative researchers decide to seek people out because of their age, sex, or race, it is because they consider them good sources of information that will advance them towards an analytic goal, and not because they wish to generalize to other persons of similar age, sex, or race” (p:180). This statement by Sandelowiski, justifies my method of only interviewing Igbo women. Sandelowiski adds that in creating the sample size for qualitative research, demographic variables, such as sex, and age, becomes an analytic variable; and that persons of one or the other sex are selected for a study because, “by virtue of their sex, they can provide certain kinds of information” (Ibid). In my research, Igbo women can provide certain kinds of information that I need to address my research topic. My decision to conduct in depth semi-structured interviews with Igbo women in a particular age category (“older” Igbo Queens/Chieftains between the ages of 40 and beyond, and “younger” Igbo women between the ages of 21-40) is specifically because I will excavate certain types of meanings and to also provide

²¹Crouch, M. and McKenzie, H (2006). The logic of small samples in interview based qualitative research. *Social Science Information*, 45(4), 483-499.

a comparative assessment of how spirituality is and was negotiated based on age. Another reason why I selected this age category (for the younger respondents) is because it has allowed me to include Igbo women from a wide range of diverse experiences and world views that has ultimately enriched my research.

It is important to note that because of the nature of the subject matter, and the style of in-depth semi-structured interviews, many of the accounts provided by my coproducers happened through stories. The ways in which several accounts of the past and the present were presented through oral tradition/storytelling, highlight the pivotal role of storytelling in decolonizing research and restoring the gaps of colonial erasure. Finally, I was granted Ethics Approval by York University to photograph my “older” coproducers (40 years and over) as they are mostly public figures who are accustomed to being photographed and having a public image. The ability to include photographic representations in qualitative research is an essential component in capturing, communicating, and interrogating their lived experiences. As Rose (2016) aptly describes, “the act of taking or selecting a photograph in qualitative research, becomes part of the reflexive process through which meaning is co-constructed” (p: 15).

Igbo women have historically played a central role as custodians of oral traditions and storytellers (Ugochukwu, 2005). By weaving stories of ancestors, gods, and everyday life, Igbo women ensure that cultural heritage remains vibrant and relevant across generations. Their stories are more than mere accounts; they are performances that integrate ritual elements, invoking the presence of ancestral spirits and affirming communal identity. Through storytelling, they uphold their roles as spiritual guides and cultural historians. In this way, storytelling becomes an act of defiance against the erasure of histories and identities, asserting the sacredness of their lived experiences.

Ultimately, Igbo women storytelling affirms the power of their voices and the enduring significance of their stories, their histories and their futures.²²

In line with my research decolonial ambitions which seeks to prioritize the voices, languages, and humanity of African women, I have chosen to present some of the narratives from my interviews in Igbo language. Igbo language is the language of the Igbo people, and the language in which most of the interviews were conducted. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) argues that research conducted and disseminated in local languages is more accessible to Indigenous and local communities. Santos (2014), also makes a similar point and stresses that research in local languages is a transformative act that challenges the dominance of western epistemologies and asserts the value of Indigenous knowledge systems. This approach not only addresses linguistic inequities but also reclaims intellectual sovereignty for historically marginalized communities. Most significantly, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. (1986), *In Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, argues that colonial languages have historically been privileged in academia, marginalizing non-western knowledge systems. He insists that writing in local languages recenters Indigenous and local ways of knowing and discards the hierarchical relationship between knowledges in academia. Most specific to me, I present portions of this research in Igbo to respect my culture, to make my work accessible and to retain the “spirit” and character by which this research was conducted.

2.34 Critical Literature Review, Through a Critical Discourse Analysis.

“A critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a method of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated, and

²² I will elaborate on the significance of female storytellers in decolonial research in chapter seven.

resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (Van Dijk, 2015:476). Feminist CDA which is a contemporary expansion of Critical Discourse Analysis offers a “sophisticated theorization of the relationship between social practices and discourse structures” (Lazar, 2005: 4-5). Although CDA and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (an offshoot of CDA) are linguistic theories, their concern with language, ideology, identity, society, and gender makes them pertinent approaches to analyze literary texts (Ibid).

Fowler, in his 1979 book titled “*Language and control*” has suggested that there are certain linguistic choices made by the interviewees/co-producers. Wodak and Meyer (2011) add that according to the critical linguistic rubrics, critical discourse analysis claims that text and talk do not occur in segregation rather they are interdependent. Discourse and society are reliant, and they represent each other, which implies that discourses contain both society and culture (Lazar, 2005; 2007). It is for these reasons that this thesis centers a feminist critical discourse as it enables me to thoroughly and critically analyze the data for the purpose of this research. The talk (semi-structured in-depth interviews) and text data (literature review) is analyzed using a feminist critical discourse analysis to ensure that this research does not inadvertently discard the importance of rigor in framing Igbo power dynamics.

In the context of decolonizing colonial narratives, FCDA²³ plays a crucial role by interrogating how colonial ideologies have been embedded in language and discourse. It challenges the dominance of western epistemologies and seeks to uncover and validate alternative ways of knowing and being that have been marginalized or suppressed. For instance, Nancy Henaku (2024) advocates for an "intrasexual feminist critical discourse analysis that considers the complex

²³ Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

interplay of local and global discourses in African contexts” (Ibid:2). She argues that such an approach "recalibrates not just the social categories that often underlie feminist intersectional analysis but also gives us a complex view of power that interrogates CDA’s emphasis on top-down approaches" (Ibid:3). Furthermore, FCDA contributes to decolonization by highlighting the voices and experiences of those who have been historically silenced. By analyzing texts and discourses through a feminist lens, researchers can reveal the ways in which language perpetuates colonial power structures and work towards more inclusive and equitable narratives.

The utility of a FCDA in my research, allows for a rigorous and robust critique of the literature concerning Igbo women. This critique serves to disrupt the existing colonial, racist, and discriminatory framing, language, and depiction of Igbo women to offer counter discourses. By critically engaging with the literature on Igbo women, I am able to analyze written text on precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial Igbo society to identify themes, patterns, silences, erasures and misrepresentations. This process of critically engaging with the literature creates a valuable opportunity to “read in between the lines” of academia to rewrite existing colonial narratives and reclaim and center the lives and realities of Igbo women.

2.34 Journey Through the Research Process: Challenges, Triggers, Blind Spots, Confronting Biases and the Insider Outsider Status.

20 Igbo women ranging between the ages of 21 to 90 agreed to be coproducers in this research. Among them includes three Igbo Queens from the Kingdoms of *Ibuzo*, *Obior*, and *Iseel-Uku*. The selection of these three kingdoms happened entirely organically. The Queens of these were the ones that were open to being interviewed in the time that I was in Nigeria, and they were also the ones that were excited by the prospect of speaking about the role of spirituality in gendered power. I reached out to several other Queens, but they were either uninterested in speaking to me, or they

were unavailable for interviews at the time I was visiting. The division of interviews based on age, allows a comparative analysis to be performed between how the “younger” and “older” generation perceive gendered power through spirituality. This comparative analysis will interpret and show how both generations understand the nature of gendered power, how Igbo spirituality has changed over time and most importantly, how it is being renegotiated (or not) in contemporary Igbo society.

The selection process for the first group of women (women between the ages of 41 and beyond) was done strictly through invitation for various reasons. Firstly, because the demographic of 41 years and beyond comprises of Igbo Queens, I had to ensure that they were available and open to the idea of being interviewed by me. These Queens are very important people in Igbo society, and they fulfil various cultural obligations, the invitation was central to making sure that our schedules aligned. Secondly, because the pool of Nigerian Igbo Queens is scarce and most of them cannot be found on social media or through email the invitation was necessary to ensure that they are aware of my interest to interview and that I will be granted an interview. With this knowledge, I had to rely on my contacts in Nigeria to make the introduction on my behalf and was able to conduct the interviews successfully in person.

The first category which I label as the “older” Igbo women category, are women of not only a particular age (41 and above), but women that identify as belonging to the Igbo ethnic group or the Igbo speaking people of Delta state (Anioma). The selection process for the secondary category of women which consists of the “younger” women, also followed certain criteria. The criteria are very simple. Firstly, you had to be a woman from the Igbo ethnic group, or women from the Igbo speaking region of Delta state (Anioma). Secondly, you had to fall within the age category stipulated for this study (21-40 years of age). Thirdly, you had to have some degree of knowledge

on Igbo spirituality (which I asked very briefly before commencing with the interviews) and be comfortable speaking with me. The names of my younger coproduces (21-40 years) will be anonymized, while the names of my older coproducers (40 and beyond) will be presented using their real names²⁴ because most of them are public figures and well known in Igbo society. I have chosen to present the data I retrieved from my “younger” and “older” coproducers together as some of their responses are similar in nature and do not reflect any significant difference based on their age. Separating the data based on age does not present any important utility to this research.

Once I received the approval, I began conducting fieldwork in Nigeria. The field work phase comprises of in-depth semi-structure interviews with twenty Igbo women. I was granted Ethics approval by York University to photograph, and audio record my “older” coproducers. For my “younger” coproducers, I was given permission to only audio record my interviews to protect their anonymity. The Igbo women were chosen randomly, with some help from family and friends in Nigeria. The interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes to 1 hour with some of the longest ones lasting for almost two hours. The Igbo women selected for the interview are Anioma women (women from the Igbo speaking region of Delta State) and Igbo women from the southeastern states. The Anioma and Igbos from the southeastern part of Nigeria have the most concentration of Igbos, and most importantly, these are the locations where the Igbos originate from. I divided the two coproducers into two groups of 10 coproducers each. One group comprises women between the ages of 21 and 40 years from diverse financial, social, and academic backgrounds, while the second group of coproducers comprises women from the ages of 41 and beyond, also from diverse backgrounds. This second group of coproducers includes some Igbo Queens and Igbo

²⁴ I was granted Ethics Approval from York University to make this differentiation and include the real name of my older coproducers because some of them are public figures.

female Chieftains. I chose this very wide age group of 21-90, because I believe that at the age of 21 most people will have their own independent thoughts and will likely have some knowledge on Igbo spirituality. Limiting the age of my coproducers to 90 years of age was my way of being realistic to the age range of people I will most likely encounter in the field.

Challenges.

This chapter on methodology will be incomplete without a proper acknowledgement of the numerous dynamics that are at play throughout the research process even before the commencement of field work. To fully encapsulate the challenges of conducting field work in the western, Canadian academy, I will start from the very beginning with my experience with the Ethics Board at York University. I found the process of gaining ethics approval to be quite daunting and frustrating. The ethics board was unsatisfied with several aspects related to my research methods. First, they were not satisfied with my method of recruiting coproducers. They found my recruitment strategies “unethical” particularly because I did not have a written script for recruitment. This insistence on a written script is an unfortunate reflection of the lack of understanding of how certain communities work, interact and connect.

My research requires me to “access” women located in somewhat semi-rural communities. Let me quickly point out that southeastern Nigeria and Anioma communities are developed in several social, economic, and infrastructural metrics. The requirement by ethics to present a script to my intended coproducers would require that it be done via email/phone call or WhatsApp call/message (WhatsApp is the most popular app for connecting with people in Nigeria from the west). Except for phone calls (which are expensive), email and WhatsApp require data and internet connection which is still out of reach and relatively expensive to many people, and free Wi-Fi is not generally

available. Most significantly, connections are not generally established through the rigid limitations of a script. I explained to the ethics board that in my research community, connections are built by shared identities, values and respect. I further insisted to the board that not only am I not able to send a script to my co-producers, but that the introduction of any script can distort the process of building a more organic and trustworthy connection thereby undermining my research. At the end, the issue of a written script was resolved. However, getting to this resolution was hard fought.

The second difficulty I experienced with my recruitment strategy was the board's dissatisfaction with how I planned to access my coproducers since I would not be using a script. The subject of accessing coproducers was a continuous "sore point" because we could never fully agree on how I would go about it. Because of the constant back and forth, I was asked to retake one of the ethics courses I had written months prior named "TCPS 2: core", to refamiliarize myself on how coproducers should be recruited. I explained that in the Nigerian context, reaching out to people is usually done in a very informal style. Nigeria does not have a strict "appointment culture" and people are quite sociable and relatively "easy" to access. This is not to mean that appointments were not made before conducting interviews, however, confirming appointments does not require elaborate formalities. To gain access to a community you will mostly require the help of someone from that community to legitimize your presence, build confidence, and instill trust as you navigate the spaces you are entering or attempting to enter. Because those spaces are "your community" you will be welcome and treated with care. I found the lack of understanding and appreciation of the informal nature of gaining access to southeastern communities a reflection of how research in the west is structured around white ideals of how connections and access to spaces are constructed. The idea that you can only access spaces using a script, points to the need to decolonize not only

research but the understanding of how connections and friendships are made in nonwestern communities.

I also received significant pushbacks concerning my plan to obtain both verbal and written consent. I explained to the board that I will be obtaining written and verbal consent for my work, so that co-producers that may decide not to read the written consent form will have a full understanding of what they are agreeing to. As I suspected, many of my coproducers did not read my written consent form but rather had me explain it to them before signing. I initially submitted a 2-page written consent form, however by the end of the ethics approval process, it became 4 pages long. I explained to the board that a 4-page consent form will most likely not be read by my coproducers as 4 pages was too long. Ultimately, most of my coproducers found a 4-page consent form to be too long, wordy, and complicated, which posed a significant challenge to me and my coproducers.

In the middle of my “battle” to gain ethics approval I encountered a “research altering” disappointment. Her Royal Highness, Omu Obi Dr. Martha Dunkwu, the most renowned Igbo Queen from *Okpanam* Kingdom in Delta State, went to meet her ancestors in February 2024 ²⁵. Omu Dunkwu is often referred to as the Omu of the entire Anioma people²⁶. She was central to

²⁵ In Igbo traditional belief, a Queen does not die but goes on to meet her ancestors where a new life begins. Esogbue, E. (2016). *“A Short History of Omu” An Account of the Female Traditional Institution in Anioma*. Carpphem communications press. Ibadan Nigeria

²⁶ Omu Anioma, Martha Dunkwu, was an illustrious traditional ruler of Anioma land, which covers nine local government areas in Delta State. Once you are pronounced as Omu, and you were previously married, you must leave your marital home and return to your father’s house because you are now a “man”. A palace will be built for you in your father’s place, and you can no longer have any form of intimacy with your previous husband. If you had children before you became Omu, the children will still be yours but if you want more children, you will have to marry a

my work as her knowledge, and experience on gendered power made her a very popular figure to Igbo and Anioma women's empowerment. She ascended the throne as an Omu in 2002 and became globally known as an authority of Igbo gendered culture and Igbo culture.

Other challenges I experienced in the process of conducting field work involved people's perception about my work and my purpose. The geographical location of southeastern Nigeria can be described as largely Christian and even fanatical. Questions related to how traditional spirituality was and is negotiated are sometimes misunderstood and taken to mean that my research advocates for a "return" to traditional modes of Igbo spirituality and forms of worship. I encountered this misunderstanding quite frequently and had to constantly explain "the why" of my research. I was often faced with coproducers that found my research to be suspicious. Questions such as: "why are you interested in this" ("this" meaning spirituality) were asked to me directly. People were also surprised that I was researching spirituality for a PhD thesis and thought it was not worthy of scholarly interrogation. The perception of some that my work is not "scholarly enough" is a factor I suspected I would encounter, however although it was expected, it still felt difficult to hear.

woman to bear other children for you. The responsibility of the Omu is divided as follows: 10% is dedicated to looking after women in the community. Another 10% caters to looking after the markets and places of commerce. 10% is reserved for the personal needs of the Omu, while the remaining 70% is reserved for all the spiritual obligations that protect the realm. The Omuship system predated colonial administration and has been dated back to 700 years ago. Esogbue, E (2016). *"A Short History of Omu: An Account of the Female Traditional Institution in Anioma"*. Carpphem communications press. Ibadan Nigeria

Triggers.

Some coproducers and intended coproducers whom I will describe as “real Christians” found my use of the term spirituality to be quite “triggering”. I found that for them the term “spirituality” connotes something opposite to religion and as such deviant. Because of the use of the term, some people decided not to be interviewed on the assumption that my work would expose them to conversations that were “ungodly”. For those that agreed to continue with the interview, some of them constantly reminded me that they are Christians and that they do not practice any form of traditional spirituality although they have knowledge of it. I also had people switch between the term spirituality and religion in the same sentence, with people feeling more comfortable with the term religion as opposed to spirituality. For my coproducers that found the term “spirituality” uncomfortable, the understanding was that spirituality meant something “ungodly”, informal and “unchristian”. They felt more comfortable with the term “religion” as it is more familiar and is associated with Christianity. After a few interviews I also found myself switching between the terms “spirituality” and “religion” to make my coproducers comfortable and to avoid the awkwardness that the term spirituality seemed to conjure.

Another trigger I encountered revolved around one of my interview questions. Question five in my interview questionnaire, reads as follows: “Do you identify as female”? This question did not only become a trigger but caused some degree of confusion to most of my coproducers. People found the question disingenuous and problematic. “Someone does not identify as anything... they just are”, was the general feedback I received from that question. Conversations concerning gender in southeastern Nigeria are still binary in its framing, acceptance and conceptualization. I ultimately had to remove it from my questionnaire as the use of the term “identify as...” is not how people communicate in that region of Nigeria and in many other parts of the country.

Suprises, and Blind Spots.

Probably one of the biggest surprises I encountered in my work is the fact that my research title was believed to reflect my lack of knowledge on the subject matter of Odinani. The title of my thesis which originally was “*Mainstreaming the Mystic: Gendered power through rituals In Igbo Nigeria*” is believed to be misleading. The fact that I constructed my title with the idea that “the mystic” in this case Igbo could be mainstreamed, exposed my naivete about Igbo spirituality/Odinani. Igbo spirituality cannot be mainstreamed. Its purpose and utility are not to be mainstreamed. It is solely reserved for Igbo people (regardless of geographical location) and does not lend itself to exposure to non-Igbo indigenes. To “mainstream” it means to divorce it from its power which is intricately tied to its secrecy. This fact also invalidated one of my key research questions about how Odinani could be used in places beyond Igbo land and how it can be utilized to enact power among other colonized people. This knowledge was quite a disappointment; however, it highlights just how different value systems operate. With this new knowledge, I am convinced that I must change the title of my research to reflect the knowledge that I have gained during my field work.

In the west, (US, Canada, England etc.), there is an obsession to “bring things to light” to be “obvious” “seen”. The west likes to make a spectacle of everything. However, for Odinani, the power of spirituality resides in the mysterious, the hidden, and the hard to explain. The idea that Odinani is understood as mysterious and as such should not be “obvious”, brings into conversations questions about why and how cultures should be protected. Who should have access to said culture. How said culture should be disseminated and most importantly for what cause.

The second surprise I encountered while conducting field work is related to the specific way I designed my research. In the research design, my initial “entry way” to analyzing Igbo spirituality

was by analyzing two specific modes of Igbo spirituality namely *Itu Aja* and *Igba Afa*. While conducting research, I discovered that my framing of the two spiritual practices as independent from each other is problematic. *Itu Aja* and *Igba Afa* cannot be understood separately, they are performed together and simultaneously. For example, you cannot perform *Igba Afa* to “see” the cause of an illness, without performing *Itu Aja* to render sacrifices that will cure said illness. My binary and restrictive framing of both spiritual rituals exposed my rigid understanding of the nature of Odinani, particularly in how Igbo cosmology always works in cohesion and complementarity. This connection between *Iju Aja* and *Igba Afa* is better understood in chapters (5 and 6), where I analyze the data from the interviews I conducted.

Another surprise/blind spot I encountered was the long-standing conflict between Igbo people and Anioma people. I categorize this as a blind spot because as a child growing up in Nigeria, I was aware of the contentious relationship between the two groups of Igbo people however, I did not expect it to come up in the way that it did in my research. The Anioma people are a sub-set of the Igbo ethnic cluster of modern Nigeria. The term “Anioma” has not always been used to refer to the land and people of the area. It is a new term deployed for the first time around 1976 where questions about their identity became contentious²⁷. My noticeable inclusion of the term “Igbo”

²⁷ The term “Anioma” is of Igbo origin. The people of Anioma occupy current day Delta State Nigeria. They are believed to be of diverse origins and speak various of Igbo dialects. The historical antecedents of the Anioma will show that the people and their respective cultures have come from a variety of sources. This encounter with other ethnic groups has created a multitude of influences from the Edo, Igbo, and Igal. Though predominantly Igbo-speaking, they were geographically on the Nigerian side during the Biafran civil war from 1967-1970). The fact that the Anioma were on the “opposite” side of the war, meaning that they were on the side of Nigeria and not Biafra as

people in my thesis title, and research questions, meant that I had inadvertently excluded Anioma people from my work. A few of the people I approached to be interviewed felt excluded and declined my request. They insist that they identify only as Anioma, and that it is an identity separate and unique from any other Igbo ethnic group and must be recognized as such. Let me quickly add that this position is controversial and not shared by most Anioma people of Delta state. I ultimately had to change my approach by separating Anioma from Igbo to accommodate all people of Igbo origin.

Confronting Biases.

Bias is a central part of the human fabric and because of its centrality to how humans interact with the world and each other, it cannot simply be understood as a “good” or “bad” phenomenon. Understanding research bias is important for several reasons. First, bias exists in all research, across research designs and is difficult to eliminate. Second, bias can occur at each stage of the research process; third, bias impacts on the validity and reliability of research findings and misinterpretation of data can have important consequences for practice. While conducting research I realized that as the principal investigator I had my own bias/baggage that “showed up” before and after fieldwork. While interacting with my coproducers, I realized that they also “showed up” with their own biases that made some of our interactions awkward, pleasant, and sometimes hostile.

other Igbos has been attributed as a reason for the contention between them. Nwaokocha, O. A. (2015). An Interrogation of the Anioma Identity. *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 24(1):14–36.

According to Schulz-Hardt, et. al (2021), “Confirmation bias in social science research consists of the tendency of individuals to judge new information in a way consistent with their preexisting ideas or convictions” (p:560). Put simply, it means that while doing research there is a tendency to prefer supporting information rather than conflicting information and tend to overlook or disregard information that does not fit into the worldview of the principal investigator. In my earlier interviews, I found myself struggling to overcome my confirmation bias. On some occasions the answers provided by my coproducers seemed “wrong” to me and I found myself struggling to accept their account of a particular issue. For example, when a coproducer attributes Odinani as diabolic, or when they disagree with the connections between the colonial encounter and the diminished status of Igbo women. I would ask them follow up questions to make sure they understood the question. In the moment I did not realize I was doing this, until I listened to the recording after the interview. Overcoming this bias required that I learned to respectfully accept the accounts of my coproducers and recognize them as knowledge producers. Ultimately, confirmation bias undermines critical thinking and works against creativity and open mindedness in research.

On the part of my coproducers, I experienced their bias against me mostly through the questions they would ask me. Many of my coproducers were interested in what my spiritual/religious beliefs are. I found that this curiosity about my spiritual/religious beliefs used to determine how much they could tell me, if I would judge them and what my background is. While for others this interest in my spiritual life had more to do with undermining my place as the principal investigator. I was asked questions about my father and his own spiritual/religious practices and why I was doing this work. Some of my coproducers were concerned about how they would appear in my research. Others were worried about my impression of them. A few of them wanted to know my opinion

about Christians, while others asked me if I thought they were evil. Throughout the field work phase, I continuously had to “battle” with my Christian faith which sometimes made me feel like a fraud, with “one leg” in Odinani and the other in Christianity.

Insider Outsider Status.

Conducting research in “my community” revealed several unique challenges, and opportunities. In social science research, the concept of insider outsider positionality refers to the researcher's relationship to the community or subject being studied. According to Merriam et al. (2001), “an ‘insider’ shares characteristics, experiences, or membership with the study group, while an ‘outsider’ does not” (Ibid:407). This dichotomy, between “insider” vs. “outsider”, is not fixed as researchers often have to navigate a continuum between these positionalities. As an “insider” conducting research in my community, factors such as my Igbo identity, my knowledge of the language, culture, and landscape worked in my favor. Access to my coproducers was relatively straightforward as the factors identified above presented me as a sister, daughter and friend. I leveraged my identity as an Igbo woman to gain believability and build trust between myself and my coproducers. In addition, because of my “insider” positionality, I was able to connect to their realities, ask personal questions, and be direct with them without having my motives or presence questioned. I was invited freely to homes, was spoken to fondly, was offered more information than requested, and was asked personal questions. I fully embraced the position of an “insider” and was treated and such.

On the other hand, my identity as an “outsider” presented me with challenges that I had to overcome in the research process. My “outsider” identity was legitimized by the following factors. I am an Igbo woman who has not lived in *Ala Igbo*/Igbo land for a long time, whose current location is in the west, and who visits Igbo land for a limited amount of time like a “visitor”. These

diverse realities complicate my Igbo identity and position me as an outsider to some of my coproducers. In addition, I find that I inadvertently internalized my outsider positionality because of my connection to the west. During some of my interviews, I failed to speak up for myself the few times my Igbo identity was questioned. Some coproducers implied that because I no longer live in Igbo land (and I live so far away), I can no longer fully understand the culture and the people. To them, the fact that I am of Igbo background is mostly cosmetic as my Igbo identity is not a factor in my everyday life.

The dichotomy that exists in the insider outsider positionality is one that must be recognized and critically examined and that reflecting on one's positionality is crucial, especially in the context of decolonizing research methodologies. My switch between “insider” and “outsider” meant that although I was seen as an “insider” by some, that “insider” position was “fragile” as I had to be open to being perceived as an outsider. I had to be constantly mindful that my connection to the west positioned me as somewhat “different” from my people, and that assumed “difference”, solidified my outsider position. This tension between insider and outsider increased the need for me to operate with epistemic humility as although my Igbo identity gave me access, my connection to the west complicated my identity and that access.

2.35 After Field Work: Transcribing Data, Artificial Intelligence and its Challenges.

The enormous responsibility of retelling the stories of Igbo women and their knowledge of spirituality, power and status is one I take very seriously. The task of transcribing, analyzing and interpreting these stories as accurately as they were told is a great responsibility and privilege, I do not take it for granted. To begin the process of transcribing my interviews, I was advised to use qualitative software to make the process of transcribing easier, faster and more efficient. Several qualitative software options were recommended to me including MaxQDA, NVivo, ATLAS.ti,

and Quirkos. The most popular of the four software options is NVivo which is a qualitative data software used to analyze data (written and audio) from across a diverse range of fields particularly in social sciences. I spent a few hours watching YouTube videos and found the process of using NVivo to be quite cumbersome. I wanted something simpler and faster and decided to explore the Artificial Intelligence route.

Otter.ai was recommended to me because of its ability to develop speech to text transcripts using AI and machine learning technology. The idea was quite exciting, and I decided to give it a try. I paid for the monthly subscription of \$19.99 and started to use it to transcribe my audio interviews to generate a transcript. Unfortunately, it did not go as planned because Otter.ai, although quite efficient, could not transcribe my interviews coherently. In most of my interviews, my coproducers speak a wide variety of Igbo dialects, English language with Igbo accent, and Nigerian pidgin English, which is generally combined with innuendos, proverbs, and the occasional singing, etc. The AI software could not capture the interviews accurately. For the few interviews that were done entirely in English language, I still found that the transcript was not accurate and could not be used. The biggest disappointment of using AI to transcribe (particularly Otter.ai) was the inability of the software to allow me to share (whether through download or copy option) the transcript thereby making it impossible to upload the transcribed data to my personal files. With mind boggling advancements in technology especially in the AI space,²⁸ I found the fact that a high-tech software like Otter.ai could not transcribe Igbo language quite surprising. Otter.ai only supports the English US, Canada and UK version as of July 2024. Even Google Translate which is very widely used does not support any Nigerian languages or any languages from Sub Saharan countries. This opens

²⁸ AI continues to make incredible advancements in games, robotics, medical diagnosis, logistics systems, language processing, autonomous driving, language translation, and interactive personal assistance and every other field imaginable

conversations related to the dominance of English language, the monopoly of the west and the “othering” of other languages from the margins.

For the reasons identified above, I decided to transcribe, analyze, code, and tag my interviews the “old school way” by painstakingly listening to my interviews and writing them down “word for word”. I used a 200-page notebook and divided it into two of 100 pages each. The first 100 pages were allocated for the interviews with my coproducers between the ages of 21 and 40, while the other 100 pages are reserved for my “older” coproducers (41 years old and beyond). I color coded the identified codes, and allocated names to the themes that emerged. The coding process allowed me to appreciate the frequency in occurrence of certain themes which ultimately assisted me in generating findings. While transcribing the interviews, I simultaneously analyzed, interpreted, coded, and generated six themes from my interviews. Although it was challenging and time consuming, I found it to be a very rewarding exercise that allowed me to recollect my interviews and listen to them more intently while discovering missed meanings and deeper contexts.

2.4 Final Thoughts on Methodology.

“Feminism and feminist research have been at the forefront of challenging the silencing of women’s voices in society by confronting the narrow natured kind of science, which cast women in passive and subordinate roles and excluded them from scientific practices by virtue of them being ‘emotional’ and hence incapable of ‘reason’” (Burns and Walker, 2005: 66). The “journey of field work” is paved with rewarding twists and turns. An account of my “why” and its connection to my positionality, outlines the importance of this work and its role as a counternarrative to discourses pertaining to gender power. The task of conducting decolonial research requires that my coproducers feel valued, prioritized and understood throughout the

interview process. Because the nature of my interview questions is sensitive, the responsibility of ensuring that I don't make them feel judged was a skill I had to perfect. On some occasions I had to "bite my tongue" when a coproducer responded to questions with a disrespectful answer about women. Learning how to "bracket my bias" ²⁹ became the utmost task as I had to constantly remind myself that my role as a principal investigator is not to judge, or to direct or dictate. My role is to listen carefully and respectfully and trust in the knowledge my coproducers have so generously shared with me.

2.5 Data Analysis.

Ndewo, greetings in my (Igbo) language.

The data collected from my coproducers reveal many important discourses associated with the nature of Igbo gendered power and its connections to spirituality. The interviews conducted regarding gendered power, its connections to spirituality and the implication of colonization, is instrumental in answering my research questions which centers around the ways in which Igbo West African gendered power through spirituality is problematized, constructed, and sustained. In addition, the narratives from my coproducers are useful in helping me unpack how other forms of

²⁹ In Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, he describes bracketing as refraining from judgment or staying away from the everyday, commonplace way of seeing things. Creswell, (2003), also identifies bracketing as a way in which the researcher can separate his or her own experiences from what is being studied. In practice, it involves opening one's mind and changing one's perspective and is a state that one crafts actively. Vagle, M. D. (2014). *Crafting Phenomenological Research*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

power that depart from the dominant Western conceptualizations can be included in mainstream discourses regarding power. The reclaiming of “lost” gendered spiritual rituals and practices, is also a topic of much interest as discourses about how this could be achieved is quite central in my research.

While conducting interviews for my research, I developed a critical understanding of how Odinani and gendered power in contemporary Igbo societies is constructed. This deliberate engagement with my subject interest led me to identify the following themes:

1. *Construction of Igbo gendered power through spirituality*- This first theme provides an account of how gendered spirituality is constructed and negotiated in precolonial vs contemporary Igbo communities. This is achieved through her “essence”, her blood, her naked body, her ability to create, her pronouncements and through nature.
2. *Dualistic fluidity*- This is a concept that I developed that helps to explain the complex and separate practice of Christianity and Odinani by women, without conflict. This form of fluidity yet dualism, serves as a coping mechanism, and a form of “insurance” for Igbo women, that helps them retain their connections to their ancestors while responding to the demands of “modernity”.
3. *Loss of spiritual connections*- This theme identifies the effects of the colonial erasure on the practice, perception and application of gendered Igbo spirituality in contemporary Igbo society.
4. *Colonial Denial*- This is another concept I created to problematize the denial of the effects of colonization on Igbo consciousness (coloniality of knowledge) and Igbo ways of being (coloniality of being). It addresses the ways in which the denial of colonization is associated with the sustained “inferiorization” of the status and roles of Igbo women in their culture.

5. *Odinani tainted by Capitalism*- This theme investigates the contemporary use and misuse of Odinani through the rise of “online” prophetesses/*Ezenwanyi*³⁰, by exploring how these prophetesses monetize Igbo spirituality.

6. *Odinani masking as Christianity*- This sixth theme explores the rise of modern day churches and their techniques that somewhat mirror many Odinani practices.

In accordance with the objectives of my research, I focus on the 4 themes (1,2,3 and 4) which respond to the main questions I am concerned with. An analysis of these four themes will allow for a closer interrogation of the nature of gendered power through Odinani in contemporary Igbo society. It will also provide an appreciation of the imposition of colonization on the status of Igbo women today. Themes 5 and 6 are important themes that also emerged from this work but will be taken up in future research as they do not directly attend to the focus on my research at this time.

While conducting interviews, questions related to the presence and utility of gendered power are met with mixed reactions. The nature in which power is perceived in Igbo communities is generally based on masculinist, Euro-American ideals. I should quickly add that a few coproducers articulated their understanding of gendered power to be less masculinist but rather more abstract. Some of my coproducers articulated their belief and understanding of gendered power as being associated with knowledge, particularly in how knowledge can influence others. The introduction of spirituality to the discourse on gendered power also generated some pause. For some of my coproducers, spirituality is believed to be a viable way in which Igbo women accessed and access unique forms of power. Some others have the opposite view and insist that spirituality does not possess the kind of “power” that could be instrumentalized “positively” particularly in Igbo society

³⁰ Igbo prophetesses

today. This set of coproducers, strongly attribute the occult, witchcraft, Mami Wata to gendered spirituality, and argue that such powers can only serve “diabolical” purposes. The last set of coproducers do not believe that Igbo women (then or now), have any form of power. They also cannot “see” how spirituality could be connected to gendered power, as their understanding of power (gendered or not) is constructed in the lens of physical strength, control, dominance, influence, authority, superiority, and many other ways in which “maleness” and “masculinity” is constructed.

For this research, chapters four, five and six (which are the chapters dedicated to data analysis) will be divided as follows. Chapter four will analyze the construction of Igbo gendered spirituality which unpacks my findings related to the nature in which gendered spirituality was performed in precolonial Igbo communities while comparing it with what is in practice “today”. Chapter five analyzes gendered spiritual power using the concept of dualistic fluidity to problematize how Igbo women continue to “adjust” to the demands of modernity while balancing their connections to their culture and ancestors. My engagement with the concept of dualistic fluidity provides an account of complexity that exists between Odinani and Christianity (Catholicism and Pentecostalism), to show how Igbo women practice both belief systems separately without conflict and how some spiritual and religious beliefs are not so easily combined. Chapter six analyzes two separate themes namely *“Loss of Spiritual Connections”* and *“Colonial Denial”*. The first category of chapter seven will address the effects of colonization on gendered spirituality and its connection with environmental degradation, capitalism, greed and crime. Some of my coproducers accuse the “forgiving Christ” of being responsible for an increase in crime and the overall “moral decay” of contemporary Igbo society. They attribute the “get rich culture” to Christianity especially Pentecostalism and accuse Christianity of being “too soft” on bad behavior, thus making crime too

“easy” to commit. They also attribute Christianity to being responsible for women losing their unique role in the community especially through the erasure of certain spiritual rituals that gave them the role of healer, visionary and “medicine”. The second category of chapter six is analyzed using the concept labelled Colonial *Denial*. This chapter investigates how Igbo women exhibit some form of denial when it comes to the question of colonization and its effects on spirituality. This form of denial is associated with the colonality of being and the colonality of knowledge in how the discourse of Igbo spirituality is operationalized in contemporary Igbo land. This presence of colonial denial shows up in how the question of gendered power, spirituality, and religion is framed and perceived particularly in how some Igbo women demean their history and connections to their ancestors. Like chapter five, chapter six also exposes the complexity and contradictions experienced by Igbo women and their relationship with gendered spiritual power. It engages in important conversations about how meaning is made, the source of said meanings and the techniques used to sustain specific types of meanings.

GENDER SPIRITUALITY AND POWER IN PRECOLONIAL NIGERIAN IGBO

COMMUNITY AND DISCOURSES OF POSTCOLONIAL RESIDUES

The white man told of another country beyond the sea where a powerful woman sat on a throne while men and women danced under the shadow of her authority and benevolence. She was ready to spread the shadow to cover the Agikuyu. They laughed at this eccentric man whose skin had been so scalded that the black outside had peeled off. The hot water must have gone into his head. Nevertheless, his words about a woman on the throne echoed something in the heart, deep down in their history. It was many, many years ago. Then women ruled the land of the Agikuyu. Men had no property; they were only there to serve the whims and needs of the women — *wa Thiong'o, A Grain of Wheat*.

This chapter starts off with a brief geo social/cultural scope of Igbo society to situate the physical and ideological location of this research. The geo social scope of this chapter identifies the uniqueness, differences, and similarities between the two Igbo speaking locations of Nigeria which are found in the southeastern and south-south (Anioma) regions of Nigeria. Most significant to this chapter is an analysis of the concept of gendered power in precolonial and colonial Igbo society, emphasizing the diverse ways in which Igbo women exercised authority. The literature highlights the economic, political, and psychological strategies employed by women, to advance their status and position in the society. Some of these strategies involve nontraditional resistance tactics like boycotts and rituals that continue to be used as a unique mode of negotiating gendered power. A significant focus on spiritual power, where female deities like *Idemili* and *Adoro*, as well as priestesses and diviners, played central roles in governance, protection, and moral authority and served as an important way for Igbo women to exercise their spiritual agency. Finally, the chapter ends with an important analysis on the advent of Christianity in colonial Igbo society and connects Christian doctrine to postcolonial discourse of gendered respectability. This connection is evident

in contemporary Igbo society through the continuous and sustained promotion of several Christian and Eurocentric ideals that serve to morally police Igbo women. This moral policing ultimately seeks to create a “new” brand of womanhood, morality, and femininity that significantly limits Igbos women’s spiritual agency and heritage.

3.0 Geo-Cultural Scope of Study: Southeast Igbos and Anioma Igbos.

Southeast Igbos.

Since my coproducers are from diverse groups of Igbo people, I will provide a geo-cultural scope of the Igbos in the southeastern region, and the Anioma Igbo’s who are in the south-south geopolitical region of Nigeria. The Igbos of southeastern Nigeria is one of the three largest ethnic groups in the country, the others being the Hausa in the north and the Yoruba in the southwest. The Igbos are predominantly Christians, majority of which are Catholics. The Igboland is in the north of the Delta swamplands and covers a land area of about 15,800 square miles (Ibewuiké 2006). They are the most migratory group in the country and can be found all over the world. The current census pegs the Igbos as numbering seventy- two million (Iwunna, et.al, 2021), however there are several debates that that number is higher. In present day political distribution, the Igbos inhabit the Anambra, Imo, Abia, Ebonyi, and Enugu States east of the River Niger and a sizable part of the Delta, Bayelsa, and Rivers States west of the Niger Delta.

Igboland is bordered to the north by the Kogi and Benue States, to the south by the Rivers and Akwa Ibom States, to the east by the Cross River State, and to the west by Edo State. The population of Igbo people in Nigeria is believed to exceed 30 million people (Umezurike, 2019)

which is estimated to 23.5% of the total population of people in Nigeria.³¹ Igboland is in the rain forest and freshwater swamp regions of southern Nigeria, with rivers such as the Niger, Anambra, Imo and Kwa Iboe, running through the land and emptying into the Atlantic Ocean. While the main occupations of these people are farming, fishing, and trading, the thick forest produces mahogany and other kinds of wood that are valuable occupational resources for carving canoes and furniture (Ibewuike 2006). The Igbo differ to a large degree in their traditions of origin and migration. These traditions vary from one group to another. Although all the groups speak the Igbo language, they also have various linguistic dissimilarities between neighboring towns and villages. Furthermore, there are a lot of dialectical differences. For example, the Igbo dialects among Igbos from the southeast, and south north, are substantially different from the Anioma people who are the Igbos that make up the south-south geopolitical region of Nigeria.

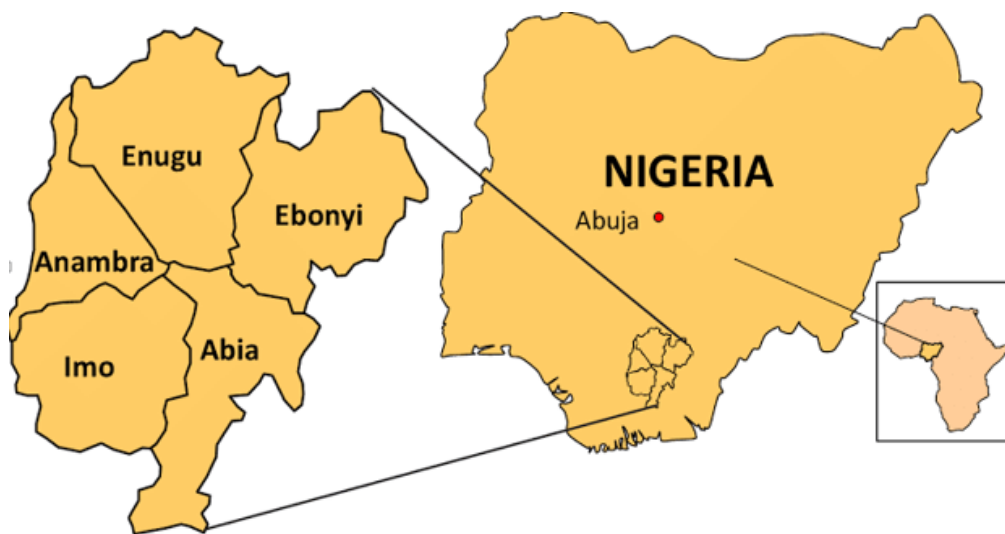


Figure 1.1- Map of Nigeria showing Igboland

³¹ There is a debate about the population of Igbo people in Nigeria. It is believed that census documents are over politicized in Nigeria, and to get an “accurate” number of Igbo’s is very difficult.

3.01 Anioma: Igbos from South-South Nigeria.

Anioma encompasses all the Igbo-speaking communities in Delta State. In various Anioma Igbo dialects, the concept of '*oma*' or '*nma*' stands for good or beauty, therefore the term 'Anioma' stands for good or beautiful land', as the general Igbo word for land is '*ani*'. Anioma therefore means 'good land' in Igbo language Okoh (2020) and Nwaokocha, (2015). The Anioma people comprise a series of towns and communities currently located in Delta State, Nigeria. Anioma became part of Delta state and got tagged 'Delta Igbo' to differentiate them. This differentiation is important because most of the population of Delta State is not from the Igbo culture.³² The great majority of Anioma people speak basically three different dialects derived from the Igbo language and two other dialects of Yoruba and Igala. Broadly these are: *Enuani* (made up of *Oshimili* and *Aniocha*), *Ika* and *Ukwuani* or *Kwale* (consisting of *Ndi Oshimili* and *Ukwuani*), a Yoruba dialect called *Olukwumi* and the Igala dialect spoken in *Ebu*. However, it is safe to conclude that Igbo is the general language of the Anioma people. There are also Anioma people in neighboring states of Anambra that is Onitsha, *Ogbaru*, *Oba*, *Akwukwu*, *Obosi*, *Ozoubulu*, *Oraifite*; Imo that is *Oguta*; and River State that is *Ndoni* and *Ogba*.

³² To provide some context, for political reasons, the capital of Delta state is a town called Asaba, however most of the people from Delta state are from more dominant groups like the Urhobo. Asaba was made the capital by a military head of state whose wife (Maryam Babangida) was from Asaba.

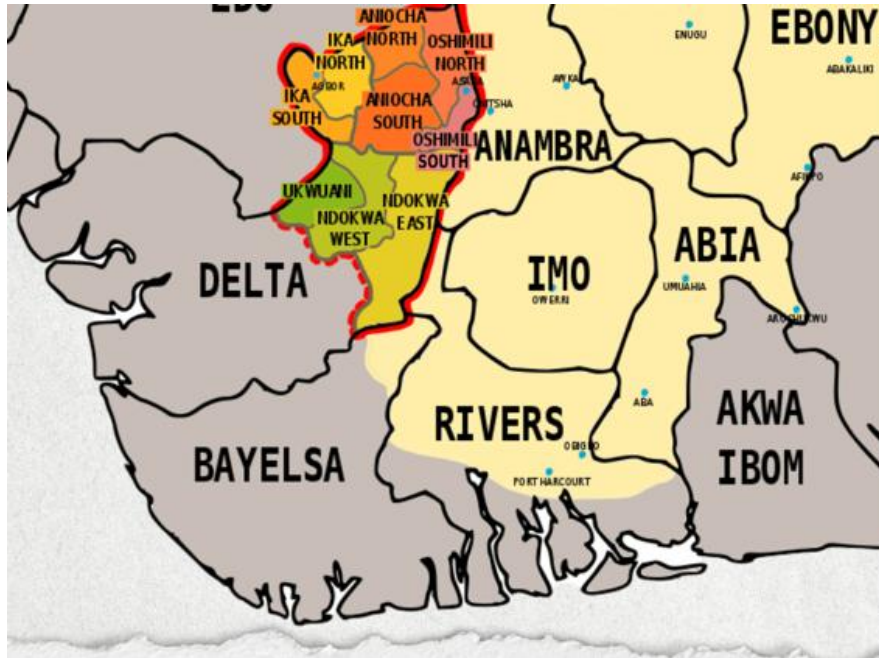


Figure 1.2- Map of Igboland situating Anioma communities and their local governments

Aniocha North, Oshimili North, Oshimili South, Ndokwa East, Ndokwa West, Ika North, Ika South and Ukwuani.

3.1 Gendered Power in Igbo Society

A critical look at the literature on gendered power in precolonial and colonial Nigeria, reveals several themes and modes of power that have come to be associated with how Igbo gendered power is framed and constructed. These modes of power speak to the multiplicity of Igbo traditional modalities of power, the fluidity of Igbo gender constructions, and the unique position women occupied in colonial Nigeria. Scholars like Chuku (2015; 2009, 2018), Ekejuba, (1967), Korieh, (2010; 2020) provide an analysis of Igbo gendered power through the attainment of economic gains. Other scholars like Amaechi (2018), Mbah (1982), Uchendu (2006), Nzegwu, (1995), Ekejuba (1967) trace Igbo gendered power by analyzing the role of women in positions of politics

as title holders, *Omu*'s,³³ *Umu Ada*,³⁴ Queen mothers, merchant Queens etc. Most of the scholars listed above including Amadiume, (1987; 2000), Achebe, (2005; 2011;2003), analyze the attainment of Igbo gendered power through a psychological analysis. A psychological analysis in this context means that Igbo women have been known to use nontraditional strategies intended to appeal to the conscience of the person they intend on influencing. Some of these strategies, including nudity, boycotts, laying curses, denying, or pausing sex to a romantic partner, refusing to carry out certain familial duties such as cooking etc., are also used as a form of power and resistance. The construction of Igbo gendered power through motherhood is accounted for by van-Allen (1997) and Achebe (2011), while Amadiume (1987), centers an analysis of Igbo gender power through their unique position as male husbands. For the purpose of this research, an exploration on the themes that highlight the spiritual modalities of Igbo gendered power will be emphasized. Some of these discourses speak to spiritual gendered power through the theme of females performing masculinities (Uchendu, 2006; Achebe, 2011; Mbah, 2017;), through the enactment of spiritual rituals by becoming goddesses, spiritual mediums and rain Queens, (Achebe, 2011; 2005; Amadiume, 1987, Kalu, 2003), through the occult and witchcraft (Atata, 2019; Chuks, and Makwudo; 2020), and through the avenue of magical female creatures like *Mami Wata* and other mythical creatures (Drewal, 2009; Badejo, 1998; Chuks, and Makwudo; 2020).

³³ *Omu* is the Igbo word for Queen, see Uchendu, E. (2006). Gender and Female Chieftaincy in *Anioma*, Nigeria. *Asian women (Seoul, Korea)*, 17–46.

³⁴ *Umu Ada* loosely means first daughters of a common male ancestor. “*Umu Ada* is a collective term for all first daughters and is formed from two Igbo words, *Umu* and *Ada*”. *Umu* means children, while *Ada* means first daughter/daughters of the soil. The *Umu Ada* women are responsible for administering widowhood rites, maintaining peace and order, ensuring female moral discipline, family dispute resolution, and sustainable development in Igbo society. See Amaechi, C. (2018). “Women and Development in Africa: Urbanization and the Role of *Umuada* in Igboland”, Southeastern Nigeria”. *Asian Women*. 34(1):85-107

According to Achebe, (2003) *Ezechitoke* (who is genderless and the creator of all things) is assisted by a pantheon of more accessible lesser gods and goddesses (for example *Adoro*) who are interdependent. To assess the application of gendered spirituality through spiritual mediums, Achebe profiles some of these “lesser gods” including the goddess *Adoro*. Goddess *Adoro* was a deified female “medicine”³⁵, that was created by women to protect against being taken into slavery and for success during intervillage wars. *Adoro* was a “mobile deity”³⁶ and had multiple roles as protector, nurturer, fertility goddess (human and crop), and goddess of moral conduct. At her peak, she was described as the “supreme court” (Ibid:57), making her “the most important and powerful legal instrument in all of northern Igbo society” (p:89). Female “medicines”, goddesses, priestesses, and diviners featured as political heads in Igbo precolonial communities, they were “placed at a position above all mortals” (Achebe, 2005:35) and enjoyed a central position in the decision-making process of the community. This measure of power that Achebe describes is what this research seeks to problematize. This body of work is interested in how this power that “placed them above all mortals” stacks up against several female discriminatory Igbo practices and cultures, most notable male preference, that existed and still exists), in precolonial Igbo communities.

Amadiume (1987), provides her own analysis of gendered power through spiritual rituals by profiling the goddess *Idemili* and insists that spirituality was an integral part of how women derived power in precolonial Igbo communities. Unlike *Adoro* which is a “land spirit”³⁷, *Idemili* is a water spirit³⁸, and was worshipped by the entire Igbo community of Nnobi. All idols worshipped,

³⁵ Medicine is put in double quotation marks to signal that this form of medicine is believed to be a living thing.

³⁶ Mobile deity means that the deity could be carried around. She (*Adoro*) was not constrained to her shrine like most deities.

³⁷ Land spirits derive their powers from the earth and all living beings that exist on land alone (Achebe, 2011).

³⁸ Water spirits are deities/divinities that are in or have their shrines/abodes close to a body of water. They are also a part of a body of mythical, magical creatures like mermaids and other fantastical sea bodies see Drewal (2009).

originated, and derived power from her” (p:99) and she was attributed as being responsible for Igbo women’s industriousness and prosperity. All titled women had to be worshipers of *Idemili* and through her supplication, other forms of power were derived. These derived powers ultimately gave women access to structural/formal power that was used in the attainment of economic and or political gains. The fact that *Idemili* is female, was worshiped by the entire community, and had supremacy over all other deities (Achebe 1987), ties into many African feminist arguments that support the dominance of matriarchal/matrifocal cultures in precolonial Igbo communities. Like Achebe, the absoluteness, dominance, and influence used to describe Igbo gendered spirituality, will need to be looked at critically. Some Igbo scholars (Uchendu, 2006) are critical of what they describe as a “selective reading” (Ikime, 1967:665) of Igbo gendered history and caution postcolonial feminist scholars to read Igbo history more critically. Could the desire by postcolonial feminist scholars to frame the dominance of female spiritual consciousness in precolonial Igbo society contribute to the way gendered spiritual power is framed? Does my need to be more critical in the way gendered power is framed expose my colonial sensitivity?

Amaduime (1987) adds that *Idemili* occupied several central functions as mother, nurturer, warrior, protector, and punisher, and was attributed as being responsible for Igbo women’s industriousness and prosperity. Her devotees believed that whatever she “touched” yielded multiple fruits/profits and through her supplication all crops increased, domestic animals reproduced prolifically, and wealth was assured. Her power stretched to include all women as all titled women³⁹ had to be worshipers of *Idemili* and through her supplication, other forms of power (political, economic etc.) were derived. Amadiume, further insists that all derived powers ultimately gave Igbo women

³⁹ The highest titled position precolonial Igbo women could occupy in Nnobi was the *Agbo Ekwe* title, this placed them at a central political position in town assemblies, it also gave them vetoing rights and authority at village general assemblies.

access to structural/formal power that was used in the attainment of economic and or political gains. She identifies that the attainment of economic and political power was done through the enactment of certain spiritual rituals. For example, she insists that it was the goddess *Idemili* who decided on who would attain gendered political titles (the *Agbo Ekwe* title) through spiritual possession. The attainment of said gendered political titles extended to economic gains as women who held this title had access to becoming female husbands, and as such, were women of considerable wealth and influence. Many stories also persist of how the goddess *Idemili* protected the people of Nnobi in the time of Nigerian-Biafran civil war (1967- 1970). It was believed that “through her protection Nnobi was neither invaded, evacuated, or occupied during the war (p:64). This protective element showed her ability to be not only a nurturer, but a formidable protector of her people.

At her peak the *Idemili*’s shrine was forbidden entry, to both men and women. No one could enter the shrine of *Idemili* except a “shrine priest”. A shrine priest could only be a “female man” (p:53) which Amadiume describes as a biologically born man who “transforms” into a woman by performing his duties in a “gendered fashion”. This “gendered fashion” included wearing his wrapper to cover his chest, (only women tie their wrapper over their chest in Igbo culture) as opposed to wearing it in a loincloth fashion which is generally how Igbo men tied their wrapper. Goddess *Idemili* also had a special day of obligation which was Sunday (which served as *Idemili* day) and on that day “there would be no oath taking, no fighting, no life-cycle ceremonies and no sexual intercourse” (p:54). Whoever was caught breaking any of these rules would have to perform a ritual of cleanliness to appease *Idemili* and the community. To this day, there remain many devotees of *Idemili* in contemporary Igbo communities who still “feed” her and break kola nut in supplication to her.

Like Amadiume, Achebe (2005; and 2003), identifies several modes of gendered spiritual power that precolonial and colonial women negotiated. Achebe insists that “African women have long played the superhuman role of savior, deliverer, protector and healer” (Achebe, 2005:68). Female diviners would combine divination work with healing practices to perform the task of mediating between the humans and spirits, interpreting the will of the gods and producing potent medicines. Achebe (2003) unpacks the practice of gendered spirituality by identifying and profiling several modalities of gendered spiritual power including goddess *Adoro*, *Nimu Kwame*, and goddess *Efuru*. She unpacks how gendered modalities of power through rituals were instrumental in how power was constructed and enacted.

The *Adoro* medicine goddess emerged in the late 19th century and was developed as a protective medicine to safeguard against slave traders and intertribal war. Goddess *Adoro* was a deified female “medicine”⁴⁰, who as a “mobile deity”⁴¹, had multiple roles as protector, nurturer, fertility goddess (human and crop), and goddess of moral conduct. At her peak, she was described as the “supreme court” (Achebe, 2003:57), making her “the most important and powerful legal instrument in all of northern Igbo society” (p:89). She was consulted to decide cases that were deemed too difficult for human justice, served as fertility doctor and the goddess of moral conduct. Female medicines, goddesses, priestesses, and diviners featured as political heads in Igbo precolonial communities and were “placed at a position above all mortals” (Achebe, 2005:35). During her life, the Nsukka people would elevate the *Adoro* from a “medicine goddess into a full blown universally respected and worshiped female deity who married wives and thus fulfilling the birthing responsibilities of a mother goddess” (Achebe, 2005: 56-58).

⁴⁰ Medicine is put in double quotation marks to signal that this form of medicine is believed to be a living thing.

⁴¹ Mobile deity means that the deity could be carried around. She (*Adoro*) was not constrained to her shrine like most deities.

Other goddesses profiled by Achebe include *Nimu Kwame*, who was a warrior goddess of *Obukpa*, the goddess of fertility, protection, and moral conduct. *Nimu Kwame*, who was a notable site of power in her community and was attributed for being responsible for successfully capturing land from rival communities by “sending her spirit” (Achebe 2005:68) to guide warriors on the battlefields. Like goddess *Adoro*, goddess *Efuru* also emerged in the mid late 19th century in times of great difficulty and was responsible for unveiling the mysteries that eluded human experience and reason. Goddess *Efuru* also fulfilled multiple medicinal and healing functions for the Nsukka people and was widely known as a goodness of ultimate healing. African female deities are also constructed in the realm of motherhood and givers of fertility by Mokwena (2004), Day (2020), Seguda (2015), Amadiume (1987), Achebe (2011), Nzegwu (1995), and many others. Day (2020) explains that the status of motherhood in African cosmology is embedded in African spirituality which she connects as being a contributing factor to the elevated status of African women. She further explains that the diverse spiritual roles of practice African women occupy as priestesses, healers, and secret cults such as the Zaar cults (Ethiopia, Somalia, Egypt, and Eritrea) and *Iya Mi*⁴² demonstrate the expansive ritual capacity African women possessed in precolonial communities.

For Amadiume and Achebe, they conclude that the fact that *Idemil*, *Adoro*, *Efuru* etc. are female deities that are revered and worshiped by the entire community, ties into many African feminist arguments that support the dominance of matriarchal/matrifocal cultures in precolonial Igbo communities. Amadiume (2000) insists that the flexible gender systems allowed for a neutral construction of male and female, which gave them the ability to share roles and status. She also strongly believes that the introduction of the rigid European gender system that was ushered in

⁴² *Iya* (Mother) *Mi* (Mine) translates to *My Mother*- is a cult prescribed only for women in the Yoruba culture of Nigeria.

through the colonial encroachment, which allows only for male or female, can be directly traced to the erasure of the power of gendered Igbo spirituality and by extension the status of Igbo women.

Esogbue (2016) analyses the question of Igbo gendered spiritual power through the functions, roles, and status of the *Omu*/Queen Mother. He posits that the *Omu* of Anioma constitutes the oracle which is significantly responsible for protecting the *Obi/Igwe*/King and the community. She, the *Omu*, is responsible for finding solutions to all “unnatural”/spiritual and metaphysical problems affecting the *Obi/King* and the realm. She has considerable influence by being the “ear” of the King in several matters and is responsible for imposing curses on anyone who exhibits attitudes (theft, adultery, murder etc.) that may result in the “social imbalance of the peace” (Ibid:27) in the community. Most important to Esogbue’s (2015) analysis is his assertion that an “*Omu* is an *Obi/Igwe* in status” (Ibid) and in some Anioma communities (*Ibusa, Okpanam, Asaba, and Illah*) the *Omu* is addressed as *Igwe/King*. Once installed, the *Omu* becomes a “man” and in some cases becomes an *Okpoho ka li okei*, (a woman greater than a man). In addition to some noticeable physical transformations including adopting the appearance of a man in how she dresses, she is also formerly greeted as a man by being called *Ogbuefi* which literally translate to mean “a person who kills a cow” (cows are seen as very strong and powerful and difficult to kill) however its figurative meaning implies a strong, reputable and respected person. It is not a common title for a woman regardless of her position; or affluence, however it is used as a form of greeting for an *Omu*. The *Omu* ultimately discards her husband’s or her father’s name, for a new more masculine name. However, her “power” is utilized mostly through her access to the ancestors and as such her connections to “other worlds”. Most interestingly when it is time to join her ancestors, “she is laid in state sitting down” (Esogbue, 2016:27) and eventually buried in a sitting position inside the local coffin the same way the *Obi/King* is buried.

Another important interpretation of gendered spiritual power through the *Omu* system is presented by Egodi Uchendu as she provides a critical read of the *Omu* Queenship system, and the spiritual practices involved in its configurations. She identifies that the *Omu* Queenship system, which is still in practice in many communities particularly among the Anioma⁴³ people, “functioned as a cult” (p:26), with the *Omu* generally viewed as a sorcerer/witch, diviner, prophet, and the spiritual conscience of the people. Most of the activities of the *Omu* revolved around rituals⁴⁴ to protect the paramount ruler⁴⁵ and the realm and was also known to accompany him to war in times of battle (Kaine, 1963). The spiritual power of the *Omu* also functioned through the advancement of commerce and trade as she was specifically responsible (through rituals), for ensuring the success of trade in the market which was mostly reserved for women.

Uchendu (2006) also provides a distinct and critical interpretation of the nature of power the *Omu* negotiated. She argues that the *Omu*’s lose their femininity for an acquired masculinity from the day of their coronation and that Queenship or female chieftaincy status was necessitated through the appropriation of masculine qualities. Some of these qualities include dressing like a man, leaving her upper body bare, having cropped hair, separation from her husband if married etc. Kaine (1963), argues that “Igbo women generally had little obvious functions before colonization and the fact that postcolonial African scholars point to female chieftaincy as proof of female power, is an exaggeration and misread of history” (Ibid:668). Uchendu (2006), however agrees that the decline/abandonment of gendered spiritual knowledge, acceptance, and practices, resulted in Igbo women losing their place and unique spiritual power, leaving them to “fight” for power that was mostly configured for Igbo men thereby causing disillusion and unnecessary rivalry between men

⁴³ The Anioma are the Igbo speaking people of Southern Nigeria.

⁴⁴ See Kaine, E., (1963)., *Ossomari: A Historical sketch*, London: Hazel Watson and Vine.

⁴⁵ Paramount ruler is used as opposed to king because the Igbos did not have a defined “king” but were governed by several chiefs (see Achebe, 2011).

and women. Mbah (2017) also agrees with the position provided by Uchendu, and he describes this interpretation of gendered power through performing masculinities as a “shifting notion of gendered power” (p:35), whereby for women to attain power, there had to be some level of female to male transformation which negated their feminine positionality. He also points to women becoming female husbands as an example of how gendered power was configured in precolonial communities and argues that there is no recorded case of a man becoming a male wife, and as such concludes that power is gendered as masculine in Igbo culture.

Other notable contributions to the question of gendered power are provided by scholars like (Drewal, 2009; Badejo, 1998; Chuks, and Makwudo; 2020). They unpack the composition of Igbo gendered spiritual power through the embodiment of mythical creatures. These scholars identify the connection between female sexuality and power through an exploration of the *Mami Wata/Nne Mmiri*⁴⁶/water mother who is a water spirit⁴⁷. The *Mami Wata* is often portrayed as a beautiful “fishlike”/ half fish half woman creature with a head and torso of a woman and the tail of a fish. She is described as beautiful, jealous, generous, healing, empowering, seductive and potentially deadly” (Drewal, 2012:78). Her devotees worship her because of her ability to bring good fortune, cure infertility and impotence, explain and prevent infant mortality, cure spiritual illness, and heal physical sickness. Most importantly she provides the spiritual and professional avenue for women to become powerful priestesses and healers thereby sustaining a community of women that are committed to her worship. This mode of mythical power speaks to the unique power of femininity and the connections between sexuality and gender power. It is argued that this form of mythical power negotiated by precolonial Igbo women was challenged (and remains challenged) due to

⁴⁶ Nne Mmiri is Igbo language for *Mami Wata- Nne* (Mother) *Mmiri* (Water).

⁴⁷ Water spirits are deities/divinities that are located or have their shrines/abodes close to a body of water- they are also a part of a body of mythical, magical spirit mermaids and other fantastical creatures. See Drewal (2009).

colonial mechanisms like Christianity. The introduction of Christianity served as a means to gain access to resources and territories, control social life, and ultimately disrupt gendered relations thereby creating new forms of patriarchy. The control of social life through Christianity also meant that a new kind of “woman” was created, a “new” idea of “womanhood”, and “femininity”, that prioritized European or Victorian standards of femininity. This “new femininity” served to place ascribed Christian values of respectability (particularly female respectability) and morality, on a pedestal, and used it as a benchmark to determine who is a “good respectable Christian woman,” and who is not.

3.4 Christianity in Colonial Igbo Communities and its Sustained Gendered Residue.

The introduction of Christianity in Igbo land beginning in the mid 19th century, coincided with broader colonial incursions that profoundly altered Igbo religious, political, and social landscapes. The first formal missionary contact with Igbo land began in 1857 with the arrival of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) at Onitsha. It was led by Reverend Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a Yoruba ex-slave and bishop, and Reverend John Christopher Taylor, an Igbo ex-slave and catechist, (Isichei, 1976). Christian expansion in Igbo land was inseparable from British colonialism as the colonial government and missionary societies often cooperated, with missionaries providing education and moral instruction in exchange for political protection and land grants (Falola, 1998; Nwadiakor and Obiakor, 2015; Ekechi, 1971).

According to Alokwa and Egwuonwu, (2024), the advent of Christianity in colonial Igbo communities of Nigeria, was not a benign spiritual project but an integral part of the broader colonial “civilizing” mission. Through the work of missionaries and colonial administrators, Christianity imposed Eurocentric ideals of gender, sexuality, spirituality and morality upon precolonial Igbo social structures. While these interventions were framed as “progress”,

Amadiume (1987), and Oyěwùmí (1997 and 2021), insist that they disrupted relatively flexible and complementary indigenous gender systems, replacing them with hierarchies of gendered respectability that persist to this day. When European Christian missionaries arrived in Igbo land, they viewed indigenous gender and sexual practices as barbaric, immoral and evil, (Basden, 1921; Talbot, 1926). The goal of the colonialist was not simply to convert individuals to Christianity, but to reconstruct Igbo society along Victorian patriarchal lines (Mba, 1982). Central to this project was the imposition of gendered respectability, which is a system of values that dictated how women (and to a lesser extent men) should behave to be seen as morally worthy (Skeggs, 1997; Higginbotham, 1993). According to Dorothy Roberts (2015) “gendered respectability is not simply a set of personal values; it is a political tool of social governance and exclusion. It constructs hierarchies of moral worth based on compliance with dominant gender, sexual, racial, and class norms” (Ibid: 205). She further argues that those who do not or cannot conform for example, unmarried women, queer people, sex workers, or women in male-dominated public roles are often marked as “unrespectable” and subjected to stigma, surveillance, and marginalization.

In precolonial Igbo society, gender relations were governed by dual-sex political and social systems, where women and men operated in parallel domains of authority (Okonjo, 1976; Nzegwu, 2006; Oyěwùmí, 2021). Women participated actively in governance through assemblies such as the *Umuada* (daughters of the lineage) and controlled significant religious and economic spaces as priestesses, diviners, and market leaders (Amadiume, 1987). These systems allowed for multiple gender identities beyond rigid male/female binaries, including roles such as female husbands. In addition, sexuality and marital practices were governed by communal pragmatism rather than strict moral codes and arrangements like polygamy, levirate marriage (widow inheritance), and consensual unions reflected social needs rather than moral policing. These practices emphasized

kinship continuity, social stability, and collective welfare over individual chastity or nuclear family ideals (Ebo, 2022). The imposition of Victorian Christian norms later pathologized these practices, branding them as immoral and backward, thus erasing the cultural logic that sustained them.

At the core of this moral regime was the elevation of monogamous, heterosexual marriage as the only legitimate form of sexual and social union (Mothoagae and Shingange, 2024). “Christian missionaries actively sought to dismantle indigenous marriage practices such as polygamy and widow inheritance, elevating monogamous, heterosexual marriage as the only morally and socially acceptable union. This imposition was part of a broader civilizing mission that sought to “regulate African sexuality according to Victorian Christian norms: (Okoro, 2021:185). This need to regulate was not merely about personal faith, but about disciplining sexuality, particularly female sexuality, within narrowly defined moral boundaries (Oyěwùmí, 2021). Sexual purity and virginity before marriage were promoted as essential markers of female virtue, with church teachings and Christian auxiliary groups such as the Mothers’ Union, actively policing young women’s behavior (Matera, 2010). In doing so, Christianity introduced a moral hierarchy that positioned women’s sexual self-regulation as a primary criterion of respectability, a logic vastly different from indigenous systems where female sexuality was more communally managed and less stigmatized (Amadiume, 1987).

Equally significant was the redefinition of women’s social roles through an ideal of domesticity and submissiveness. "Missionary and colonial efforts to mold African women into respectable, domestic wives and mothers were part of a larger ideological project to assert colonial authority through the reordering of African social life" (Allman and Tashjian, 2000:20). According to Mianda (2002), missionary and colonial interventions across Africa promoted domesticity as a core aspect of respectable womanhood, redefining African women’s roles in ways that supported

patriarchal and colonial objectives. Missionaries constructed an image of the “Christian wife” whose proper place was in the home, devoted to her husband, children, and religious duties (Oyèwùmí, 1997). This ideology sharply contrasted with precolonial Igbo realities where women actively engaged in market economies, political assemblies, and religious leadership (Okonjo, 1976). By promoting domesticity, the Christian respectability regime sought to contain women’s ambitions and mobility, aligning gender norms with Victorian patriarchal values rather than indigenous models of gender complementarity (Skeggs, 1997). Modesty in dress and comportment both in colonial and postcolonial Igbo community, became another visible marker of moral worth. Missionary discourses condemned indigenous styles of adornment such as body painting, tattoos, elaborate hairstyles, and festival attire, as immoral or heathen (Mba, 1982). Women were encouraged to adopt Western-style clothing, with an emphasis on covering the body and projecting humility and sexual restraint. According to Skeggs (1997), these aesthetic codes were not merely superficial; they functioned as disciplinary practices that inscribed Christian gender norms onto women’s bodies, making them legible as “respectable” or “unrespectable” in both religious and colonial public spheres. It is important to note that these interventions did not disappear with the attainment of flag independence, rather the gendered residue of Christian morality and respectability continues to shape postcolonial Igbo social life constraining women’s agency, sexuality, spirituality and public presence in the contemporary era.

While colonial rule has formally ended in Nigeria, the gendered residues of Christian encroachment continue to pervade Igbo spiritual life, shaping contemporary attitudes toward indigenous spiritual practices, gender roles, and the legitimacy of women’s agency and leadership. The Christianization of Igbo land during colonialism involved a systematic campaign to delegitimize indigenous spirituality, which was framed as demonic, superstitious, and backward

(Isichei, 1976; Lindsay, 2003). In postcolonial Igbo land, women who engage in traditional healing, divination, goddess and ancestor worship, are often labeled as witches, evil and diabolical (Dube, 2012; Semley, 2011; Okonkwo et. al, 2021; Gastrow, 2017), and this stigma reflects the colonial Christian coding of female indigenous spirituality as dangerous and unrespectable. In addition, the rise of Pentecostal Christianity in postcolonial Igbo society intensified gendered spiritual policing (Gastrow, 2017). Pentecostalism insists on a strict dichotomy between Christianity and “paganism”, portraying traditional spiritual practices, especially those involving women, as demonic (Ibid). Pentecostal churches emphasize male spiritual headship, positioning women as submissive spiritual followers whose primary religious role is to uphold family morality and support their husbands’ leadership (Marshall, 2009; Okeke-Ihejirika, 2004). Female spiritual authority outside the church structure is discouraged, and women who maintain ties to ancestral religious practices risk social ostracism.

Igbo women’s spiritual expression in postcolonial Igbo society remains heavily regulated by gendered moral codes rooted in colonial Christianity. Modest dress, sexual restraint, and domestic submission are constructed as markers of “Christian respectability” (Skeggs, 1997). Women who transgress these norms, by engaging in public ritual performances, and asserting spiritual authority, are subject to moral surveillance and stigma (Semley, 2011; Gastrow, 2017). As Oyěwùmí (1997) argues, “such gendered moral frameworks reflect a Western ontology of gender hierarchy that was imposed through colonial Christianity but is now internalized in postcolonial spiritual life. The result is a spiritual landscape in which women’s full religious agency is systematically curtailed, both within Christian institutions and in the indigenous spiritual spaces (Oyěwùmí, 1997:75).

The expansion of Christianity in Igbo land was a multifaceted process shaped by missionary strategies, colonial structures, and complex indigenous responses. It brought about profound

transformations in social organization, and religious life, and contributed to cultural dislocation and historical trauma. The gendered postcolonial residue of Christianity in Igbo land continues to shape spiritual life in ways that marginalize female spiritual agency and constrain indigenous spiritual pluralism and agency. The colonial Christian assault on Igbo spirituality was deeply gendered, targeting women's ritual power and public spiritual roles. Today, this legacy endures through the moral policing of women's spirituality, the masculinization of Igbo spiritual leadership, and the Pentecostal demonization of indigenous religious practices. Reclaiming the gendered essence of Igbo spirituality thus requires feminist and decolonial interventions that reclaim and celebrate gendered spiritual complexity, agency and choice. By confronting these colonial gendered residues in postcolonial Igbo communities, we will be able to move toward a more inclusive, emancipatory spiritual future. One that honors the full depth and diversity of Igbo women's spiritual heritage, while acknowledging the historical trauma wrought by colonization.

**THE PRACTICE OF GENDERED POWER IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA
THROUGH MEDICINE, BLOOD, NATURE, AND QUEENS**

“To a certain extent, African women are some sort of riddle. This is because, whether formally educated or not, "traditional" or "modern" they do not fit the accepted notion of them as muted beasts of burden” — *Ata Aidoo's 1992 essay, The African Woman Today.*

According to Foucault, power is not a single, static model but a dynamic, multidimensional framework that circulates through social relations and is embedded in discourse, knowledge, and everyday practices. Similarly, de Certeau (1984) conceptualization of power draws our attention to the everyday as a space of creative, embodied resistance. In his view, power does not flow in a single direction but circulates through lives, gestures, words, and movements of everyday challenges. This chapter engages with the multiple “everyday” ways in which Igbo women negotiate gendered spiritual power in contemporary Igbo society. It provides an analysis of gendered spiritual power among Igbo and Anioma women specifically in the way it is lived, expressed and experienced in contemporary Igbo society. Through the accounts of my coproducers, this chapter identifies the multiplicity of Igbo gendered spirituality as it is represented through medicine, blood, nature, Igbo Queenship, and the naked female body. Discourses surrounding how gendered power is understood through its connections to the environment particularly trees, fruits, roots and other herbs are discussed. Understanding of Igbo gendered power through “female essence” which is connected to seduction, the naked female body, menstruation and the ability of women to create is also addressed. Lastly, this chapter problematizes the utility of Igbo Queenship/*Omuship*, in harnessing gendered power and the ways in which contemporary Igbo Queens continue to sustain precolonial appreciation of female power.

The accounts of my coproducers are delivered in Igbo and English language. I prioritize Igbo language in my presentation to reflect my decolonial linguistic practice.

4.0 Igbo and Anioma Women and Gendered Power.

From the outset, it is pertinent to point out that the question of gendered power among Igbo and Anioma women raised a diverse set of responses from coproducers. Some of my coproducers (particularly the younger one's ages 21-40 but some of the older one's ages 41, and beyond) struggled with the idea of Igbo women being powerful. For some, the notion of power being "gendered" seemed more like a western concept. Some others believe that the nature of Igbo gendered power can only exist in a group setting/collectively, while others are of the opinion that Igbo women can possess power individually.

One of my coproducers Adaeze had this to say on the question of gendered power:

O bụrụ na ị na-ekwu maka ụmụ nwaanyị Igbo inwe iké, mara na ị bụ onye na-achọ ikike ha nhatanha (feministi) nye nwoke na nwaanyị. Ụmụ nwaanyị enweghị iké, mana ha new ikike". E kere ụmụ nwaanyị ka ha bụrụ ndị gana amụta ụmụaka ma bụrụkwa ndị gana elekọta ezinaụlọ anya. Inwe ike putara na I nwere ike ihe ọ bụla masịrị gị na enweghị onye ga-egbochi gị, gị onwe gị na-ajụ m maka iké, I nwere iké ime ya?. I nwere ụdị iké ahụ?

If you are talking about Igbo women having power then you are a feminist. Women do not have power, but they have rights" Women were made to procreate and take care of the household. To have power means that you

can carry out an action without interference. You that you are asking me about power, can you do that? Do you have that kind of power?⁴⁸

For Adaeze, who is one of my younger coproducers at 24 years old, she understands power to mean the material ability to influence others without being questioned. She believes that power must be absolute for it to be “effective” and that Igbo women in precolonial and contemporary Igbo society have never had such a privilege. Her understanding of power is associated with control and the ability to influence others.

The statement by Adaze also brings into question the place of feminism in the African consciousness and the dismissal of the validity of female African activism. In the Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists (2007) the powerful, positive, and self-affirming document provides an interpretation and description of African feminism, its characteristics, ambitions, and identities. Like many other African feminist writings, the Charter argues that feminism originated in Africa and identifies the independent and entrepreneurial tendencies of African women in precolonial African societies as proof. The Charter describes African feminism as political as it focuses on confronting and dismantling the structures that keep women subjugated. The belief that feminism locates its origins in the west is a general perception of most of my coproducers including Adaeze.

In an attempt to depart from western understanding of feminism and make it more “legible” to African sensibilities, several African female scholars have strived to “Africanize” the notion and meanings of feminism. Obioma Nnaemeka’s Neco-Feminism offers such a departure as she provides a distinctive model of African feminist praxis, centered on negotiation, relationality, and

⁴⁸ Adaeze, 24-year-old student from Delta State, Ogwashi Ukwu Local government, interview conducted in Enugu State

mutual empowerment, often as alternatives to direct confrontation (Nnaemeka, 2007). She points out that in rural Nigeria, women engage with male partners and community elders in collaborative decision-making processes on various issues and assert their power while maintaining social harmony. She argues that these acts exemplify a strategic form of empowerment that is contextually grounded and relationally aware. Others like Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, proposed Stiwanism (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) as an alternative to feminism's western biases. Stiwanism emphasizes the inclusion of African women in the processes of democratization, nation-building, and economic development, while remaining attentive to the intersecting effects of colonialism, imperialism, and neocolonial state power on gender. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) critiques western feminism's tendency to generalize women's oppression and insists that African women's struggles must be understood in their socio-political and historical specificity. Another counter-narrative to western feminism is offered by Acholonu (1995) through the introduction of Motherism as an ecological, spiritual, and culturally rooted feminist framework. She critiques Western feminism's antagonism towards motherhood and proposes instead a model that values maternal ethics, nurturing, and interconnectedness with nature (Acholonu, 1995). It is important to note that several scholars insist that Motherism is controversial. While it reclaims indigenous African values around motherhood and care, it has also been critiqued by (Maenetja, et al. 2021; Nkealah, 2016; Nnaemeka, 2004), for potentially essentializing women's roles and excluding non-maternal and non-heteronormative identities. Ultimately, the ways in which African women mobilize, resist and empower themselves is not generally appreciated as "feminist" (by themselves and the larger global community) and the perception that gendered power is in some way "feminist" and by extension "western", remains the perception by which feminism in Africa is viewed.

The notion that Igbo women have not and do not have power is also upheld by several other coproducers as Mama Ifatu who is 90 years old (my oldest coproducer) and the mother of a Roman Catholic priest, described gendered power in a way quite similar to Adaeze's view above. According to Mama Ifatu:

“Gịnị ka ụmụ nwaanyị ji iké eme...? Ọ bụ maka ụdị okwu a gbasara iké na-ebute nsogbu n'ọtụtụ alụmdinanwunye taa”.

“What do women need power for...? It is all this talk about power that is causing problems in marriages today”.

She added:

“Hmmm oge gboo...Ụmụ nwaanyị anaghị enwe ezumike makana ha na-anọ n'ugbo na-arụ ọrụ ugbo ma na-elekọtakwa ụmụ ha anya ma na-agbakwa mbọ izere ibute ọrịa. Ụmụ nwaanyị Igbo anaghị enwe ohere ma ya bụrụzie ichekasị onwe ha íke sị, íke asighị. Nwoke bụ onyeisi ezinaụlọ, nke ahụ bụ eziokwu”

Hmmm in the olden days... women were too busy working on the field, farming and taking care of the children and trying to avoid disease. Igbo women have always been too busy to worry about things like that. The man was the head, and it was understood.⁴⁹

The idea that gendered power is absurd was recorded by both older and younger coproducers but mostly by the younger ones as is evident in this response by Chioma.

⁴⁹ Mama, Ifatu, 90 year old women from Enugu State, Oji River local government, interview conducted in Enugu State Nigeria of Enugu State.

“Power ke? Ụmụnwaanyi Igbo? Anyị enweghị ike o. N'omenala Igbo, ụmụ nwanyi ga-arịoriri ikike tupu ha emee ihe ọ bụla, ị nweghị ike ime mkpebi ọ bụla n'onwe gị otu a... na ọ bughị ike. Ike bụ ịdị elu na ikike nke inye iwu ndị mmadụ na-eme ozugbo ”.

“Power ke? Igbo women? We don’t have power o. In Igbo culture women must ask permission before they take any step, you cannot just take any decision on your own like that... that one is not power. Power is superiority and the ability to make orders that people act on immediately”⁵⁰

The way in which coproducers spoke about their understanding of gendered power in precolonial Igbo communities and in contemporary Igbo society is interesting and raises the question of how power is defined but also about the impact of the coloniality of gender.

“Ma mgbe gboo ma taa, ụmụ nwaanyi Igbo enweghị ike ọbụla. Íké bụ mmadụ iji iké o nwe jikwaa ma manye mmadụ ime ihe ọ chọrọ ka onye ahụ mee. Ma n’oge gboo rukwaa taa, ụmụ nwaanyi Igbo enweghị ọtụtụ ikike, aka na-atụ anya na ha ga-anọ n’okpuru ụmụ nwoke. Onye e ji eji n’ala e nwere onu okwu?

“Igbo women did not have power, then or now. Power means having control and having authority over someone. Igbo women did not have many privileges in the past and even now, they are still expected to be submissive. Can a submissive person control anyone?”⁵¹

The position held by Mama Ifatu, Uju, and Chioma, concerning the issues of power correlates with the argument made by some scholars. There is much debate about the status of women in precolonial Igbo communities. Several historians and scholars (Green, 1964; Uchendu, 1965; Uchendu, 2006) depict the traditional role of Igbo women as subordinate, inferior and subservient

⁵⁰ Chioma, 22-year-old from Anambra State, Nnewi local government, interview conducted in Enugu State Nigeria

⁵¹ Uju, 23-year-old from Enugu State, Enugu East local government

to men. On the other end of the spectrum, a more radical depiction of traditional Igbo gender relations is presented by several scholars including Chinweizu, (1990) and van-Allen (1972). They argue that in precolonial Igbo communities' women controlled the society and the men. They also insist that Igbo women enjoyed complete freedom in the decision making and choice of all issues pertaining to their interest and wellbeing. However, much of the literature (Acholonu, 1993; Amadiume, 1987; Chuku, 2015; 2009;1995; Nzegwu, 1995; 2006; Njoku, 2002), support the argument that traditional Igbo gender relations were complementary rather than discriminatory. That Igbo women were highly organized, fully politically engaged, and frequently independent of men (Amadiume, 1987).

According to Okonjo (1976), Igbo communities operated on dual-sex political structures, where both men and women governed their respective spheres with autonomy and equal representation. Men were led by the *Obi* (male chief), while women were organized under an *Omu* (female chief or queen) and her council, responsible for market regulation, dispute resolution, and community welfare. "In some parts of Igbo land, the *Omu* (Queen) was immensely central to the economic apparatus of the community, and no trade, legislation, or transaction was made without their knowledge" (Okonjo, 1976:13). This ensured that every communal decision reflected both genders' interests. Uchendu (1965) also notes that precolonial Igbo governance prioritized deliberation and active civic participation, and community decisions were made through layered councils each representing different demographic groups. Ultimately, precolonial Igbo society exemplified a sophisticated system of gender complementarity, where power was shared, flexible, and relational with women as equal participants in governance, commerce, and ritual life.

Still on the subject of gendered power, some Igbo women believe that the “appearance” of gendered power in Igbo society has only been made possible because of Christianity. Amarachi insists that:

“Iso Ụzọ Kraịst ewetaworo ụmụ nwanyị ike, karịsịa site n’igụ akwụkwọ. Na Kraịst ugbu a, ụmụ nwanyị na-aga ụlọ akwụkwọ, ha na-enwekwa orụ ka mma nke na-enye ha ego”.

“Christianity has brought about power for women, especially through education. With Christ now, women are going to school, they are also having better jobs which gives them money”⁵²

By this statement, Amarachi implies two things. One that gendered power is associated with having “better jobs”, which results in the attainment of material wealth. Secondly, her statement brings up the issue of education, particularly western education and its ability to enact power. Her statement also encourages one to think more critically about the role of education as a weapon in discourses of power. Amarachi continues to elaborate on the connection between material wealth and its role in the attainment of gender power. She argues that for gendered power to be actionable, there must be some degree of financial/material wealth. She uses the example of her grandmother to argue her point.

“Onwere ike o bụrụ ego ezughị ịzuta akara (Chenji), o bughị nnukwu ego. O bụrụ na ụmụ nwaanyị nwe ego, ha agaghị ekweta ka nwoke lụgoro nwunye lụo ha ka nwunye nke abụọ maọbụ nke atọ. Nna nna m lūrụ ọtụtụ nwunye, ndị nwunye ya karịrị anọ, o nweghị otu onye n’ime ha nwe ego. O dika chi nye ha niile”

“Igbo women did not have real power; they had small change not real money. If they had

⁵² Amarachi, 21-year-old student from Imo State, Ideato South local government

‘real’ money they would not have agreed to be a second or third wife to anyone. My grandfather had many wives, more than four, and none of them had real money. He was like their god”.

This perception of traditional Igbo women as “powerless” is particularly surprising because in Igbo society there exists many female associations that exemplify female power. One such organization that is prevalent in both Southeastern and Anioma communities is the *Umu Ada* society. According to Amaechi (2018) the *Umu Ada* are “indispensable in the overall development of Igbo society” (Amaechi, 2018:93). *Umu Ada* loosely means first daughters of a common male ancestor. *Umu Ada* is a collective term for all first daughters and is formed from two *Igbo* words, *Umu* means children, while *Ada* means first daughter/daughters of the soil. Amaechi (2018) also defines the concept of *Umu Ada*, as the “first-born female child of a family, born in a particular town, married or unmarried, who trace their descent from the same patrilineal ancestors” (Amaechi, 2018:87). They are responsible for administering widowhood rites, maintaining peace and order, ensuring female moral discipline, family dispute resolution, and sustainable development in Igbo society. They are particularly involved in upholding the moral standards of young girls and women to ensure that women acted in a way that was socially acceptable (Obasi,2015). The presence of the *Umu Ada* was deemed indispensable during deliberations since it was believed that they conferred spiritual legitimacy (Amaechi, 2018). It is also believed that they “constitute an indispensable link between humans and supernatural beings which accounts for their elevation to ritual elites in their natal communities” (Amaechi, 2018: 94). These women are respected, revered, and trusted, they are members of the community, they are women who are a part of the culture, they are also mothers, wives and in some cases widows. Their functions as

guardians of Igbo culture, their reconciliatory attributes, their leadership attributes, make them impactful female figures in Igbo society today.

On the other side of the divide, some coproducers believe that the power possessed by Igbo women could only be measured as a group. For this group of coproducers, they do not believe that gendered power can be achieved individually. They gave the example of the Aba Women's riot of 1929⁵³ and other gendered practices⁵⁴ that women engaged in to influence behavior and as such gain access to some negotiable power. Chi Chi one of my coproducers had this to say on the question of Igbo gendered power being accessed as a group:

“Omenaala anyị dika ogwu, o nwe ihe o bu naanị umụ nwaanyị na-eme dika otu ha ji enweta ndị di ha. O bụrụ na ndị di anaghị akpa agwa dabara adaba, ha ga-ajụ inye ha ahụ ha nakwa ibunye há nri. Nke a bụ ụzọ ha ji akpota akonauche ha n'ebe ha nọ ma gbanwekwaa akparamagwa ha”

“Our culture is very complementary; there are things that only women did as a group to hold the men accountable. If men have not been behaving well, they will go on a woman strike and deny their husbands of sex and food. This was a very powerful way to attract their attention and change behavior.⁵⁵

⁵³ The Aba women's riot of the Women's War began as a massive revolt in the colonial Eastern Nigeria countryside on November 23, 1929. The women's uprising, characterized by widespread grassroots mobilization that employed feminine ideology, rituals, and symbols, acquired some formal organizational structure. Its significance lay not only in the wide area covered by the revolt (about six thousand square miles in the Owerri and Calabar Provinces of Southern Nigeria) but also in the fact that rural women led it. The women's war was brief, lasting only about two months. However, women made the most of it, drawing attention to rural Eastern Nigeria's economic and political conditions in the late 1920s and early 1930s. (Korieh and Onogwu, 2024).

⁵⁴ “To “sit on” a man involved “gathering at his compound, sometimes late at night, dancing, singing scurrilous songs which detailed the women's grievances against him and often called his manhood into question, banging on his hut with the pestles women used for pounding yams, and perhaps demolishing his hut or plastering it with mud and roughing him up a bit” (Van- Allen, 1972:170). Men were sanctioned in this way for several reasons which included mistreating his wife, not living up to his familial obligations, for violating the women's market rules etc.

⁵⁵ Chi Chi 41-year-old writer from Anambra State, *Aniocha* local government, interview conducted in Onitsha Anambra State.

Chi Chi's point stresses that gendered Igbo power rests solely in collective action and that individual acts of resistance are not as well-received and successful as the collective. She continues to elaborate on her point; and insists that individual forms of resistance are perceived as "stubbornness". She elaborates on her point as follows:

"[Ọ chĩa ọchi] Ọ bụrụ na o mee ya, ha ga-asị na ọ bụ nwaanyị na anaghị ekwe ekwe na onye umengwụ, mana ha jikọta aka mee ya, ọ gazie nke ọma, ụmụ nwoke niile ga na-enye mkpesa maka out ihe ahụ "

"[Laughs] If an Igbo woman decides to revolt on her own, maybe refuse to cook for her husband or something like that, they will say she is a stubborn woman who is lazy, but as a group it is more effective, all the men will be complaining about the same thing".

Scholars like van-Allen (1972), Okonjo (1976), and many others have written extensively on the success of female collective action in Igbo traditional societies. In precolonial and colonial Igbo communities, when a woman felt that she had been unfairly treated by her husband, when the men in the community are not living up to their expectation, or when woman's crops had been harmed by some man's livestock, she would engage in collective action, which included strikes, and boycotts to put an end to the injustice. This form of gendered collective action is still quite popular as scholars like Obi, (2018); Gassiep, (2021), Bastian, (2005) and many others show how collective action using various techniques including nakedness is still used today by Igbo women to hold their husbands, government, and other forms of authority accountable.

The last category of coproducers believe in the unmistakable presence of gendered power. This set of coproducers attributes women's connection with the "spirits", their ability to bring children into the world, their position in the family and their entrepreneurial ability as tangible forms of

gendered power. They also identify the *Umu Ada*, and the position of the *Omu* as ways in which women access and have always accessed power. Ugonna provides this insight as to the nature of gendered power among Igbo women.

“Fa ke olu eke”.

“Work is divided”.

“Ụmụ nwaanyị Igbo nwe iké n’ezinaụlọ ha ma n’oge gboo ma taa; kaosiladi, o nwebeghi mgbe ha bu ndịisi ezinaụlọ. Omenaala Igbo gosiri na ụmụ nwaanyị nwe ogwu ha ji eso di ha egosighi na ụmụ nwaanyị bu isi maobukwanu buru ndi a na-enye mkpari”

“Igbo women had and still have domestic power; however, they have never been the head the home. The great sense of complementarity in Igbo culture meant that although women were not the head they were not also disrespected.”⁵⁶

She added:

“Ike ha sitere na mmetuta di ukwu ha nwere n'ebe umuaka na. Umụ nwanyị na-edozi onodu maka otu mmeorita umuaka na nna ga-esi di na nke ahụ bu nnukwu udi ike. Umuaka bu odinihu na onye o bula na-achikwa ha, na-achikwa odinihu”.

⁵⁶ Ugonna, 68-year-old Chief from Delta State, *Oshimili* South local government, interview conducted in Asaba Delta State

“Their power comes from the great influence they have over the children. Women set the mood as to how the relationship with the children and the father will be and that is a great form of power. The children are the future and whoever has control over them, has control of the future”⁵⁷

For coproducers like Ugonna, the nature of gendered power in Igbo society is largely domiciled to the domestic. The domestic sphere is seen as an important point of influence with the women having a stronger grasp. This “stronger grasp” on the household and by extension the family, is believed to be an Igbo woman’s unique access to power. The idea that Igbo women’s access to power is obtained through motherhood brings up other issues related to the nature of power that Igbo women who are “childless” could/would negotiate. The understanding (according to Ugonna) is that indeed Igbo women with children have a unique position; however, to perform certain spiritual practices, a woman does not need to be a mother as motherhood is not a prerequisite to gain access to one’s *Chi*/guardian angel. However, Ugonna acknowledges that motherhood has a special position in Igbo cosmology that cannot be easily dismissed. This prestige given to Igbo motherhood has been expressly analyzed by scholars like Amadiume as she insists that Igbo motherhood is a significant component of Igbo womanhood, and the basis of power attributed to women in indigenous African societies.⁵⁸

4.01 Medicine as a Form of Gendered Spiritual Power.

N’oge mbu, tupu ndi ndi uka abata obodo a, umu nwaanyi nwere ike omumu. I huru etu onye o bu la si agbaga ime IVF maka imuta nwa taa? Umu nwaanyi bu ndi dibia Bekee na-eme yabu IVF. O nwere aja a na-

⁵⁷ Ugonna, 68-year-old Chief from Delta State, *Oshimili* South local government, interview conducted in Asaba Delta State

⁵⁸ I will discuss the notion of power associated with Igbo motherhood in more detail later.

achubu maka omumu a kporo Ogbede Omumu. O bu nri a na-esi ka ji awii nke e ji unere maobu jioko esi ya. Nri a abughi nri anyi na-eri kwa mgbe kama o bu nri mmuo puru iche e ji ngwa puru iche sie. Mgbe o gachara otu afo nwaanyi jiri luo di ma o mutabeghi nwa, ndi ezinaulo ya ga-akporo ya gaa na nke Dibia maobu onye na-esi ogwu Igbo iji gbaa Afa mata ebe mmiri siri baa n'opi ugbuguru. Mgbe a choputara ebe nsogbu atughi ime ahụ si, oge ufodu o nwere ike buru na o na-enwe afo icha oku, oge ahụ, enwere ike gwa ha ka e siere nwaanyi ahụ awii puru iche a ga-eji ogbede sie nwaanyi ahụ ga-eri n'ime ahia anọ ndi Igbo.

In the past, before Christianity, women had the power of fertility. You see how everyone is running to do IVF today? Women were the IVF doctors. There was a ritual known as *Ogede Omumu*. It was a meal, prepared like porridge with a special kind of banana or plantain. This meal was no ordinary meal; it was a spiritual meal made with special ingredients. When a woman got married and in one year, she did not get pregnant the family will go to the *Ezenwanyi*/prophetess to perform *Igba Afa* to determine the cause of her infidelity. When the cause is established, sometimes it can be that she has a hot stomach (*afor Iwu okwu*) they would then be told to make a porridge with the *Ogede* for the woman to eat for 4 market days.

She added:

After that, she will be instructed to sleep with her husband. This porridge was so popular that when most women ate it, they would immediately fall pregnant. With Christianity that *Ogede* no longer exists as that type of

banana tree was targeted and destroyed by Christians who said it was diabolical. So instead of people using natural god given methods to achieve fertility, they are now using holy oil, anointing oil, giving fake pastors their money and gambling in the doctor's office doing IVF⁵⁹

Ugonna believes that the ability of Igbo women to have spiritual abilities that assisted in medicinal purposes gave them an important status in Igbo society. This important status gave them power because they had a unique knowledge and ability that was generally not “passed down” to men, making them an invaluable resource. Ugonna practices Odinani solely and was one of the few coproducers that did not practice the two belief systems.

Other coproducers like Offormata identified other unique spiritual gendered practices that elevates the status of Igbo women. Offormata, describes Igbo spirituality as a combination of the values, norms, traditions that connects the known to the unknown world. In talking about Igbo spirituality, we are engaging with the subject of god, his deities and the *Ofor*.⁶⁰ Offormata had this to say on the question of Igo spirituality. Her response was in English.

“The Ofor is a symbol of righteousness and justice. In Igbo cosmology, uprightness, innocence and godliness is central to our belief system” The Igbo believe centrally in human relations. Your relationship with your fellow human being is embedded in spirituality. In creation, the Igbo belief is that everything created by god has an iota of spirituality”⁶¹.

⁵⁹ Ugonna, 68-year-old Chief from Delta State, *Oshimili* south local government, interview conducted in Asaba Delta State.

⁶⁰ The Ofo is a staff of authority held by those who have been entrusted with the power to govern or lead a people; It is made from a piece of wood known as the *Osisi Ofo* (the Ofo tree, which is usually about four to six inches long)

⁶¹ Offormata 65-year-old Professor of Igbo history from Anambra State, *Orumba* South local government, interview conducted in Enugu State Nigeria.

She gives examples of specific gendered spiritual practices, herbes, plants, fruits, spices and trees that are associated with gendered spirituality performed by Igbo women. In Igbo worldview, healing transcends the physical and intertwines with spirituality, community, and cosmology. Traditional medicine, known as *Ogwu*, blends herbal pharmacology, divination, ritual, and ancestral mediation to restore balance. According to Okoye and Okoye (2019), and Udoeye, (2018), medicinal plants are central to Igbo healing, but their efficacy lies not only in biochemical properties but also in ritual resonance. Healers invoke spirit guardians over plants, employing incantations during gathering, preparation, and administration. These spiritual rites are believed to activate the plant's latent potency, effectively bridging the physical and spiritual realms. In the same way, Igbo spirituality is also constructed through rituals involving the “essence” of a woman, her blood and through sex.

4.02 Female Essence, Seduction, Blood, and Creation as a Form of Gendered Spiritual Power

A real Igbo man knows that an Igbo woman is powerful, our forefathers were wiser than us. If women did not have special spirituality the world would take us for granted. One of the major aspects of our efficacious power is our ability to menstruate. Igbo women derive so much power through menstruation. The fact that if a woman sees any charm when menstruating, that charm is gone signifies a great sense of power. Igbo women have power embedded within them. The blood of a woman is powerful. Did you know that when a woman is menstruating and makes love to a man, she has killed his spirituality? ⁶²

⁶² Offormata 65-year-old Professor of Igbo history from Anambra State, *Orumba* South local government, interview conducted in Enugu State Nigeria

This idea of “spirituality being “killed” is fascinating to me as discourse about women’s connection to spirits/ancestors has come up repeatedly in my research.

Umụ nwoke ndị Igbo bụkwa ndị e ji ihe mmụọ mara mana ọbara nwaanyị na-emerụ ihe mmụọ ahụ. Ee, ọ ga-emenwu ka nwoke daa mba na mmụọ, mgbe nwoke dara mba na mmụọ, ihe anaghị gaara ya werewere, ihe agaghị na-agaara ya nke ọma. Ọ bụ ya mere na mgbe nwaanyị na-alụ di dinere nwoke ọzọ, n'Ọdịnaani Igbo, ọ bụ nwoke na-anwu, ọ bughị nwaanyị ahụ. Ihe ahụ jikọtara nwaanyị na mmụọ, ọbara anyị na ikike anyị nwere ịmụ nwa mere anyị jiri bụrụ ọpuruiche.

“Igbo men are filled with spirituality too and the blood of a woman neutralizes that spirituality. When a man sleeps with a woman that is menstruating, it will make the man spiritually weak and when a man is spiritually weak, he will not be successful, things will no longer be going well for him. That is why when a woman commits adultery in Igbo custom it is the man that dies not the women. The woman’s connection to the spirits, our blood and our ability to have children make us uniquely spiritual”

The notion of the blood of an Igbo woman being powerful was also discussed by my coproducers Ugonna and Chi Chi. Ugonna responds in English.

“In the past when a woman is menstruating, she will be excluded from many activities because she was in a special and protected state and did not need to stress herself”⁶³

⁶³ Ugonna, 68-year-old Chief from Delta State, *Oshimili* south local government, interview conducted in Asaba Delta State.

The statement by Ugonna above raises other larger questions. Who decides that the woman should be excluded? How is one “special” if they are excluded? How is one powerful if their movement is restricted every month, albeit for a few days? Does this idea of women being treated differently during their cycle not fit into discourses of women being “soft”, fragile and weak? I asked Ugonna about some of these concerns about the connection between menstruation and gendered power and she responds in Igbo.

I ghọtaghị... ị ma na o nwe ekpere na aja ị ga-achụ mgbe ị nọ na nsọ gị makana ọ bụ oge ahụ ka ogo gị na mmụọ nọ n'isi njedebe, oge ahụ ka mmekọrịta gị na mmụọ nọ n'uju. I ma na ndị nnanna anyị ha ghọtara nke a nke oma na mgbe nwaanyị nọ na nsọ ya na ọ na-enwe ihe mgbu, nọrọ n'iwe, ma chọkwaa ezumike? Ozọ dika ibe ya, ha ghọtakwara na nwaanyị nọ na nsọ ya bụ oke ihe ize ndụ nyere ha makana naanị anya ha hụrụ ya nwere ike imerụ ọgwụ ọ bụla na-agbanyeghị etu ọgwụ ahụ siri sie ike. Kedu ụdị iké karịrị nke ahụ? Ụmụ nwaanyị ugbua amaghị maka nke a.... Ha ga-anọ ebe ha na-arụ ọrụ...na-agbagharị na-agbanyeghị na ha nọ na nsọ ha. Etu ahụ ka ha si emegheri.

You don't understand... do you know that there are prayers and rituals you need to perform when in that state (menstruating) because that is when you are in the peak of your spirituality and your connection to the spirits. Do you know that our forefathers understood that while menstruating it could be painful, you could be down (moody), and you needed to rest? More than

that they understood that a woman menstruating is a potential danger as her presence alone could neutralize any kind of charm regardless of how powerful. What kind of power is greater than that? Women now don't even understand that power... they will be at work... jumping up and down even when they are menstruating. That is how they will be disturbing the balance of things⁶⁴

The idea that menstrual blood holds power is one that remains deeply contested (Douglas, 1966). Despite its life-giving associations, menstrual blood is also framed as dangerously powerful. Women who are menstruating are often prohibited from entering sacred shrines, handling ritual objects, or participating in particular spiritual rituals. Menstrual blood is seen to disrupt sacred energy fields, not because it is inherently “unclean,” but because its spiritual potency is too volatile for certain ritual contexts (Roxburgh, et al. 2000). By contrast, in western culture, the sanctity of women's reproductive power, particularly through menstruation, is often not observed. The menstrual taboo is most frequently imposed on women in the west in a negative sense to the extent that menstruation is often thought of as a curse (Delaney, et al, 1976). According to Gottlieb and Buckley (1988:32), “most notably in the west, menstruation has historically been constructed as a negative periodic disturbance, as a “curse” or, more fully, the curse of Eve, a part of God's punishment, from the biblical story of creation”. In addition, there is this persistence in eradicating the menstrual period with cycle-stopping birth control pills. These efforts coincide with a view of

⁶⁴ Ugonna, 68-year-old Chief from Delta State, Oshimili South Local government, interview conducted in Asaba Delta State.

menstruation as a curse, even an illness, or at least an aspect of feminine “nature” best suppressed (Ibid).

In other cultures, like the Maori of New Zealand, women’s bodies are revered and protected within a positive understanding of taboo. Social anthropologist Sheila Kitzinger (2020) explains that in Maori culture, women’s bodies are considered culturally sacred within a positive understanding of taboos. It is important to note that in many African cultures including the Bemba of Zambia, menstruation is surrounded by taboos, however, the connection with menstruation with taboos “is not only associated with concepts of impurity or contamination, as it is in the west, but rather through a focus on notions of ascending to a unique level of female spirituality and becoming a “real woman” (Rasing, 2021: 41). In attempting to locate the power inherent in menstrual blood, discourse surrounding how power is constructed emerges. It is true that in Igbo culture during menstruation women should be sequestered thus restricting their movement. It is also true that during menstruation women are seen as dangerous, and prone to “destroying” any charm. The dichotomy between dangerous yet fragile, invisible yet potent, speaks to the complexity, contradiction, and pluralism of Igbo gendered spiritual power. In this sense, menstrual blood, which transmits power, is not merely a biological substance but one with supernatural resonance intricately connected with the life giving, yet dangerous property of female reproduction.

The connection with Igbo gendered power to spirits has come up in the literature, (Chuks, and Makwudo, 2020; Babatunde, 2022; Atata, 2019), and in many of the conversations I had with my coproducers. Offormata provides some insights into how this connection occurs and how it is connected to gendered power. She responds in English.

You see this connection to the spirits eh, people think it is really complicated, it is not. You see you here, seating and looking very innocent,

you are also connected to spirits and your ancestors. Do you know that you have spirituality inside you, beside you and within you? Why is it that a woman no matter her small she is, you will see men chasing her with a gun and machete eh. (Offormata means that men always make advances at women regardless of her looks, her age or status). It is the spirituality in her that causes that. She does not even have to speak before getting the attention of men, if she is now beautiful then... [laughs], men are in trouble.

She added:

Seduction is also a form of spirituality. Igbo spirituality moves through seduction. You see when a woman, looks at a man, he starts melting [Laughs], even if it is a small girl, you will see our men abandoning their families to follow her. Do you think it is just normal? [laughs]. You will see a small girl standing by the roadside by herself at midnight, even after midnight... she will not even be scared, let a man do the same thing and see if he will survive [laughs]. It is not normal now...think about it. Do you notice that yahoo boys⁶⁵ prefer to use women for rituals? It is because women have unique spirituality that makes them very powerful, and any charm made with a woman is more powerful. There is also the belief that god answers their prayers faster. That is why you cannot rough handle women, her spirituality will come after you.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ “Yahoo boys” is the name given to internet fraudsters in Nigeria

⁶⁶ Offormata 65-year-old Professor of Igbo history from Anambra State, *Orumba* South local government, interview conducted in Enugu State Nigeria

Offormata's answer brings up a conversation that comes up quite frequently in discourses surrounding spirituality. The idea that women can "lay curses" is also connected to the belief that they are connected to the spirits. This connection is problematized by the answer below. She responds in Igbo.

[O chĩa ọchị] otu a ka ọ dị, ekwekwala ka nwaanyị buo gi ọnu o, mmuo dị anyị n'ime na-agbara anyị ọgụ oge niile. Ụmụ nwaanyị ka ekwu eziokwu, aka anyị na-adị ọcha oge niile ya mere na mgbe ọ bụla anyị buru gi maobu onye obula ọnu, ọ na-emezu. I ma na tupu ndị ụka Kraịst abata obodo a ma ruo taa, ọ buru na e gbuo nwaanyị ma onweghi onye a tara ahuhu maka ya, nwaanyị ahụ ga-ekpochapu ogbo anyị mana e gbuo nwoke, ntaramahuhu ya anaghi erucha ka ebe e gburu nwaanyị?

[Laughs] of course, don't allow a woman to curse you o, our spirituality will always fight for us. Women are more honest, our "hands" are usually "clean" so when we curse anyone it is usually effective. Did you know that before Christianity and even now if you kill an Igbo woman and no one is punished, she will wipe out your entire generation? But if you murder a man the destruction is less?

She added:

Makana nwaanyị bu onye nne maobu onye na-akwadobe ibu nne, I gbuo ya, i gbuola nne umuaka maobu nne umuaka akaga amu amu. O bu aru kwọ nwa n'azu. Ka osila di, iké umu nwaanyị ejedebeghi naani na ibu nne n'omenaala Igbo. I bu nne abuchaghi ya kama n'ebe isi sekpu nti di bu na ha na-eke ihe. Ụmụ nwaanyị na-ekeputa ihe n'ụwa, ewepu umuaka ha na-amu, ha nwekwara ihe ndi ozo ha na-ekeputa.

Because a woman is a mother or a potential mother so if you kill her, you have killed the mother of children or you have killed the mother of unborn children. It is a horrible taboo. However, women's power is not only about being a mother in Igbo cosmology. It has less to do with motherhood and more to do with creation. Women create things, women bring things into life does not just children.⁶⁷

In Igbo culture, the status of motherhood is profoundly impactful. According to Madubike (2015), "Igbo motherhood assumes the position of goddess liken to mother-earth (Ala/earth). Motherhood is the pride of humanity and is held in such a dignified honor and respect in the community as a source of life" (Ibid:45). He adds that underlying this culturally held image is the belief that "motherhood embodies collective power both economic and political wills more efficiently than the fatherhood that favors self-centered interests" (Ibid:46). In Igbo cosmology motherhood is revered as a sacred and foundational role, deeply intertwined with spiritual, social, and cosmic order. The Igbo worldview venerates the mother not only as a source of life but also as a spiritual mediator, lineage anchor, and cultural educator. Interestingly, Offormata who speaks about the power of Igbo women does not do so through an attribution to motherhood. She, however, describes this form of power through the lens of creation.

Speaking about the idea of creation, my coproducer (Offormata) responds in English.

"There is no home without a woman. Women bring things and places to life...women bring people together, they create peace, love, togetherness. In our families' women are the ones that create a

⁶⁷ Offormata 65-year-old Professor of Igbo history from Anambra State, *Orumba* South local government, interview conducted in Enugu State Nigeria

happy healthy atmosphere... is that not so? Women are the creators of everything.... Women are powerful”.⁶⁸

4.03 Trees, Fruits and Herbs as a form of Gendered Spiritual Power.

Gendered power through Odinani is constructed through several things in nature like trees, spices, animals, herbs, and fruits, like the udara⁶⁹ fruit. In Igbo cosmology, certain plants, and trees are associated with fertility, ancestral lineage, divination, and cosmic balance. Offormata offers her opinion on this issue and responds in Igbo.

I ma udara. “I hula ukwu udara na mbu? I ma na o bu aru gi onwe gi iji aka gi ghoro udara, iwu ka o bu na i ga-echere ka udara ahụ jiri aka ya daa tupu i tuturu ya. Osisì udara na-ebu ibu ma nwekwaa otutu alaka na-enye ndo, ogwe ya anaghi adi larii, o na-adi ka mkporogwu ... A ma osisi udara dika osisi e ji akwalite omumu. Tupu ndi uka Kraist abia, umu nwaanyi ndi na-achọ nwa na-anọ n’okpuru osisi udara na-atughari uche maka ochicho obi ha n’ebe imuta nwa no. Mmuo omumu huru ukwu udara n’anya, ya mere na ka isi noro n’ukwu udara ga-eme mmuo omumu inye gi nwa.

Have you ever seen the Udara tree? You know it is forbidden to pluck the fruit yourself; you must wait for it to fall on its own. The tree is also very big with plenty shade, the trunk is not smooth, it looks like the roots come up to the trunk... this tree is known for its ability to promote fertility. Before Christianity, women looking for the fruit of the womb would seat under the

⁶⁸ Offormata 65-year-old Professor of Igbo history from Anambra State, Orumba South local government, interview conducted in Enugu State Nigeria

⁶⁹ Udara or African star apple is a fleshy fruit that has a pink pulp, orange back and large brown seeds. It can sometimes be sweet and also very sour and is rich in antioxidants.

Udara tree just relax and meditate on their desire for a child. A spirit of fertility likes the Udara tree and the more you visit the tree she will bless with a baby.⁷⁰

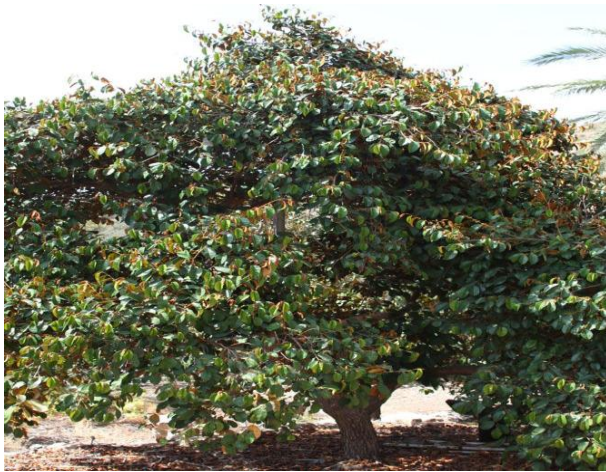


Image 1: Photo of Udala/African star cherry from online source www.growplants.org

⁷⁰ Offormata 65-year-old Professor of Igbo history from Anambra State, *Orumba* South local government, interview conducted in Enugu State Nigeria



Image 2: Photo of Udala/African star cherry fruit. Photo courtesy of author 2024.

There is something about the Udara tree that makes it conducive for spirits. I don't know if it is the kind of shade or the sweetness of the fruits or that people don't disturb the tree... I don't know. There is also another tree, this tree called *Anunuebe*. It is believed that this tree is controlled by spirits. It is also known to be the most powerful and fearful tree in Igbo land. It is known as a natural oracle. People do not get close to the tree, not even a *Dibia*/ native doctor

She further explains that:

“I nwere ike ihu ya naani n'ime oha ugbo a. Uka gbutuola osisi Anunuebe niile di n'obodo. Ngwa nri ndi ozọ di ka akwukwo Ogilisi/Newbouldia bu umu nwanyi na-ejikari echebe megide mmeru ahụ. O bu otu n'ime isi ihe eji eme Itu Aja mgbe mmadu na-eme amara/ogwu”

“You can only find it in the bush now. All the *Anunuebe* trees in town have been cut down by churches. Other spices like *Ogilisi*⁷¹/*Newbouldia leaves* are used mostly by women to protect against harm. It is one of the main ingredients used for *Itu Aja* when one is making a charm/medicine”.

She added:

A na-ahụ akwụkwọ ndị a n'ọtụtụ kichin ụmụnwanyị Igbo a na-eji agwọkwa ahụ ahụ mana ọtụtụ nsogbu ime mmụọ. A na-eji ya maka nchebe, na iji nweta ọganihu. A na-akuziri ụmụ nwanyị ka esi eji ezumike ahụ wepụ ihe ọhụrụ ya ma ọ bụ gwepịa ya maka ọgwụ. Ihe ime mmụọ ndị ọzọ dị ka Oshishi Ugwu bụ mgborogwu nke nwere ike imebi nguzozi n'ụlọ ọ bụla. Ọ buru n'ihie ụzọ webata mgborogwu ahụ n'ụlọ gi, ihe ndị dị ịtụnanya ga-amalite ime. Ọjia, ọgụ n'etiti ndị òtù ezinụlọ, ihe dị iche iche. Everting na ala Igbo bụ mmụọ ma ị kwenyere ma ọ bụ na ị kwenyeghi..

These leaves are found in many kitchens of Igbo women and is used to cure physical but mostly spiritual problems. It is used for protection, and to achieve breakthroughs. Women are taught how to use the leave and extract its juices or crush it for medicinal purposes. Other natural spiritual elements like *Oshishi Ugwu*⁷² is a root that can disrupt the balance in any home. If you mistakenly bring that root into your home, strange things will begin to happen. Sickness, fighting

⁷¹ In Igbo cosmology, *Ogilisi* (also spelled *Ogirisi* or *Ogirishi*) refers to the sacred tree *Newbouldia laevis*, meaning “tree of life” or “fertility tree.” It is revered not just for its physical and medicinal uses, but also for its spiritual potency, protective power, and gendered symbolism.

⁷² *Oshishi* (wood) Ugwu (pumpkin leave) so *Oshishi Ugwu* means the stick/wood from an ugwu plant.

among family members, different things. Everting in Igbo land is spiritual whether you believe it or not⁷³.



Image 3: Photo of *Ogilisi*/*Newbouldia* leaves in the compound of one of my coproducers. This leave is used as a medicine for sickness, and as a potent ingredient in the creation of charms for protection. Photo courtesy of author 2024.

4.04 The Naked Female Body as a Form of Gendered Spiritual Power.

As I continue to interrogate the nature of Igbo gendered spirituality in the way it is constructed, the role of the naked female body in enacting power is identified. Several of my coproduces insist that female nakedness plays a pivotal role in the way power was administered in precolonial, colonial and contemporary Igbo society. Ngozi, a justice of the Asaba, Delta State customary court and one of my coproducers and has extensive knowledge on Igbo customs and Igbo women's

⁷³ Offormata 65-year-old Professor of Igbo history from Anambra State, *Orumba* South local government, interview conducted in Enugu State Nigeria

history. She identifies the ability of Igbo women to enact power through nakedness, as a viable source of Igbo gendered power through spirituality.

When strange things begin to happen or a person in a community starts doing something evil, especially if that person has been cautioned repeatedly, the women in the community will wake up very early in the morning and tie a white wrapper on their waist exposing their breast while holding a pestle. They usually do this without brushing their teeth while heading to the market square. Here, they make prayers against the evil person/evil plague or illness, after which they bend down and expose their back side [laughs embarrassingly] ... Once they do that, it signifies a way of passing judgement on whatever matter is which ultimately restores sanity to the community. This practice is feared even till today⁷⁴

Omu of Obior, Her Royal Highness Onyebuchibe Okonkwo another coproducer explained the power enacted through the naked female body as follows:

N'oge a luru agha n'obodo anyi a, mgbe ndi soja batara Obior, O bu Omụ gba otọ jiri aka ya naani ya chupu ndi soja n'Obior. O gara n'ebe ndi soja ahụ jiri mere onodu gaa na-eme amansi nke mere ka ndi soja ahụ kwakoro ngwongwo ha laa. Juo onye obula maka akuko a... o bu akuko onye o bula ma maka ya. Agha erighi ndi obodo Obior, ujo ekweghi ndi soja Naijiria bata obodo ahụ ozọ

During the civil war when the soldiers came to Obior, it was the *Omu* that single handedly drove them away from the town by walking completely

⁷⁴ Ngozi, 59-year-old, Justice of the customary court of appeals Asaba. From Asaba, *Oshimili* South local government, interview conducted in Asaba Delta State Nigeria

naked to them. She went to where they were camped and started making pronouncements and incantations and the soldiers were after and packed all their things away and took off. Ask anybody of the story... is very popular. The town of Obior was not taken over during the war, the Nigerian soldiers were afraid to come back⁷⁵



Image 4: Photo of *Omu* Issele-Uku, Adafo Onwordi, at her residence in Issele Uku Delta State Nigeria. *Omu* Onwordi believes that the power of the naked female body holds great power and mystery. The decision to blur her chest is related to questions about privacy, consent and the gaze of the African female body Photo courtesy of author 2024.

The power enacted through female nakedness is brought up extensively by many African scholars including Amadiume, (1987), Achebe, (2011; 2003), Mathebula, (2022), Diabaté, (2020), Mapara,

⁷⁵ Her Royal Highness, Oyebuchibe Okonkwo, *Omu* Obior, interview conducted in her palace at Obior Delta State Nigeria.

(2022). I ask if all women in Igbo communities have this power and how it is transmitted. Ngozi explains as follows:

Mba, naanị nne nwaanyị mụgoro nwa nwere ikike a. Nwata nwaanyị alụbeghị di nwere ikike ibụ mmadụ ọñụ mana ikike igba ọtọ buo ọñụ bụ ụmụ nwaanyị mụtagoro nwa ka ọ dirị n'omenaala Igbo. Ụmụ nwaanyị Igbo nwere ike puru iche. Ikike anyị nwe ibụ ọñụ, gbaa afa na inweta ụsà ndị a bụ ike puru iche ụmụ nwaanyị Igbo nwe. Ụmụ nwaanyị Igbo abughịkwa mmadụ nkịtị oo. E nwere ọtutụ ike anyị nwe n'ahụ anyị, okwu anyị na okike chi anyị. Okwu na-aputa nwaanyị n'ọñụ na-adị ike. Ụmụ nwoke enweghị ngozi obodo jikọtara aka ọñụ kwadoo maka ibụ mmadụ ọñụ maọbu buru ndị nwere obi sarasara n'obodo ka ụmụ nwaanyị.

Only the body of a mother has this level of potency. A single girl can lay curses even if she has not had children but this power in nakedness is reserved for mothers in Igbo culture. Igbo women have unique powers. Our ability to lay curses, to perform *Igba Afa* and come up with a solution is a unique form of power that women have. Igbo women are not ordinary people o. There is a lot of power in our body, our words and our sexuality. The mouth of a woman when she makes pronouncements is very powerful. Men do not collectively have the blessing of the community to lay curses or be the moral conscience of the community like women.

With respect to gendered power being transmitted through pronouncements, my coproducers explain how words can become power:

“I gwa gi eziokwu enweghi m ezi usa nye ajuju a. A na m eche na o dabere n’ikwuba aka oto na inwe ntachiobi. Ekwenyere m na o bu maka etu anyi na ihe okike siri metuta nakwa nsọ anyi nahu kwa onwa. Ihe ndi a nwere ike ibu ihe kpatara ya”.

“To be honest I don’t know the real answer. I suspect it has to do with our honesty and steadfastness. I believe it relates to our closeness to nature and our changing monthly circle. Those could be the reasons”.

This answer about women being steadfast, is connected to the position held by some scholars including Madubike (2015), where he argues that there is a belief in Igbo culture that women, because of their “maternal instinct” are “naturally” more honest and trustworthy. Understandably this belief system is highly critical as there is no way to measure what is “maternal” or what constitutes “instinct”. This ideology of Igbo women being connected to the “spirits”, and possessing powers that cannot be easily understood, remains a strong theme throughout my conversations. Discourses like this make the argument for the social construction of gender and the place of culture, environment and conditioning to create and alter “reality”.

Coproducers speak about this connection to the spirits and the “power” in the essence of Igbo women. which seems hard to measure. From their perspective, the power of Igbo women lies in their very being, in their knowledge, their connection to the spirits, ancestors, and people around them. Their power resides in their ability to act beyond the physical as they protect and watch over their community, and families. Igbo gendered spiritual power is not individualistic, it is used for the good of the community.

It is also important to mention that Igbo gender spirituality is exercised for the good of the community as Ngozi (my coproducer) points it out:

Ọ dị mma, enwere ụmụ nwaanyi ama ka ndị Ọmụ/ Eze nwaanyi. Ọ bụ ọrụ ha ịgbape ahịa ma kpekwa ekpere maka ọdịmma onye ọ bụla n'obodo. Ọ dabere n'obodo gasị, ndị Ọmụ na-aga n'ahịa kwa izu ekpe ekpere. N'omenaala Igbo, abalị anọ ọ bụla mebere otu izu ndị Igbo. Ha na-ekpe ekpere maka ihe nnweta na agamnihu n'ahịa ahụ. Ha na-ekpe ekpere megide ajọ ihe ma chụọ aja n'aha ndị obodo niile.

There are women known as *Omu's/Queens*. They are responsible for opening the market and making prayers for the good of everyone in the community. Depending on the town, some *Omu's* go to the market to pray every market week. In Igbo traditional culture, the market week is every four days. They pray for prosperity and for success in the market. They pray against every evil and make sacrifices for the entire community.

As the reach of Christianity through colonization continued to spread, the role of the *Omu* has also evolved. Over time, the *Omuship* tradition struggled to remain relevant and many Anioma communities⁷⁶ discarded the custom. However, in the last two decades particularly through the accession of *Omu Martha Dunku*, the *Omu* institution has returned with vibrancy and relevance. The place of the *Omu* in Anioma communities has become one of great reverence and respect, with the entire Igbo society grateful for their unique role.

4.05 *Omu* Institution as a Form of Gendered Power Through Spirituality.

According to HRH Oyebuchibe Okonkwo *Omu* Obior, the *Omu* institution is indigenous to the Anioma people and began over 800 years ago. She explained that the ancestors believed that every community must have a mother who will appeal and be a representative to the needs of women.

⁷⁶ The *Omu* institution is practiced in Anioma communities. Onitsha community in Anambra State, practiced the system of *Omuship* in the past, but it has been several decades since Onitsha had its last *Omu*.

The *Omu* also serves as a protector of women and mitigates against any unjust laws of punishments meted out on women. The *Omu* or Queen has many of the rights and privileges enjoyed by the *Obi*/King, including her own palace, her own Chiefs or cabinet like the *Obi*/King, and her autonomy over the women in the community. In Ibusa kingdom, the *Omu* is the only woman allowed to be present with the elders in the *Obi*'s palace. Every *Omu* is selected by the gods and in the few occasions when the community selects an *Omu*, she is not usually successful because the calling must be done spiritually.



Image 5: Photo of *Omu* Okwei, (Center), Omu of Osomala Kingdom in Anambra State. She is renowned for her power, strength and industrious character. In the picture she appears physically “masculine” which complicates discourses of power, performance and proximity to masculinity. Photo taken in 1932 from authors family archives.

The *Omu* has many roles and responsibilities in her community. According to *Obi Omu* Ibusa, an *Omu* is the custodian of the market. This involves saying prayers over the success and safety of the market and all the activities therein. In Igbo cosmology, the market is regarded as a highly

spiritual or mythical place. It is believed that spirits” also come to the market to trade and that prayers and rituals must always be made to ensure that both humans and spirits coexist harmoniously. The market is also central because it is the economic/material hub of the community that feeds and sustains the people. She is also responsible for cautioning the Igwe/King and ensuring that he does not destabilize the balance of things (living and nonliving) in the community. She is also responsible for resolving marital disputes, and as such serves as the moral compass of the community. This role of moral compass in Anioma communities is reserved for the *Umu Ada* in the southeastern parts of Igbo land where the *Omu* institution does not exist.

“If you do not have spiritual power, you cannot become an *Omu*... you understand me? For an *Omu* to see to the affairs of all the deities of the town she must be a uniquely spiritual person. Our work as *Omu* is 80% spiritual, 10% dedicated to the affairs of the market and 10% personal. You must be sensitive to the spiritual workings of your community so that you can protect it from all kinds of harm, especially spiritual harm”.⁷⁷

She added:

Dịka onye bụ Omu, a ga-enye gi Nze obodo ahụ niile, ọ bụrụzie nke gi. Ihe ọ bụla dị n'ime mmụọ ahụ ga-ebidozi gwawa gi okwu. Ike niile dị na mmụọ ahụ ga-abanyezi gi n'ahụ, afọ ọ bụla, ị chụọrọ ya aja iji mee ka obi dị ya mma. “Aja niile a na-achụ bụ ihe dị ndụ ka e ji achụ ya; o nwere ike bụrụ ọkụkọ maọbụ ewu, ọ dabere na nke ha chọrọ. E gbuchaa anụ ahụ maka ịchụ aja, I kpekwasị ekpere na ya maka ala na ụmụaka bi n'obodo tinyekwara ndị bi mba ọzọ.

⁷⁷ Her Royal Highness, Oyebuchibe Okonkwo, *Omu* Obior, interview conducted in her palace at Obior Delta State Nigeria.

As the *Omu*, you are given the *Nze* of the entire town, and it becomes your property. Whatever is in that *mmuo*/spirit will begin to speak to you. All the powers from the *mmuo* will ultimately transfer to you and every year you will have to perform rituals to appease it. All rituals require the killing of a living thing; it can be a chicken or goat depending on the need. After killing the sacrifice, you will say a prayer on it for the land and our children in the community including those in the diaspora.



Image 6: Photo of Her Royal Highness, Oyebuchibe Okonkwo, *Omu* Obior, at her palace in Obior, Delta State Nigeria. Currently, *Omu*'s appear visibly feminine in their appearance and posture. Photo courtesy of the author 2024.

Omu Ibusa added this regarding the gendered power of women through *Omuship*:

Ekpere ndi a na-ekpe gunyere igbapu anya ndi ojoo n'obodo, o bu oru anyi igu ma choputa usa nye ajuju ndi ahụ siri ike na-emekpa ndi be anyi ahụ... i ga-ahụ etu obodo Naijiria siri sie ike taa. Omụ na-enyeaka eme ka ala diri umu nwaanyi na ndi obodo mma. Mmụo ahụ na-edu m nyere m "anya ime mmuo" Ekwesiri m ihu uzo kari ndi ozo iji choputa ihe na-eme ma hukwa etu m ga-esi gboo nsogbu ahụ. Igwe/Eze na-adabekwara n'Omụ iji gboo nsogbu siri ike na-eme n'obodo ma hụ na ihe niile na-aga nke oma n'etiti ndi anya na-ahụ na ndi anya anaghi ahụ.

The prayers we say involves wielding off evil eyes from the community, it is our job to "go" and find the solution to the difficulties questions that are affecting our people... you can see how Nigeria is so "hard" today, the *Omu* help to create a better environment for women and the larger community. The spirits leading me give me the "spiritual eyes" I need to see beyond the surface to determine what is happening and how to solve it. The *Igwe/King* also relies on the *Omu* to resolve complex things that are happening in the community and make sure there is a balance between the seen and the unseen.⁷⁸

The way in which an *Omu* "activates" the power she possesses is very fascinating. *Omu* Ibusa explains how she can manifest spiritual into the physical.

"I na-ahụ na ihe m kwesiri ime bu ibuli nzu a (na-ebuli nzu nke di na tebul ma welie ya) ma kpoo aha onye m na-ekpe ekpere ma kpee ekpere n'ime ya [ochia] ma mechaa nke gi. O bughị kari nke ahụ. Anyi bu aria ime mmuo, o dighikwa anyi mkpa ime otutu ihe"

⁷⁸ Her Royal Highness, Obi Isioma Nwannabugwu, *Omu* Ibusa, interview conducted at her place in Ibusa Delta state.

“You see all I need to do is lift this *nzu*⁷⁹ (holds up the *nzu* that was on the table and lifts it) and call the name of the person I am praying for and pray into it [laughs] and your own don finish. It is not more than that. We are spiritual vessels, and we don’t need to do much”.



Image 7: Photo of Her Royal Highness, Oyebuchibe Okonkwo, *Omu* Obior, at her palace in Obior praying for the author with *Nzu*/bentonite powdered clay. *Nzu* functions as a powerful material symbol that links morality, spirituality, and social life. Photo courtesy of author 2024.

⁷⁹ *Nzu* is the Igbo name for edible clay or bentonite clay, it is used by Igbo traditionalist to connects the spirits with the living.



Image 8: A bowl containing *Nzu/bentonite powdered clay* and *Kolanut* with Lords “hot drink”/alcoholic beverage. Photo courtesy of the author 2024.

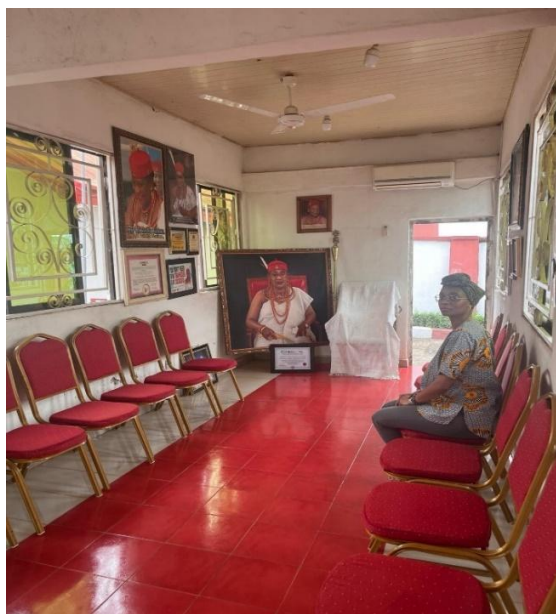


Image 9: At the reception hall at the palace of the late Omu Martha Dunkwu, Omu Anioma. Omu Dunkwu returned to her ancestors (February 2024) a few weeks before this picture was taken. I visited her palace to pay my respects. Photo courtesy of the author 2024.

The unique position of an *Omu* gives her considerable power as the *Omu*'s of Ibusa, Issele-Uku and Obior have identified. Her Royal Highness, Adafo Onwordi, *Omu* Isselu-Uku explains how the spiritual power of the *Omu* translates to the physical in contemporary Igbo society.



Image 10: At the reception hall in the palace of the late Omu Martha Dunkwu, Omu Anioma. Standing beside a large portrait of her in her palace in Anioma, Delta State. Photo courtesy of the author 2024.

*Ufọdụ ndị nọ n'out Ọmụ na-aga anata "ajọ mmụọ " ike... ike anyị new eh...ngwa
gị ya, ị gaghi enwe ike ịrahụ ụra n'abalị. Ọ bụ ihe nzuzo, ọ bughị ihe m ga-abia
gwawa gị. Tupu ị bia igba m ajuju ọnụ a, a hụrụ m ya na ị na-abia. A hụrụ m gị*

n'obi m, akwa a iyi ugbua Ama m na i ga-eyi akwa na-eji oji, nakwa na i ga-eji ihe ekechi isi gi.

Some people in the *Omu* institution go and “collect” power from “evil” sources... the power we have eh... if I tell you, you will not be able to sleep at night. It is a secret, and it is not something I can share just like that. Before you came for this interview, I had a premonition that you were coming. I saw you in my mind, this cloth that you are wearing... I knew you would be wearing something black, and that your hair would be covered.

She added:

“Mmuo ndi a achoghi ka m gwa gi ihe niile, agaghị m akpoba gi n'ime ulo ebe m na-agba afa ka i hu makana ihe gbasara mmuo ndi Igbo di nsọ, o bughikwa ihe nile ka a na-agba n'anwu... i ghọtara ihe m na-ekwu? O nwere ihe i na-ekwesighi ima”.

“The spirits do not want me to reveal everything to you, I cannot take you to my divination room to see because Igbo spirituality is sacred, and secrecy must always be preserved... you understand me. There are things you should not know”⁸⁰

Before I conclude this category of my research on power through the *Omu* institution, I will quickly provide an analysis by History Professor Egodi Uchendu, who problematizes the nature of power *Omu*'s have. In her thought-provoking article “*Gender and Female Chieftaincy in Anioma Nigeria*” (2006), Uchendu argues that postcolonial writers have postulated that the colonial experience stripped Igbo women of their precolonial political status, however this argument

⁸⁰ Her Royal Highness, Adafo Onwordi, *Omu* Isselu-Uku, interview conducted in her palace in Isselu-Uku Delta State.

deserved nuance to avoid romanticizing traditional Igbo culture. According to Uchendu, it is uncritical to divorce the power wielded by the *Omu* from its proximity to “maleness”. She argues that for a woman to become an *Omu*, there are several parameters that she must undergo, and these parameters stress how her gender, as a woman, must be dismissed, silenced and altered.

First, for the initiation of an *Omu* to be complete she must first “lose all her femininity”. This is usually reflected in the way she dresses and conducts herself in the community. She must dress like a man with her chest open and wear her hair short and cropped. She cannot be seen crying, eating, kneeling, carrying anything on her head, or showing any kind of emotion in public. If she was married prior to her initiation, she must immediately leave her husband behind and have no further association with him. In most cases, *Omu*’s are selected from women who are experiencing menopause or are post-menopausal. The reason for this is associated with the belief that if an *Omu* is still menstruating, she will inadvertently “render ineffective charms” (Uchendu, 2006:37) which would be detrimental to the community. Ultimately because of these important aspects required for Igbo women to assume the position of *Omu*, Uchendu concludes that “power is gendered as male in Igbo culture” (Ibid). “The fact that women must relinquish and alter their “normal gender to gain acceptance and recognition” (Uchendu, 2006:38), further contributes to her argument that the appropriation of masculine qualities serves to enhance the social position of women particularly the *Omu*.

The restrictions placed on the autonomy and choices of *Omu* forces us to confront the complexity of power and the dominance of masculinity in understandings of power. It also reinforces the conceptualization of gender as performance as the closer one is to “maleness” the greater the access and attainment to material power. The nature of gendered power remains complex, and often contradictory. The place of contemporary Igbo women who continue to navigate their traditional

beliefs while attempting to balance the demands of modernity, calls for a critical examination of the postcolonial State. An analysis of what/who a contemporary Igbo woman is, and how she can successfully “balance modernity”, allows us to attend to the involvement of Christianity/modernity in the construction of contemporary Igbo womanhood.

This chapter has shown that the construction of Igbo gendered power through spirituality takes on many different forms. This chapter has provided an account of the practices, rituals, and belief systems that encompass the application of gendered *Odinani* in precolonial and contemporary Igbo land. Through the accounts of the majority of my coproducers, the notion of gendered power through spirituality is tangible and exercised in Igbo communities. The nature of Igbo gendered power through spirituality is exercised in various ways, through their essence, their blood, their pronouncements, their naked bodies and their ability to create. It is also exercised through the application of several things in nature including roots, leaves, fruits and spices. The *Omu* institution, and the *Umu Ada* are also ways in which Igbo women (then and now), access and negotiate power. Gendered spirituality cannot be understood as separate from Igbo culture and the fundamental understanding that everything has a spiritual component. Through the accounts of coproducers, gendered spirituality is appreciated through its interconnectedness with women and nature or through their essence. This “essence” is connected to seduction but not limited to it, as my coproducers insist that there are deeper understandings of how an Igbo women’s “essence” can utilize power that divorces itself from seduction or sex. They posit that her (Igbo women’s) presence alone enacts power that exudes a spiritual element that is mysterious and powerful. The centrality of menstrual blood is also identified as a unique form of gendered spiritual power. Menstrual blood, which is understood as being both powerful and dangerous, holds a significant importance in Igbo cosmology that emphasizes the centrality of women and the complexity of

gendered power. Lastly, the place of the *Omu* institution in contemporary Igbo society is analyzed and discourses surrounding gender as performance, and the masculinization of power is also tackled.

**NAVIGATING ODINANI AND CHRITIANITY IN POSTCOLONIAL IGBO LAND A
PRACTICE OF SEPARATION.**

Colonialism imposed European languages, cultures, religions, schooling systems, and administrative norms, creating a divide between public modernity and private tradition. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o articulates how colonization alienated Africans from their languages and cultures, creating a colonized mindset that idealized western standards at the expense of indigenous identity (wa Thiong’o, 1986). This fragmentation compelled individuals to adopt dual forms of existence. The “modern self” for public spaces and the “traditional self” in community or familial domains. This chapter interrogates the ways in these dual forms of spiritual existence are enacted, negotiated and utilized in contemporary Igbo society. Through the accounts of my coproducers, this chapter goes into detail to unpack the many ways in which contemporary Igbo women exist in dual forms of spirituality thereby highlighting the sustaining residue of colonization. The ways Igbo women reserve the practice of Odinani to the “village space” while practicing Christianity in the “city”, and the unique ways in which they insist on their “Christianess” while protecting their belief in Odinani, is critically interrogated in this chapter. This chapter ultimately problematizes this separation between two spiritual world views, to understand how both could exist together, but separately. In addition, this chapter provides several arguments that insist that the contemporary practice of dual spiritual world views needs to be explored beyond syncretic discourses which centers religious mixing and hybridity. Central to this chapter is the interrogation of the concept I have created labeled *Dualistic Fluidity*, which provides a framework for acknowledging how colonization “splits a person in two”, thereby creating dual spiritual identities and realities.

5.0 Dualistic Fluidity.

Igbo cosmology insists that humans are complex, dynamic, ever evolving, and are constantly engaged in making sense of their lives. The unique way in which contemporary Igbo women navigate the practice of Odinani and Christianity not through complementarity, or interdependence, but rather through separation, led me to construct the concept “*Dualistic Fluidity*”. Dualistic fluidity serves as a framework to analyze the duality of Odinani without the rigidity, and the fluidity of Odinani without the interdependence. The concept of dualist fluidity serves as a framework for unpacking, interrogating and dismantling the nuance associated with the practice of Odinani and Christianity in contemporary Igbo communities, specifically in the way Igbo women practice both beliefs side by side, but separately, in their daily lives. A dualistic, yet fluid interpretation of the practice of Odinani and Christianity, emphasizes the existence of the two spiritual world views while exposing how varying world views are negotiated in different circumstances and times, to achieve different outcomes. The practice of gendered Odinani is neither dualistic nor fluid but both. The fluid nature of Igbo spirituality shows that the contemporary practice of Odinani is malleable, however caution must be applied in evaluating its malleability because at first glance, it appears as if both exist in complementarity; however that is not the case. They exist together; however, they do not complement or depend on each other to function. While conducting field work, the accounts of gendered spirituality presented by my coproducers could sometimes be described as a form of dualism, or syncretism⁸¹ however, to describe it only as such is inadequate. For my coproduces that practice and “switch” between Odinani and Christianity, they do so to serve

⁸¹ Syncretism represents religion mixing which is very different from dualistic fluidity. I will identify their major differences at the end of this chapter

as a form of “insurance”⁸² and as a way of holding on to their traditional beliefs without completely subscribing to the prescription of modernity.

In Igbo cultural belief, spirituality is the way of life of people. It is the culmination of our needs, desires, wants, ambitions and aspirations. In Igbo cosmology, very few things are constructed as being entirely separate from one another. The mind or spirit, and the body operate in tandem. The spirit dictates what the body does and vice versa. For the proponents of Odinani, every day begins with a prayer to ones *Chi* (guardian angel)⁸³. The concept of *Chi* in Igbo ontology plays a dual role in the manifestation of reality. Achebe (1975) posits that a person's *Chi* is an individuating power that serves as their other identity in spirit-land, with their spirit complementing their terrestrial human being/body. This view is grounded in the perspective that nothing can exist alone, as there must always be “another thing” standing beside it. Thus, *Chi* is believed to shadow the physical aspect of our being on earth, exerting a greater influence as it operates on a higher plane. There is a popular saying in Igbo language which says, “*onye kwe chi ya ekwe*”. This translates to mean “what you agree on, so also will your god.” What this directly shows is that in Igbo cosmology, the interaction between *Chi* (spirit/immaterial/metaphysical) and man (physical) happens simultaneously and that differentiating between the physical and spiritual realm is impossible. It is important to note that while each entity occupies a unique space, it is not independent of the universal reality. Rather, every entity collaborates with others in sustaining the universal reality, thus achieving

⁸² I use the word insurance because some of my coproducers (I will go into the details of this in chapters 5, 6 and 7 of this thesis) describe Christianity as such. What they mean by this is that Christianity serves as a form of protection for where/when Odinani “fails”. For them, their practice of Christianity and Odinani, although at different times, means that they are fulfilling the obligations of their tradition while being “practical” to the needs of “modernity”.

⁸³ *Chi* is understood as the divine aspect of the human person (Ilogu 1974); *Chi* as our other identity, *Chi* as our guardian angel (Achebe 1958); *Chi* as the determinant of our destiny (Nwodo 2004; Okoro 2008).

a harmonious relationship between realms. Every person of Igbo origin is believed to be a spirit, and both realms (spirit and physical) interact daily in many unique and tangible ways. My coproducers that identify as “traditionalist” have a great understanding and reverence for Odinani. While discussing the practice of Odinani, my coproducers continuously describe Odinani as an independent and separate belief system from Abrahamic religions. While conducting field work there were many instances where the account of Odinani and gendered spirituality seemed “contradictory”. For example, the idea that a woman can go to church on Sunday, but practice Odinani other days of the week was difficult for me to understand. Secondly, some coproducers reserve the practice of Odinani to the “village space”, while the practice of Christianity is limited to the city. This fascinating style of practicing their spirituality implied that these women practice both spiritual belief systems separately and independently of each other. Igbo world view is capable of entertaining different and contradictory world views, and the practice of Odinani does not exist in the fringes, neither is it in the center, however, it is visible, powerful, and present. It resides somewhere between the fringe and the center and is powerfully intertwined in the lives of contemporary Igbo women.

Enweghi m nsogbu n'ebe Jizọs nọ, mana a na m emekwa Ọdinaani n'akuku nke ọzọ. Oge ọ bụla m nọ n'obodo, a na m esonyere ndi ezinaulo m n'ihe niile gbasara omenaala, mgbe m nọ n'obodo mepere emepe, esonyekwa m ndi uka Mountain of Fire Ministries bu ebe m na-aga uka, o doro m anya nke oma. E nwere otutu umu nwaanyi Igbo na-esonye n'ekpemekpe abuo n'otu oge?

I don't have a problem with Jesus, but I still practice Odinani. When I am in the village, I join my family in all traditional events and when I am in the city, I am a

member of Mountain of Fire Ministries⁸⁴, it makes sense to me. The fact that I am practicing both is not odd, it is the way that makes sense for me. There are many Igbo women that practice both religions at the same time?⁸⁵

The response above speaks directly to the heart of what dualistic fluidity interrogates. For Uche, the practice of both Odinani and Christianity, happens in different places, different times and for different purposes. Her account did not present Odinani as dependent on Christianity, neither did it imply that they are combined, or complementary. She separates the practice of both spiritual belief systems to location, and is not attempting to create a different religion, hybrid, or belief system.

Another coproducer that portrayed this sense of duality while being fluid in her spiritual practice was Adafo Onwordi *Omu* of Isssele-Uku kingdom of Delta State. She identifies as a Christian however she still performs many of the traditional rituals that are required as an *Omu*/Queen and her answer highlights this dual spiritual existence.

“O bụchaghị eziokwu o, o dabere n’ihe i na-eme. Ekwenyere m n’ Ofọ, ekwenyere m na Chiukwu, ekwenyere m n’Umụagbara m/ chi ndị obodo m, Ndịichie/ ndị nnanna anyị ha na chi na-edu m”. A na m nsọpuru ma na-akwanyekwara ha ugwu mana nke a emeghị ka m ghara i bụ onye ụka Kraịst. Anaghị m etinye aka n’ihe ruru arụ ga-emegide okwukwe m dika onye ụka Kraịst.

“It depends on what you are doing. I believe in *Offor*, I believe in *Chukwu*/big god, I believe in my *Umu Agbara*/community gods my, *Ndi Ichie*/ancestors and my *Chi*/guardian angel. I respect

⁸⁴ Mountain of Fire Ministries is Pentecostal church founded in Lagos Nigeria. Their preaching is mostly centered around the performance of miracles and the “elimination” of “enemies”.

⁸⁵ Uche, a 37 year old businesswomen from Oguta in Imo State, interview conducted in Onitsha Anambra State

and revere them but that does not mean that I am not a Christian. I don't involve myself in anything diabolical that will affect my Christian faith".⁸⁶

In the response provided above, *Omu* Adafo identifies as both a Christian and a traditionalist and insists that she practices both belief systems. She says that she "reveres" both beliefs and does not pick one side over the other. Like Uche (in the response on the previous page), *Omu* Adafo, does not imply that she combines both belief systems and that they are complementary or interdependent.

These conversations bring up questions related to the practicality of "mixing" both world views that seem completely opposite without them "clashing", however the question of mixing both views is not the concern of this thesis rather the ways in which they exist together but separately.

The ways in which the practice of two separate spiritual belief systems can exist separately but side by side, is also identified by *Omu* Ibusa as she explains how it can occur without "clashing". She responds in English.

I am a Christian by birth and a traditionalist by choice. As I continue to advance in life, I have come to understand that life is complicated, and things are not always as they seem. If our traditions are so bad and diabolical why did the White man come here and steal all our deities and put it in their museum? Why are they still learning about our religion? If White people are curious about these things that means, there is something there. We

⁸⁶ Her Royal Highness, Adafo Onwordi, *Omu* Isselu-Uku, interview conducted in her palace in Isselu-Uku Delta State.

cannot be ignorant and just abandon our way of life because of a new religion⁸⁷.

Like my other coproducers, *Omu* Ibusa identifies as both a Christian and a traditionalist and uses the example of how colonial violence stole and continues to steal Igbo spiritual heritage. This response shows how although Odinani has been labelled as “unchristian” and evil, the “white man” is still intrigued by it and steals Igbo deities for his use.

Obi *Omu* of Ibusa continues to explain how this dual yet fluid way of practicing both spiritual world views is represented in her life. She responds in Igbo.

O bu m na-elekota mmiri di n'obodo m anya, ekwenyere m na Jizos, ekenyere m na ndi ichie m, ekwenyekwara m n'arusi ndi Igbo". Dika m di out a, abụ m nwa onwa, onwa na-agwa m okwu n'abali. Oge o bula m kpere ekpere, a na m ekpere ya ndi ichie m huru n'anya. A na m ebu uzo ekpe ekpere n'isi ezinaulo nne m ha tupu ndi ezinaulo nna m makana ha na-eme m nwa ma jirikwa otutu ihunanya choo m mma. Mmehazie, ekpere m nnenne m na ndi ozo ndi nnanna m ndi ozo nwere ihe ha na-eme na ndu.

I am a custodian of the rivers in my community, I believe in Jesus, I believe in my ancestors, and I believe in our traditional Igbo deities. As I am like this, I am a moon child, the moon speaks to me at night. When I pray, I pray to my beloved ancestors. I pray to my maternal family before my paternal family because they

⁸⁷ Her Royal Highness, *Obi* Isioma Nwannabuogwu, *Omu* Ibusa, interview conducted at her place in Ibusa Delta State.

nourished me and showed me a lot of love. Then I pray to my grandmother and all my ancestors that had an impact in my life⁸⁸

Like my previous coproducers, Chika, Adaku, and Ngozi, the *Obi Omu* of Ibusa implies that she practices both world views. She does not come out plainly to describe herself as a Christian but clearly states that she believes in Jesus and prays in the name of Jesus.

She continues in Igbo.

*“Ime ma n'otu oge a dī nnọọ mfe. N'agbamakwūkwo omenaala gị, ị mere emume ufọdu dī ka ịwusa libation na ịkpọ ndị nna nna gị n'oge Igwo Ofor?”*⁸⁹

“Practicing both of them is very simple. During your traditional wedding did you perform some rites like pouring libation and calling on your ancestors during your *Ìgbankwù*”?⁸⁹

I answer in the affirmative.

Then that is how it works today. I believe in my ancestors. To me my late grandmother is a saint because of the kind of lifestyle she had when she was alive. Anytime I see her in my dream I know it is going to be a good week. In Christian religion there is Saint Peter, Saint Paul [laughs] me I don't know any Peter or Paul, I know my grandmother Comfort, and she is an angel to me to me. I pray to Jesus, but I also pray to my grandmother angel comfort⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Her Royal Highness, *Obi* Isioma Nwannabuogwu, *Omu* Ibusa, interview conducted at her place in Ibusa Delta State.

⁸⁹ *Ìgbankwù* literally means "bride marriage ceremony", and it refers specifically to the customary marriage rites performed in accordance with Igbo cultural traditions.

⁹⁰ Her Royal Highness, *Obi* Isioma Nwannabuogwu, *Omu* Ibusa, interview conducted at her place in Ibusa Delta State.

On a quick read of the response above, one might assume that Omu Ibusa combines her Christian prayers with her prayers to her grandmother however that is not what she says. She identifies as a Christian but does not pray or believe in the Christian saints. Most importantly, she does not pray to the Christian saints while praying to her grandmother and as such, is not combining both belief systems. Although one could problematize this response by *Omu* Ibusa and say that she is co-opting the belief in saints which is prevalent in Christianity/Catholicism, and as such is “mixing” both beliefs. However, ancestor veneration is one of the several pillars of Igbo spiritual life and Omu Ibusa veneration of her grandmother is reflective of her Igbo spiritual heritage.

Other responses that point to the dual yet fluid nature of Odinani and Christianity performed by Igbo women can be appreciated through this statement made by Offormata. She responds in English.

If you are not practicing Odinani well, you cannot be a good Christian. The white man imported his western religion and used it as a tool to bring us down, it was a very smart way to devalue our people and our sense of being, so the knowledge of their religion is essential to help us fight against the effects of it. You cannot fight what you don't know. The knowledge of Christianity also increases your conviction for Odinani because Christianity cannot answer all our problems. It is your knowledge of the bible that will allow you to know of Abraham, that wicked man... he did not kill his son physically, but he killed him in his mind [laughs]... isn't that about sacrificing? When Christians speak badly about Odinani that we are always

performing sacrifices, I remind them about Abraham who was willingly going to sacrifice his only son... can you imagine that?⁹¹

She added in Igbo

“I ga-amariṛi akwụkwọ nsọ gị karịsịa ma ọ bụrụ na ị bụ onye omenala... Anyị nwere nsogbu pụrụ iche na Africa na Iso Ụzọ Kraịst na-adaba mgbe ụfọdu”.

“You must know your bible especially if you are a traditionalist... We have unique problems in Africa and Christianity sometimes falls short”⁹²

The response by Offormata is important and highlights the centrality of dualistic fluidity for several reasons. Firstly, she says that if one is not practicing Odinani “well” one cannot be a good Christian, this confirms that the practice of Odinani and Christianity are two separate entities and that the practice of one inadvertently leads to a greater understanding of the other. Secondly, she says that the knowledge of the bible increases one’s conviction of Odinani, confirming again that both belief systems are separate and not interwoven, however according to Offormata, one’s understanding of Christianity increases one’s understanding of Odinani, a position that I believe requires some clarity.

In addition, Offormata’s response emphasizes the point made by Nigerian historian and Professor of African Studies Toyin Falola. Who states:

Colonialists, who did not understand the social and spiritual essence of African traditional religion, (ATR) and disparaged it as too crude to be responsible for societal advancements. They offered religious alternatives that were incapable of making social or spiritual contributions that could

⁹¹Offormata 65-year-old Professor of Igbo history from Anambra State, *Orumba* South local government, interview conducted in Enugu State Nigeria.

⁹² Offormata 65-year-old Professor of Igbo history from Anambra State, *Orumba* South local government, interview conducted in Enugu State Nigeria.

sustain the development of the African people. The real decline in the moral and philosophical standards of Africans is connected to the religions that they practice. It is not that other religions are inherently weak or morally delinquent, but they are incapable of shouldering the ideological responsibilities that ATR had previously manage (Falola, 2003:541).

This quote serves not only as a reflection on the material consequences of colonial religious imposition but also as a philosophical critique of the moral erosion that followed the disruption of indigenous spiritual systems. According to Falola, the “religious alternatives” that were introduced in colonial and precolonial Nigeria, (Christianity and Islam) did not align with the needs, aspirations and world views of African people. Western religion was “deliberately weaponized and used in a war for cultural supremacy over Africa and its religious beliefs” (Ibid:539). It is used as a way of solidifying Euro American/white supremacy, which categorises Igbo culture along racist discriminatory groupings like primitive vs modern.

Falola’s critique is grounded in the reality that ATR was not a mere set of ritualistic practices but a comprehensive worldview that organized African life including politics, ecology, justice, and ethics. The colonial misunderstanding of ATR as a collection of primitive superstitions was not an innocent misrecognition; it was a strategic move to undermine indigenous authority structures and moral order. By casting ATR as incompatible with modernity, colonial administrators and missionaries legitimized the imposition of Christianity and Western moral codes as necessary civilizing forces. Yet, this imposition created a rupture between spiritual belief and communal responsibility. As Ifi Amadiume (1987) observed, ATR was deeply gender balanced and embedded in a dual-sex political system, whereas Christianity reinforced Victorian gender roles and patriarchal dominance. The spiritual systems that replaced ATR thus often lacked the capacity to mediate conflicts, sustain indigenous ecological knowledge, or nurture collective responsibility.

This supports Falola's argument that imported religions, while not morally deficient in themselves, were incapable of shouldering the ideological responsibilities that ATR had historically managed.

In addition, Falola's critique resonates with the notion of "epistemicides" as articulated by Santos (2014). When colonial powers dismissed ATR, they also dismissed centuries of indigenous philosophy, ethics, and metaphysical inquiry. The result was not just a change in ritual practices, but the erosion of moral frameworks that had been central to African identity and cohesion. African communities, now stripped of their spiritual scaffolding, were left to navigate modernity with imported systems that neither reflected their lived realities nor addressed the philosophical questions pertinent to their contexts. The decline in moral and philosophical standards Falola describes must also be understood considering the postcolonial state's failure to reclaim indigenous ideologies. As scholars such as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) have argued, postcolonial African states often perpetuated colonial structures, including the privileging of western religious and legal institutions. The continuity of colonial worldviews within African governance structures has left little room for the revalorization of diverse modalities of African spirituality as a legitimate foundation for public life. In this context, imported religions are not only ill equipped to manage social cohesion, but they are also complicit in the ideological alienation of African peoples from their spiritual roots. However, it is important to avoid romanticizing African spirituality as wholly egalitarian or infallible. Like all systems, it had its contradictions and exclusions. Yet, what Falola underscores is not the perfection of African spirituality but its contextual appropriateness and ideological integrity. The forced substitution of this system with one that lacked spiritual, ecological, and moral resonance with African life constitutes a profound loss, one whose consequences continue to manifest in contemporary crises of identity, governance, and ethics across the continent.

Back to the central issue of this chapter, which is on the subject of dualistic fluidity, one of my youngest coproducers 21-year-old Amarachi from Imo State gave an account of how her father who is a Pastor of a Pentecostal church took her to see a *Dibia*/native doctor when she was very sick as a young child. She responds in English.

I visited the village a few years ago for my grandmother's burial and became ill soon after I arrived. I kept on having this intense stomach pain and no medication they gave me was working. I went back to Lagos after the burial and did deliverance in my father's church. However, the pain increased so my parents suggested that I should return to the village and see a *Dibia*. The *Dibia* discovered that I had "spiritual pins" placed in my body during the burial and that was the reason for the stomach pains. He said many incantations took my arm and sucked out the pins with his mouth and spat out what looked like small black pins⁹³

She added:

"The pins were supposed to kill me slowly, I think. We never found out who was responsible. I have not had those types of stomach pains since then and it has been almost four years now. I believed I would have died if not for the intervention of the *Dibia*"

This account identifies another important way Igbo spirituality takes on a dual yet fluid component. According to Amarachi, her father is not just a Christian but a Pentecostal pastor, however that did not deter him from taking his daughter to see a *Dibia*/native doctor to seek alternative methods of healing that did not incorporate "Christian approved" methods.

⁹³ Amarachi, 21 year old student from Imo state, Ideato local government, Interview conducted in Enugu State

The notion of dualistic fluidity was not only represented through the conversation with coproducers. In addition to the accounts of the dual and fluid nature of Odinani and Christianity by Igbo women, the complementarity of both world views was also observed. On my visit to the *Omu* of Obior, Her Royal Highness, *Omu* Oyebuchibe, Okowkwo I observed a picture of Jesus hanging by the corner of her wall. The picture of Jesus was hanging in a room filled with other items and symbols that are used in the practice of Odinani including, kola nut, *nzu*, alligator pepper, cowries, palm wine, and alcohol. The presence of this picture signals the dualistic yet fluid nature of Odinani in the contemporary context. Throughout our interview, *Omu* Obior expressed her spiritual beliefs which do not conform with Christianity. She prays and makes sacrifices to her *Chi* and other Igbo deities on behalf of herself and her community. She does not attend church, does not practice any Christian modes of worship and describes herself as “belonging to the water” which means that she is a mother to all water creatures.⁹⁴ It is important to note that the place and practice of gendered power through spirituality in Igbo communities continues to evolve and take on new meaning.

In addition, the practice of both Odinani and Christianity among contemporary Igbo women is also described as a form of “insurance”⁹⁵. For some of my coproducers who are Christians but practice Odinani, the switching between these two spiritual world views; serves as a form of insurance. To them, they believe that there is no way to accurately tell which belief system is “correct”, or which practice will lead them to heaven, so they practice both forms of spirituality “just in case” and to cover all their bases.

⁹⁴ I talk about this concept of “water spirits in chapter two” of this thesis through my literature review. They include water and other celestial beings that reside in the water.

⁹⁵ Chi Chi 41-year-old writer from Anambra State, *Aniocha* local government, interview conducted in Onitsha Anambra state.

This statement below by Justice Ngozi emphasizes the point of the dual yet fluid practice of Odinani as insurance. She responds in English.

“I am a Christian, but I have my reservations. I can never disregard everything about Odinani. Traditional modes of worship are not all about diabolism. The *Mami Wata*⁹⁶ is after all a creation of god. God made the water even if evil things reside in it. Give Ceaser what belongs to Ceaser.

For coproducers like Ngozi, her reverence of Odinani while being a Christian is interwoven in the fabric of her daily life. Both identities are separate yet intertwined. Her practice of both belief systems shows up through her interaction with herself and others and serves as a coping mechanism in response to colonial historical trauma. Colonialism introduced structural violence in Igbo society, attacking spiritual and social frameworks. Yet, Igbo traditional spirituality endures as a vital coping mechanism existing not as a relic, but as an active system of adaptation and empowerment in the face of historical rupture.

At this point, it is important to present an account by Adaku who is one of my coproducers that shares the practical way in which she navigates the practice of Christianity and Odinani. Adaku incorporates some form of “mixing” between both spiritual belief systems and she believes that both world views are an expression of her two identities as an Igbo woman and a Christian. Ultimately, she insists that we all worship the same god, albeit in a different way. She responds in English.

⁹⁶ The name “Mami Wata” (from Pidgin English “Mother Water”) refers to a diverse family of water spirits, rather than a single deity. Her visual image, a female torso atop a fish, serpent, or snake lower half, adorned with mirrors, jewelry, and snakes. Mami Wata embodies duality, she offers wealth, fertility, healing, beauty, yet also poses danger, emotional turmoil, and even death. Her snake symbolizes wisdom, divination, and sometimes enchantment or threat. See Drewal, H. J. (2009). *Sacred waters: Arts for Mami Wata, and other divinities in Africa and the Diaspora*. Indiana University Press.

When things become very difficult for me and I have prayed to god about it... maybe I have been trying to get a job or I have been experiencing spiritual attack, I go and get *Ogilisi* leaves and pray over it. After praying over it I say Psalm 24, 36 and 31, to pray for protection and breakthrough... Things begin to happen... I begin to get answers to my prayers. The use of traditional Igbo prayers and psalms together does not clash at all... that is the right way to do it [laughs]. Women must be knowledgeable on both ways.⁹⁷

This response by Adaku is different from the articulation provided by the rest of my coproducers and requires further interrogation. From her response, one can conclude that she combines/mixes both Christianity and Odinani at the same time for the same purpose. She prays a Christian prayer while incorporating traditional Igbo spiritual elements like *ogilisi*, and *nzu* simultaneously in her spiritual practice. This view is contrary to the practice of other coproducers that show a clear separation between the practice of both spiritual belief systems. However, it is crucial to identify that although Adaku incorporates both belief systems, it is difficult to determine if the result of such “mixing”, creates a hybrid or a “new” kind of religion or spirituality. Does her incorporation of Christian psalms and other Bible passages while holding *nzu*, culminate to the creation of a new kind of Christianity of Odinani? Is that her intent? Is this the only way she practices her spirituality, or does she perform this act of “religion mixing” only when she is “experiencing difficulty” as she puts it? Does she only practice this form of religious mixing alone or while “praying” with others? Is this a practice that was learnt, or did she create it herself? These important questions lead me to

⁹⁷ Adaku, 43 year old businesswomen from Abia State, Aba North local government, interview conducted in Onitsha Anambra state.

interrogate how “mixing of religions” or religious syncretism, relates to my research and the concept of dualistic fluidity which explores how two beliefs systems can be practiced side by side, but separately.

Syncretism is generally understood to be the process of exchange and interaction that occurs when two or more distinct belief systems are fused to create a new one. Syncretism is defined as a “combination of two contrasting ideas, finding synergy in pursuit of a common goal that ultimately blends the two to such an extent that something new emerges that originates from both, yet is different from them” (Anonaba, 2025:49). The idea of “mixing religions” is central to the concept of religious syncretism as it refers to the blending or fusion of elements from two or more distinct religious traditions, leading to new hybrid practices and belief systems. According to Anizoba and Aande (2021), “religious syncretism often occurs when a foreign belief system and teachings are introduced and blended with an indigenous one whereby the new, hybrid religion then takes on a life of its own” (Ibid:11). Religious syncretism can manifest through the adoption of symbols, practices, or rituals, and the reinterpretation of religious texts. Within religious studies, Anonaba (2025), explores how syncretic religions emerge through the fusion of different spiritual traditions, such as Afro-Caribbean religions like Santería or Vodou, which combine elements of African, indigenous, and Christian beliefs that functions as a creative response to cultural encounters, addressing human needs for meaning and belonging. Anizoba and Aande (2021) identify the concept of hybridization/hybridity as a central discourse of religious syncretism and insist that the practice of spiritual life does not simply encounter, but interact, interweave, and invent anew.

This brief explanation of religious syncretism provided above, serves to reveal the ways in which the practice of Odinani and spirituality in contemporary Igbo society, cannot be identified as syncretic. The centrality of hybridity and the creation of a “new” religion inherent in religious

syncretism, means that the notion of dualist fluidity best describes their reality because they do not create a “new” religion or attempt to do so. In the case of dualist fluidity, my coproducers accounts show how the practice of both beliefs is performed separately, and sometimes in different locations. Their unique practice of Odinani and Christianity does not combine both beliefs (hybrid) but strives to keep both spiritual world views separate. The separation of both world views highlights the fact that women in postcolonial Igbo communities continue to straddle two separate/dual lives. They identify as Christians in public but remain practitioners of Odinani in their villages and in the privacy of their homes. They respect and revere Christian doctrines and do the same for their tradition, while keeping both beliefs “safe” from “adulteration”. The separation of both spiritual world views is connected to the fact that they recognize that many of the beliefs inherent in Odinani (ancestor veneration, reincarnation, and others), is contrary to Christian values and as such, problematic to merge. It is crucial to identify that my mention of syncretism at this point of my thesis departs from its association to nation building. In the context of African countries like Nigeria, where colonization introduced Christianity and Islam into societies with deeply rooted indigenous/traditional spiritual systems, religious syncretism emerged as both a coping mechanism and a tool for constructing a collective national identity (Mbiti, 2015). My research, however, does not center this discourse of nation building, or collective national identity, as it is more concerned with the unique way tradition and Christianity have remained relevant in the individual lives and identity of Igbo women which is very separate from their national or collective identity.

Gendered Igbo spirituality is private, personal, and customized to suit individual needs and ambitions. Igbo women will not bring traditional Igbo symbols of worship⁹⁸ into a church or

⁹⁸ Objects like oji/kolanut, *ofo*/staff *nzu*, *ogilishi*, and allegator pepper.

expose them to outsiders, and they reserve their practice of Odinani to themselves or their family. They respect both religions and spiritual beliefs, while keeping them aligned but separate. I will be remiss to ignore the fact that there are many indigenous Igbo Christian churches⁹⁹ who pray in the name of Jesus but perform practices that mimic some rituals adopted in Odinani, particularly through their rituals, music and practices.¹⁰⁰ The practice of both world views in these kinds of churches can be described as syncretic, however indigenous churches are not the subject of my research. I sought to understand how the practice of Odinani in Igbo Nigeria is negotiated in the lives of everyday contemporary Igbo women who belong to diverse Christian denominations.

Ekpere m n'isi gi bu na ihe o bu la i ga-eji nchọchaa mee ga-agaziri gi. Ekwenyere m na nchọchaa ga-ebuli umu nwaanyi elu ma mee ka ogo umu nwaanyi no rikwue elu. Ekpere m bu na gi na ndi gi na ha so bia ije a ga-enweta ezi nchekwa. O ga-adiri unu niile mma, unu ga-araghachikwa ebe unu si bia njem a n'udo. Ihe niile i rioro n'aka Chineke bu nke i ga-enweta... Ofọ m n'isi gi bu ka o gaziere gi. Ka ihunanya kpọ unu niile ihu n'ụwa a n'aha Jizọs.

My word of prayer for you is that whatever you want to use this research for will be successful. I hope that this research will uplift women and will elevate the statue of women more. I pray that you and the people that have come with you will be safe. It will be well with you all, and you will return from where you are coming

⁹⁹ The Cherubim and Seraphim Church (C&S) was established in 1925. The Celestial Church of Christ, established in 1947. Olumba Olumba Obu (Brotherhood of the Cross and Star) established in 1956. Holy Ghost Church of Christ (Obioma) and many others.

¹⁰⁰ Some of the services in these indigenous Igbo Christian services feature energetic drumming, clapping, akin to folk music. Songs often reference ancestral blessings, personal transformation, and spiritual warfare, echoing traditional prayers sung at community rites such as funerals.

from safely. All you ask of God for will be fulfilled...I wish you success, I wish you all the love in the world in Jesus' name¹⁰¹

I decided to end this chapter by unpacking the prayer that HRH, *Obi Josephine Nwannabuogwu*, *Omu* Ibusa said to me. *Omu Obi* Ibusa describes herself as a “traditionalist”¹⁰², who has not been to church since she was a child. To my surprise, her prayer to me at the end of our interview, ended in “Jesus' name”, creates people who exist in a fractured locus whereby they hold multiple belief systems and build walls between these varying systems. The result of this is witnessed in the dual yet fluid way in which contemporary Igbo women boldly affirm their belief in Odinani while still “holding on to Christianity”, and in the way they navigate both world views separately by an “imaginary wall”. This ability of people to practice Odinani while also practicing Christianity or expressing Christian beliefs, exposes the dualistic yet fluid nature of traditional Igbo spirituality in contemporary Igbo society. The separation of both world views underscores the “battle” between “modernity”/Christianity/Euro-American culture, and tradition/Odinani/ specifically in the ways in which some things/cultures cannot be so easily unified.

¹⁰¹ Her Royal Highness, Obi Isioma Nwannabuogwu, *Omu* Ibusa, interview conducted at her place in Ibusa Delta state

¹⁰² A person that practices Odinani



Image 11: Her Royal Highness, Obi Joesphine Nwannabuogwu, Omu Ibusa in her palace in Ibusa Delta State. Obi Omu Nwannabuogwu who is currently one of the youngest Omu's, highlights the humanitarian component of Omuship by prioritizing the necessity of giving back to the women in her community and the sacredness of this task. Photo courtesy of the author 2024.

**LOST SPIRITUAL CONNECTIONS AND COLONIAL DENIAL IN POSTCOLONIAL
IGBO SOCIETY**

“The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.”
— *Achebe, Things Fall Apart.*

This chapter achieves several things. Firstly, it analyses the impact of gendered spirituality in Igbo communities by showing how missionaries and colonial policies were implicit in curbing the role/status of Igbo women in postcolonial Igbo social and cultural life. Secondly, it presents a detailed account of the ways in which colonization resulted in a “loss” of spiritual connection for Igbo women. This “loss” generally appeared though a nonchalance, and a lack of, or limited knowledge about Odinani. In addition, it analyses how the coloniality of knowledge is embedded in the way information concerning Igbo spirituality is framed and constructed among Igbo women, and how it ultimately contributes to hindering the acceptance of Odinani. Thirdly, this chapter exposes the nature of colonial denial Igbo women convey when they express the effects of colonization. This denial is expressed in the way colonization is made sanitized, legitimized, and outrightly denied. I argue that the denial of the reality of colonization serves as a coping mechanism, a form of resistance, and a strategy of retelling Igbo women’s colonial histories, that seeks to distance themselves from the position of victimhood. Finally, this chapter instrumentalizes the prevalence of the two fundamental premises of the colonality project, namely, the colonality of being, and colonality of knowledge to directly interrogate how the “loss” of spiritual connections and colonial denial, are instrumental in creating particular types of colonial rhetoric/knowledges that alter Igbo women’s sense of being.

7.0 The Impact of Colonization on Gendered Spirituality.

The previous chapter identifies how unique forms of power through spirituality were the reserve of Igbo women. These unique forms of power are associated with their closeness/proximity to the “invisible universe”¹⁰³, their ability to create, the power of their naked body, their powers of pronouncements, and lastly, the power their blood holds. With colonization particularly through Christianity and western education, these unique forms and understanding of traditional spirituality in Nigeria began to be labelled as primitive, evil, barbaric and “ungodly” (Chidester, 1996, and Kraemer, 1938) subsequently leading to those knowledge’s being villainized and “lost”.

The missionary is a revolutionary, he must be, for to preach and plant Christianity means to make a frontal attack on the beliefs, the customs, the apprehension of life and the world, and by implication (because tribal religions are primarily social realities) on the social structures of primitive society. The missionary enterprise need not be ashamed of this, because colonial administration, planters, merchants, western penetration, etc., perform a much more severe and important attack” (Ibid: 342).

The position by Kraemer (1938) captures the feelings of Christian missionaries in colonial Nigeria. At its core, the quote positions the missionary as a “revolutionary force”, not in the liberatory sense, but in the radical reordering of society through ideological conquest. Preaching and planting Christianity, in this view, constitutes a “frontal attack” on indigenous worldviews. This attack is not incidental; it is deliberate and foundational. By introducing a foreign religious system that discredits and delegitimizes existing spiritualities, missionaries systematically dismantled the cosmologies, moral codes, and collective identities of African societies. In the case of the Igbo people of Nigeria, the advent of Christianity brought with it not only new beliefs but a redefinition

¹⁰³ In African cosmologies, the universe is not an inert mechanistic system but a vibrant, relational cosmos, a tapestry woven from both visible realities and invisible spiritual agencies. This “invisible world,” often overlooked or suppressed by colonial epistemologies, is fundamental to African ways of knowing. See Appiah, K. A. (2020). *Invisible agents: Spirits in a Central African history*. Ohio University Press.

of what it meant to be human, moral, and respectable, especially along gendered lines (Amadiume, 1987; Nzegwu, 2006). By attacking indigenous spiritual systems, missionaries effectively intervened in the entire social fabric. The imposition of Christianity undermined these structures, branding them “pagan,” “diabolical,” or backward. This demonization was not only theological; it redefined African society through western epistemic frameworks, what Oyěwùmí (1997) calls “epistemic imperialism.” (p:125).

Interestingly, the quote concludes by arguing that the missionary “need not be ashamed,” because the broader colonial apparatus, through merchants, planters, and administrators waged an even more “severe and important attack.” This sentiment reveals the racism, and coordination between Christian missions and colonial regimes. Far from being apolitical or neutral, missionary work often smoothed the path for colonial administration by, providing western style education, and inculcating new forms of discipline and obedience (Falola, 2023). Scholars such as Mudimbe (1988) and Fanon (1961) have long argued that religion served as a soft instrument of colonial domination, facilitating what Fanon calls the “cultural mummification of the colonized subject” (Fanon, 1961:34). The demonizing of spiritual knowledge, understanding and connections contributes to a phenomenon known as internalized colonialism which functions collectively and individually. It generally appears through a sense of self-loathing and inferiority complex of one’s culture, and sense of self. According to Agozino, (2003), internalized colonialism weakens collective self-esteem by distorting the importance of the indigenous culture. At the individual level, internalized colonialism encourages a sense of inferiority and causes a person to lose part of her/his individual and collective identity.

6.01 Loss of Spiritual Connections in Postcolonial Nigeria.

“Amaghị m ka o si adị ikpe ekpere n’asụsụ Igbo”

“I don’t know what it feels like to pray in Igbo language”¹⁰⁴

This statement made by Adaeze introduces the nature of what I will be analyzing in this chapter which centers the effects of colonization on the practice, acceptance and perception of gendered spirituality. Through the accounts provided by some of my coproducers, the loss of spiritual connections can be categorized in two different ways. Firstly, it is appreciated through the limited or sparse knowledge of Odinani, that was recorded by some of my coproducers, and secondly through the conflation of Odinani with diabolism. Ultimately, the loss of spiritual connections I encountered was witnessed not only by the lack of information concerning it, but most significantly through the negative perception, and lack of acceptance of Odinani.

Like some of my coproducers, Udochukwu has very strong opinions of Odinani. Her views reflected the ways in which some women in contemporary Igbo society have come to associate Odinani as something deviant and wrong. She responds in English.

“My grandmother was a traditional worshipper; she only became a Christian in 2021 and died in 2022. Thank God she died after her conversion... All these traditional ways of worship are bad; they are evil and diabolical. At least my grandmother was saved on time”¹⁰⁵.

This statement by Udochukwu brings up the question of indigenous/traditional knowledges and how/if they are “passed down” to the next generation.

¹⁰⁴ Adaeze, 24-year-old student from Delta State, Ogwashi Ukwu Local government, interview conducted in Enugu state

¹⁰⁵ Udochukwu, 22 year old student from Enugu State, Nsukka local government, interview conducted in Enugu state.

“Pass on ke? No o... we are Christians, and we don’t do things like that. We are children of God. When she was alive my father made sure she did not speak to us about any spiritual thing... she discarded all those things before she died. I don’t need that kind of knowledge. I am a Christian and all this kind of stuff is diabolic.”¹⁰⁶

Udochukwu statement also exposes the reach of Christianity through colonization and the ways in which indigenous knowledges ultimately become “lost” and abandoned. She continues to contribute her view through this exchange below.

“Odinani is diabolical now... don’t you know. These our old religions are all about sacrifice and killing people for money, it is not the type of thing Christians do”.

The conversation with Udochukwu reminds us of how the effects of colonization are intergenerational and how people from colonial backgrounds continue to reproduce colonial rhetoric.

Colonial rule was an imposition that unleashed deadly blow on African culture with the immediate consequence of the introduction of such values as rugged individualism, corruption, capitalism and oppression. Colonial rule disrupted the traditional machinery of moral homogeneity and practice. The method of moral inculcation was vitiated, which resulted in the abandonment of traditional norms and values through a systematic depersonalization of the African and paganization of its values (Igboin, 2011:101).

Colonialism in Africa waged not only a political and economic conquest but also a systematic campaign against indigenous spiritual knowledge. Through missionary rhetoric, and educational reforms, colonial regimes dismissed ancestral wisdom as superstition or witchcraft. This resulted

¹⁰⁶ Udochukwu, 22 year old student from Enugu State, Nsukka local government, interview conducted in Enugu State.

in epistemic violence, deeply displacing spiritual systems that once regulated community life, cosmological understanding, and environmental stewardship. Colonial rule in Africa fundamentally disrupted the indigenous knowledge system of orally transmitted practices encompassing agriculture, healing, governance, and cosmology. Colonial ideology introduced a rigid hierarchy, favoring western “scientific” knowledge while branding indigenous knowledge as superstition (Gaillard and Mercer, 2012). Postcolonial health systems, for instance, replaced traditional healing, thereby cementing a colonial science regime that delegitimized indigenous knowledges. Even where indigenous knowledges persisted, their oral basis became a liability (Shizha, 2013). Colonizers and later western trained elites favored written knowledge, dismissing oral traditions as unreliable or backward (Jackson et al., 2022). These dynamics fractured intergenerational knowledge transfer as older custodians were marginalized, and youth grew alienated from ancestral wisdom.

On the issue of “forgotten” or “lost” knowledges and the negative associations attributed to Igbo culture, my coproducer (Udochukwu) had this to say.

“It is like you have not watched *Karashika*¹⁰⁷. In the movie you can see how all these spiritual things are used to kill people. What kind of religion will ask you to bring your child for sacrifice and use their blood... Odinani is diabolical... it is dirty and evil”.

Her comment does not consider the fact that some of these story lines are exaggerated to boost viewership. When asked about the possibility of that being the case, she responds.

¹⁰⁷ *Karashika* is one of the most popular Nollywood horror classics produced in the 1990’s. The movie is about women using the occult to obtain several material things specifically from men. The movie actively demonizes and misrepresents Igbo tradition and has several scenes of over exaggerated “battles” between good (Jesus/ the Church) and evil (Lucifer/the ‘world’) with evil ultimately losing at the end.

“I don’t think so, these things are happening in real life”

Udochukwu’s view is again one sided. Animal sacrifices are practiced and acceptable in Christianity particularly in the Old Testament. I remind her of one very popular Bible story in the Old Testament of Issac, who was almost sacrificed by his father Abraham on the instruction of God. Although Christianity is the biggest tool in the demonizing of Odinani, the role movies play in shaping and sustaining such images cannot be oversimplified. For the coproducers that share the same view as Udochukwu, the belief that Odinani is diabolical is traced through the accounts of movies. For some, however, they identify that their negative view on Odinani is based on the personal accounts of people they know.

Since the early 20th century, Hollywood has consistently conflated African spiritual traditions like Vodou with dark magic and evil (Behrend, 2016). Movies like *Spell* (2020), *The Skeleton Key* (2005), *The Believers* (1987), and much older movies such as *White Zombie* (1932), and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), introduced tropes of zombie controlled bodies and sinister priests wielding voodoo dolls, casting Afro-diasporic forms of spirituality as malevolent. These images, deeply ingrained in Western imagination, reflect a longstanding portrayal of African spirituality as primitive and threatening. In Nigerian cinema/Nollywood, the tension between Christianity and indigenous religion is often dramatized through film, portraying traditional priests, rituals, and spiritual powers as threats requiring Christian intervention (Nyamkoh and Tchakote, 2024). Films such as *Living in Bondage* (1992), depict secret cults and dark rituals with modern church figures portrayed as the only antidote (Meyer, 2004; Azuawusiefe, 2021). This framing aligns traditional spirituality with the occult/evil, reinforcing a narrative of moral and spiritual danger. Nollywood’s frequent visual depiction of spiritual battles complete with dramatic lighting, possession, and

exorcism, transforms traditional rites into evil theatrical performances (Azuawusiefe, 2021), where Christian forces triumph over corrupt indigenous powers.

This lack of connection and knowledge of Igbo spirituality is also recorded through the account of Oluebube, a 22-year-old student and one of my coproducers.

“Ekpemekpe n’usoro omenaala ndi Igbo gbara ghari. Ndi Dibia ga-agwa gi bilite n’etiti ime abali kpee ekpere”

“Igbo traditional religion is just strange. These *Dibia*’s will ask you to wake up in the middle of the night to pray”

She added:

"Gini mere i ga-eji teta n'abali? Site na Iso Uzọ Kraịst, i nwere ike ikpe ekpere ebe o bula i nọ"

“Why do you have to wake up at night? With Christianity you can just pray wherever you are” ¹⁰⁸.

Christian denominations (in Nigeria especially) conduct several prayers that are performed at different times particularly at midnight. Some denominations call it “*Commanding the Day*”, but these forms of prayers are generally known as “*Midnight Prayers*”. These “*Midnight Prayers*” are said for “challenging” requests like the prayer for a child. The belief is that the hour of midnight is a very important time when the ‘spirit’ of a person is at the most vulnerable and that God is more susceptible to answering one’s request. In addition, the belief is that to be disciplined to stay awake till midnight, shows sacrifice and spiritual dedication. The practitioners of Midnight Prayers; point to several scriptures ¹⁰⁹ that highlight the significance of the midnight hour and insist that to “fight

¹⁰⁸ Oluebube, 22-year-old student from Enugu state, Nkanu Local government, interview conducted in Enugu State.

¹⁰⁹ Psalm 119:62- “I will rise and give thanks to God at midnight.” Acts 16:25-26-Paul and Silas are prayer at midnight, and the chains of the prisoners are loosened, etc.

off” spiritual attacks you must pray at a time when the ‘spirits’ are the most “active”. This similarity between the supposed practice of Igbo traditional spirituality happening at night with the Christian Midnight Prayers, portrays how easily something common and widely accepted can be demonized when practiced in a different context.

My co-producers have a selective way in which they described Odinani as can be witnessed in this exchange.

“These traditionalists are all evil people. One of my aunties that was married for many years without a child decided to go native (meaning use traditional methods). The *Dibia* told her that she would get pregnant if she comes to his shrine and sleep with him at midnight... can you imagine”¹¹⁰

She added:

“The way traditional religion works is just evil... there is no place for it in 2024”.

The example that she provides of *Dibia*’s asking women to sleep with them to become pregnant, can be compared to the tactics some pastors and priests employ in Nigeria. Allegations of impropriety are a regular occurrence among “men of God” in Nigeria with the recent case of TB Joshua being the most prominent. The 2024 BBC documentary¹¹¹ of Temitope, Balogun Joshua popularly known as TB Joshua, who established the biggest televangelist church in Nigeria known as “*Synagogue Church of All Nations*” (SOAN), accounts for the most salacious case of criminal misconduct in a Christian denomination in Nigeria. After his death in 2021, accounts of sexual crimes, torture, self-harm, forced abortions and many other criminal offenses were made against

¹¹⁰ Oluebube, 22-year-old student from Enugu State, Nkanu local government, interview conducted in Enugu State.

¹¹¹ Link to BBC documentary: TB Joshua <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZZVQxjXWCg>

him with majority of his victims being women. Many other Nigerian pastors and priests have been connected to “fake miracles” and various forms of criminal misconduct. The singling out of Odinani as diabolical with the example of impropriety by native doctors is limiting. Understandably there are many Igbo traditional practitioners with questionable motives and practices but to conflate Odinani with diabolism is misguided.

Some other coproducers I encountered are saddened by this loss of Igbo spirituality. They associate the lack of connection and knowledge of Odinani to the way in which Christianity has in many instances “replaced” Igbo culture and way of life. One of such coproducers is Chi Chi. She responds in English.

“Christianity has becoming culture, and we are losing the way we lived. The way our ancestors connected to the spirits, to their ancestors, and to their Chi... we are losing all of that to the Christian faith.”

She added:

“In the past when you visit a home, kola nut is brought out and presented as refreshments with a prayer to Chukwu/God, but today it is Chin Chin¹¹² no longer kola nut that is presented, and the prayer over the kola nut is replaced with a Christian prayer over the Chin Chin”¹¹³.

Chi Chi goes further to provide other examples.

¹¹² Chin Chin is a Nigerian snack. It is a crunchy deep-fried cookie that is usually cut into cubelike shapes. It is served alone as a light refreshment with soft drinks to visitors.

¹¹³ Chi Chi 41-year-old writer from Anambra State, *Aniocha* local government, interview conducted in Onitsha Anambra State.

“Masquerade festivals are now being replaced by cross over¹¹⁴ services... The bible is also documented, whereas our spirituality is shrouded in mystery and suspicion. Oral tradition needs to be practiced, in order to be kept alive but as the practice of our spirituality was destroyed, not only could it not be practiced it most definitely could not be kept”.

This notion of “lost” or “forgotten” spiritual practices continues to emerge in my conversations. The question of how colonial erasure can be measured particularly in how it affects women in contemporary Igbo society needs to be understood.

In the past before colonization, funeral rites were performed with a particular focus on the wellbeing of the bereaved. Our forefathers incorporated singing, isolating yourself from others, meditating, humming and other practices to give you the time you need to grieve. Our forefathers understood that grief required several techniques. Sometimes you would feel like singing, other times you would want to be quiet and just meditate... they were really smart. You could not be out and about in public for some time. The culture understood that you needed to be by yourself time to accept what has happened. The grieving process was sacred and was understood as being spiritual. Today people are attending grief therapy and are paying lots of money to meditate, sing and have some alone time¹¹⁵

Chi Chi also identifies other practices (that are not particularly specific to women) that have been lost through the colonial encroachment of Igbo land. Several coming of age rituals that signaled

¹¹⁴A cross over service takes place in Churches and happens on the last day of the year and continues until January 1st to signal the end of the “old” year while celebrating the beginning of a new year.

¹¹⁵ Chi Chi 41-year-old writer from Anambra State, *Aniocha* local government, interview conducted in Onitsha Anambra State.

when a child transitions into adulthood have been “lost” and demonized by Christianity. The practice of instructing on the skills of intimacy that was taught to Igbo women who were about to be married has also been associated with promiscuity and loose morals. Other skills like learning how to build a barn to store yams, learning how to tie yams properly so that they do not rot, and being instructed on how to tap palm wine are some of the skills that have been pushed to the margins in contemporary Igbo cultural life.

For the coproducers that believed that Christianity is directly responsible for the diminished status of Igbo woman they also attribute Christianity with the rise of criminality and laziness in Igbo West African society. Some set of coproducers insist that because of Christianity, “modern” Igbo women are now lazy, deviant and dependent on men. They highlight the fact that because Christianity positions men as the breadwinner and head of the house, “modern” Igbo women no longer understand that they have separate and important responsibilities in the family. Adaeze elaborates on this connection between Christianity and laziness as follows:

“Makana ekwenyere m na Chiukwu ga-egboro m mkpa m, anọrọzie m n’ụlọ ghara ịgba mbọ... ghara ileru anya ala hụ ihe m ga-iji aka meputa”.

“Because I believe God, will provide, many women will just seat at home, and not work hard... not looking inwards and overlook things they can do with my hands”¹¹⁶

The relationship between Christianity and perceptions of laziness in Africa has been examined in various academic studies, with some scholars suggesting that certain religious practices may inadvertently encourage dependency (Jeske, 2021). A study focusing on Igbo Christians in Nsukka

¹¹⁶ Adaeze, 24-year-old student from Delta State, Ogwashi Ukwu Local government, interview conducted in Enugu State

Nigeria, titled “*Begging enterprise: A growing trend among Igbo Christians*” by Ugwu and Okoye, (2022) observed a rise in begging among individuals particularly women. The research attributes this trend to several factors including laziness and suggests that some women exploit religious sentiments of charity, leading to increased lack of motivation and reduced productivity. The study recommends a return to communal values and hard work, and Offormata agrees.

“N’omenaala anyị, ntaramahụhụ dīrī agwa ojọọ ọ bụla mmadụ mere. Ntaramahụhụ ndị a na-adị n’ụdị anyị na-ahụ, nke mmadụ ga-ata anụ ahụ ya ahụhụ nakwa nke ime mmụọ. Ndị nnanna anyị ha anaghị ekwe ka mmadụ nwuo tupu ekpee ya ikpe... ihe onye metara, ahụhụ ya na-abịa ozigbo ozigbo”.

“In our culture we have consequences for crimes committed. These consequences are usually physical, practical, and spiritual in nature. Our forefathers did not wait for you to die and face judgement... the consequence was immediate”¹¹⁷

Ugonna shares a similar view with Offormata and calls Christian’s “pretenders”.

Ekpemekpe ndị ụka Kraịst aghasaala anyị... Ọ na-esi ezigbo ike ihu okwu arụsị na ngwuru ndị mmadụ ugbua... a na-ahụta ndị ka nwe okwu arụsị na be ha ka ndị na-agwọ ogwu.... Ọ bụrụ na inweghị okwu arụsị, kedu ka gị na Chi gị ga-esi akparịta nkata? Ndị be anyị na-aka Popu adị nsọ mana onweghị ihe ha ma... anyị na-aghọrị onwe anyị.

Christianity has destroyed us... it is very rare to find a shrine in people’s compound anymore... those that still have a shrine are called fetish... if you don’t have a

¹¹⁷ Offormata 65-year-old Professor of Igbo history from Anambra State, *Orumba* South local government, interview conducted in Enugu State Nigeria.

shrine how can you communicate with your *Chi*? Our people pretend to be holier than the Pope when they don't know anything... we are just deceiving ourselves.

118

She adds in English.

“Christianity is responsible for all the crime we experience in Asaba... people are no longer afraid. Our system has become so porous that we have lost all control. A young boy of 15 year old has started carrying guns and doing drugs... I blame this especially on Pentecostal churches because they preach that once you become a Christian all your sins are forgiven, and all has been made new”.

She adds in English.

This directly means that people feel like they have the license to do whatever they like, and God will always forgive them. No crime is unforgivable... this kind of thinking is what is giving our youths ‘mind’¹¹⁹ to continue to do the wrong things. In the past, our parents could just leave money, put a piece of *nzu* on it and say nothing. The presence of the chalk alone would serve as a deterrent, and no one would touch it. But today with Christianity, people will even move the *nzu* and steal the money and pray for forgiveness. If you put money on top of a Bible, they will not only steal the money but the Bible too.¹²⁰

She continues in Igbo.

¹¹⁸ Ugonna, 68-year-old Chief from Delta State, *Oshimili* South Local government, interview conducted in her Asaba Delta State.

¹¹⁹ To “give mind” in Nigerian Pidgin English means to have courage/boldness.

¹²⁰ Ugonna, 68-year-old Chief from Delta State, *Oshimili* South Local government, interview conducted in her Adaba Delta State.

“N’oge gboo, o bughị ihe o bula masiri gi ka i ga-eme... agwa ojoo o bula i kpara nwere ahuhu diri gi, ezinaulo gi na obodo. Ekpemekpe ndi uka Kraist emebisiela omenaala anyi, ihe anyi ji di ebube na njirimara anyi... anyi amaghizi ndi anyi bu ozo”.

“In the past you could not just do whatever you liked... every bad action had a significant reaction on yourself, your family and the community. Christianity has watered down our culture, our values and our identity... we don’t even know who we are anymore”.

A similar view is held by Ngozi.

“Mgbe ndi mmadu na-eke Chiukwu n’usoro omenaala, mpu di ole na ole. Ugbua, ngwa ngwa i siri ‘obara Jizos’ agbaghara gi ihe niile i metara. Eziokwu, tupu I mee njo o bula, agbagharala ya”.

“When people were practicing African traditional religion¹²¹ there was less criminality. Now, once you say ‘blood of Jesus’ all is forgiven. In fact, before you commit any sin all is already forgiven”.
“With ‘pure’ ART, you cannot be evil because it will affect so many people including your entire generation”.¹²²

She goes on to add in English.

We threw away the baby with the bath water with the introduction of Christianity. We should have taken the baby and discarded the bath water. We don’t have a good society; there is no respect. In the past, cases of rape were extremely rare.... You would be ostracized if you raped anyone

¹²¹ Ngozi uses the term African traditional religion (ART) simultaneously with Odinani. In many of the interviews I conducted, religion was loosely used to connote spirituality.

¹²² Ngozi, 59-year-old, Justice of the customary court of appeals Asaba. From Asaba, *Oshimili* South local government, interview conducted in Asaba Delta State Nigeria.

women. Women were freer and safer in their communities... there is so much criminality because there is no fear ... we have lost who we are.

Offormata also holds a similar view on the connection between the rise in criminality and Christianity in contemporary Igbo West African communities and responds in English.

“Christianity is a cover to do evil. In our old religions¹²³ you had to work for your money but with Christianity and the belief in miracles, the rise in crime is just something else. People are now lazy, and they don’t want to put in the work, but they want results... it does not make sense at all.

She adds in English.

“As a Catholic when you sin, you go for confession, and the Priest tells you to say 10 hail Mary’s and your sins are forgiven... how can that be? There is no punishment for doing evil so people continue to commit crime. In our traditional religion there is no second chance... we have lost our identity”¹²⁴.

The argument that Christianity and its “tolerance” for crime is problematized in the literature about the effects of colonization on the morality and Africans. According to Ewelu (1999):

New values have been adopted and canonized. Dishonesty and cheating, fraud and getting away with it have now replaced ancestral moral uprightness and probity. Logic and legal smartness with words have banished truth and integrity from traditional values. Getting rich overnight without working for it has become the new criterion for achievement. Youths now take on titles such as chiefs and gain unaccounted-for-wealth, and titles that their ancestors merited through years of hard work and honesty (Ewelu, 1999: 43).

¹²³ Like Ngozi and some other coproducers including Offormata, religion and spirituality are used simultaneously to describe Odinani.

¹²⁴ Offormata 65-year-old Professor of Igbo history from Anambra State, *Orumba* South local government, interview conducted in Enugu State Nigeria

In addition, Williams, (2002) insists that the ascendancy of “prosperity theology” (Ibid:2), particularly within Pentecostalism, has introduced dangerous moral and social dynamics. He adds that by promoting wealth acquisition as a spiritual mandate, it has cultivated materialistic values, undermined traditional ethics, and, in some cases, normalized criminal behaviors like fraud, kidnapping, and corruption. “Prosperity theology reframes faith as a transaction where elaborate rituals like seed faith/tithing, demand large offerings in exchange for material blessings” (Williams, 2002:5). Thereby promoting consumerism and individualism which ultimately discards Africans values of communalism.

In my interview with Ugonna, she mentions that we (Igbo women), have “lost” our identity. I wanted to find out more about how this loss translates in contemporary postcolonial Igbo society today.

“Hmmm... ụmụ nwaanyị ka o ka emetuta. Ụmụ nwaanyị ka buru ụka Kraịst n’isi na Naijiria taa. Otụtụ ndị a na-ahụ n’ime ụlọkụ taa bụ ụmụ nwaanyị... Ha nọ ebe ahụ na-ebunye ndị ụkọchukwu adịgoroja ego ha ma jiri ha kpọrọ mkpa karịa di ha”.

“Hmmm...women are the most affected. Women are the biggest consumers of Christianity in Nigeria today. Most of the congregation in churches are women.... They are there giving these fake pastors their money and placing them over husbands” ¹²⁵

She goes on to say.

¹²⁵ Ugonna, 68-year-old Chief from Delta State, *Oshimili* South Local government, interview conducted in her Asaba Delta State

“Igbo women no longer take certain traditional titles like the *Igba Odu/Otu Odu*¹²⁶ which was reserved for women that have attained important positions in the community. This title meant that she was no longer just seen as just a ‘mere woman’ but has become extraordinary”



Image 12: Helen Uzoamaka Onyejekwe, *Amalunweze* (Grandmother of author) in her *Otu Odu* regalia which comprises of elephant tusks worn on the wrists and ankles (1988). This

¹²⁶ *Igba Odu/Otu Odu* is the highest form of Chieftaincy title for Igbo women. In the Igbo town of Onitsha, the *Otu Odu* society represents a powerful organization of high-status women who hold notable social, spiritual, and political influence. This role underlines the powerful position that women can hold within Igbo societies, specifically in traditional religious and political spheres. The impact of the *Otu Odu* society demonstrates the multifaceted role of women in Igbo communities, challenging contemporary assumptions about gender roles in precolonial African societies and illustrating how women in Onitsha and across Igboland historically held significant power and respect within their communities.

image symbolizes the legacy of Igbo women's ambitions, authority and leadership. Photo from authors family archives.

The influence of Christianity through the colonial encroachment of Igbo West African communities is well documented. Through the conversations of my coproducers I realize that the effects of colonization on Igbo spirituality and by extension the essence of Igbo culture is remarkably intricate. The effect of Christianity on the socio-cultural way of life of the Igbos has altered the place and status of Igbo women in contemporary Igbo cultural and political life. In precolonial and colonial Nigeria, the practice of Odinani by women was significant. There was respect and reverence for their knowledge of traditional spirituality, their proximity to the invisible universe/spirits, the uniqueness of their “essence”, their naked body their blood and the power of their pronouncements. The important and unique spiritual contributions they made to the greater society cannot be overstated.

Offormata one of my coproducers and Igbo Historian, describes traditional Igbo spirituality as the “*sum of the norms, value, beliefs, and aspirations of Igbo people*”. Through the colonial encroachment and Christianization of Igbo West African communities, the unavoidable decline of the Igbo way of life began to be recorded. This decline shows up in the unfortunate devaluing, demonizing, dismissal, abandonment, and misunderstanding of traditional Igbo spirituality/Odinani. As traditional Igbo spirituality continues to lose acceptance, the unique and significant place of women in Igbo cultural life also simultaneously becomes threatened.

Interestingly the connection between the Christianization of Igbo communities and the decline of traditional Igbo spirituality was not agreed upon by a portion of my coproducers. These set of coproducers do not attribute colonization as a factor in the decline of Igbo spirituality. They believe that Odinani remains “untouched” by the effects of Christianity. They insist that Christianity

cannot change the “potency” of Odinani, and that its practice is still as popular and “effective” as it always was in precolonial Igbo society. I decided to label the blatant refusal to recognize the colonial connection to the decline of Igbo spirituality as a form of *Colonial Denial*. A denial that serves as a coping mechanism to “cushion” the overwhelming effects of colonization.

6.2 Colonial Denial: A way of Reflecting the Coloniality of Being.

...there is barely any literature condemning colonialism/imperialism denialism and genocide denialism that have been perpetrated against indigenous people of Africa and other continents. Typical of other forms of denialism, colonialists/imperialists and their lackeys have denied responsibility for colonialism, they deny that colonialism has continued beyond the national independence granted to Africans/indigenous people; they deny that colonialism/imperialism has injured indigenous people; they deny that colonialism/imperialism has any victims, and they have condemned their condemners (Wyatt and Brisman, 2017:337).

The position by Wyatt and Brisman mirrors what Aimé Césaire calls the foundational logic of colonial discourse, where colonialism cloaks itself in the mantle of “civilization”, to erase its violence Césaire (1950/2000). The quote also captures how denial is not a flaw, but a central feature of colonial power, a calculated strategy to evade accountability and to sustain dominance. Césaire posits that “no one colonizes innocently, a civilization which justifies colonization is already a sick civilization” (Césaire,1950/2000: 336). The pathology of colonialism lies in its capacity to cloak brutality under the guise of progress, then deny the suffering it caused. “Civilization” under colonialism is a euphemism for brutality, and denial is part of the system that transforms the colonized into savages and colonizers the “civilized” (Fanon, 1961).

I analyze an important “trend” I encountered while interviewing some of my coproduces, a trend I have labelled *Colonial Denial*. For this research, I describe colonial denial by Africans as the willful, uncritical refusal, to engage, acknowledge, and confront colonization as an event, a history

and a continuous reality. More broadly, colonial denial refers to the lack of acknowledgement, refusal, and minimization of the harm, exploitation, and systemic oppression caused by colonialism and all its continuing all-encompassing systems. It also involves dismissing or downplaying the negative impacts of colonial rule, including cultural erasure, economic exploitation, and violence. This form of denial can manifest in various ways, such as historical revisionism, justification of colonial actions, or ignorance of the ongoing effects of colonial systems. Some characteristics of colonial denial appear through the diminishing and devaluing of the African person, the prioritizing of whiteness and the belief in the “white savior”.

At its core, colonial denial has many similarities with postcolonial amnesia. Postcolonial amnesia refers to the widespread collective forgetting or sanitizing of colonial histories, often expressed through school curricula, public memory, and national narratives that erase or romanticize the violence, dispossession, and trauma inflicted during colonial rule (Stahn, 2020). Unlike simple historical ignorance, colonial amnesia is politically structured and ideologically motivated, enabling both former colonial powers and postcolonial societies to deny or downplay the violences, disruptions, and cultural dislocations wrought by empire (Kolia 2018; Brand 2006). This amnesia operates through various interconnected components, including selective memory, historical revisionism, structural disavowal, and epistemic suppression (Kolia, 2018). Most significantly, McDonough (2018) insists that colonial amnesia is a strategic silencing that safeguards present power structures that perpetuate epistemic violence. My decision to use the term *Colonial Denial* and not *Colonial Amnesia*, rests mostly in the name. Amnesia connotes failure to remember, a gap in memory. It implies a firsthand experience, something that has been forgotten. Whereas denial refers to refusal, explicit or implicit, to acknowledge reality, violence, dispossession, and enduring legacies of colonialism.

My contribution to the notion of colonial denial centers the African perspective and not that of the colonizers/settlers as most of the literature highlights. Although this form of denial was recorded by a few of my coproducers, I have chosen to include this in my thesis because it will allow for an important and critical engagement of the coping strategies people from colonized backgrounds adopt to make sense of their world and how highlight how colonization “splits” people into two. It will also encourage discourses highlighting broader questions of coloniality of being and knowledge, related to how Igbo people see themselves, their culture, and ultimately their position in the world. Collins (2011) argues that denial is itself a logic of colonization particularly settler colonialism and that denial is “active and influential in settler societies, which by definition are built upon hidden structures of violence that extend into the present” (2011: 35). This enables members of the dominant culture in settler societies to “examine their surroundings and view no evidence of colonization” (Ibid 36). Veracini (2020), further argues that denial “invisibilizes” settler colonial structures of racial capitalism and eliminationism, which have contributed to their persistence (Ibid:262). It is important to note that there is research on colonial denial (although sparse), however it is from the perspective of the settler.

From Canada, Australia and South Africa, settler colonial denial operates through systematic erasure, minimization, and legitimization of settler violence. Settler colonialism, unlike “classical” colonialism, is marked not only by the conquest of territory but by the permanent occupation and replacement of Indigenous populations (Veracini, 2022). This project of dispossession is not only material but also epistemic, maintained through narratives that justify or outright deny colonial violence. Cook (2018) insists that “settler denialism is not a failure of memory but a strategic mode of governance, essential to the maintenance of settler legitimacy and sovereignty” (p:17). In Canada, the denial of colonial violence is perhaps most clearly visible in the historical and

contemporary treatment of Indian Residential Schools. For decades, official discourse portrayed these institutions as benevolent, despite ample evidence of cultural genocide, physical abuse, and mass deaths (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015). Such denial is not merely ignorance, but part of what Tuck and Yang (2012), call the settler move to innocence that absolve the settler of responsibility while claiming empathy.

In the United States, settler denial is embedded in the way framing of the conquest of Indigenous lands as both inevitable and divinely ordained Dunbar-Ortiz, (2015). Early settlers often interpreted their expansion as a “Promised Land” mission, rooted in Old Testament covenant theology an ideological construct that rendered Indigenous dispossession both inevitable and morally righteous (Newcomb, 2017). School curricula have historically excluded the genocidal dimensions of U.S. expansion, portraying Native peoples as either savages or obstacles to progress. Wolfe (2006) emphasizes that “invasion is a structure not an event” (Wolfe, 2006: 388), meaning that denial is ongoing, expressed in the continued erasure of Native sovereignty through legal fictions, treaty violations, and the “invisibilization” of Indigenous presence in American identity. Similarly in South Africa, though politically distinct due to its apartheid history, settler denial is also witnessed. Du Toit, (2003), and Bundy (2000), posit that the 1994 transition to democracy was accompanied by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, yet economic structures of racialized land ownership remain largely unchanged. As Mamdani (1996) argues, the reconciliation process failed to challenge settler privilege because it focused on individual violations rather than structural violence. Post-apartheid denial often persists in discourses that romanticize the “rainbow nation”,¹²⁷ while ignoring the material legacies of settler accumulation (Heleta, 2024).

¹²⁷ The term “Rainbow Nation” was popularized by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and later embraced by President Nelson Mandela to describe post-apartheid South Africa as a multicultural, inclusive society in which people of all races, ethnicities, and religions could coexist peacefully. It emerged in the early 1990s during South Africa’s transition

Back to the accounts of my coproducers, the nature of their responses exposed several important and sometimes surprising ways in which the subject of colonization is perceived. In general, some of their responses exposed a dismissal, and a downplaying of the effects of colonization. This dismissal is recorded through some of their assertion that colonization occurred and belongs in the “distant past”, and that any attempt to make it relevant to the current socio-political happenings of Igbo communities is misguided. In a few cases the nature of colonial denial is witnessed as an outright denial of colonization. In such instances, colonization of Igbo communities is labeled a “myth” with researchers like us accused of encouraging victim mentality through our continuous “obsession” with the “past”. This extreme view was recorded by only a handful of coproducers. Some others exposed an admiration for some colonial techniques, especially religion and western education. They attributed these colonial techniques as responsible for curbing barbarism and “ungodly” cultures in Southeastern Nigeria.

More specifically, some coproducers praised colonial violence by mentioning that the colonial encroachment of Igbo communities was perpetrated in the “best interest” of Igbo people. In extreme cases, such coproducers could be described as “colonial apologists” as their responses reveal a clear support for colonial violence and erasure. Overall, the form of colonial denial recorded, exposes a lack of critical engagement to the subject of colonization and an avoidance of an acknowledgement of the effects of British colonial policies on the contemporary perception of Igbo spirituality.

Below Adaeze speaks about the effects of colonization on the practice of spirituality in her family, she responds in English.

from apartheid to democracy and was used as a metaphor for unity, reconciliation, and nation-building in a deeply divided country. See Jansen, J. D. (2011). *We need to talk*. Pan Macmillan.

“Colonization did not affect the practice of our old religions. My grandmother was a traditional worshipper until two years before her death, and she was already in her eighties”.¹²⁸

From the conversation above, Adaeze’s grandmother converted to Christianity “later in life”, and she believes that Christianity was not responsible for the conversion. However, she is vague as to the reason a woman would make such a significant change to her belief system after so many years of practicing Odinani. She continues in Igbo.

Ee, ị ma etu ọ dị... ọ bụ nne nwaanyị megoro okenye na-eme Odinaani, ndị mmadụ ga-amalite iche na ọ bụ onye na-ata amosu... ị ma etu ndị obodo anyị si dị. O hụrụ ụwa mgbede ya n’anya... [ọ chĩa ọchị], o bilie n’ụtụtụ o jiri ọkọkọ na mmanya Fanta chụọ aja n’ihu arụsị ya... Enwekariri m mmasị pụrụ iche na ndụ nnenne m mgbe o mere okenye kari ndụ ya dika onye ụka Kraịst.

My grandmother was under so much pressure from the rest of the family, you see she was the only traditional worshipper in the family and people were accusing her of all sorts... she just wanted peace. You know how it is... she was an elderly woman practicing Odinani, people will start assuming that she is a witch... you know how our people can be, she probably would not have converted without the pressure from the family. She really loved her old ways ... [laughs], she will wake up in the morning and do sacrifices in her shrine with chicken and Fanta... I actually enjoyed my old grandma more than the Christian version.

¹²⁸ Adaeze, 24-year-old student from Delta State, Ogwashi Ukwu Local government, interview conducted in Enugu State

It sometimes feels like Adaeze is contradicting herself while she speaks. The fact that she does not make a connection between the need to conform to Christianity, aka “modernity”, so as not to be labelled a “witch”, reveals an interesting form of colonial denial. The “pressure” her grandmother experiences to convert, is not also understood and seen within the broader discourses connected to the reach of colonization and its afterlives. Adaeze further explained that she had older female family members who were unmarried and blamed her late grandmother’s practice of Odinani as the reason for their unmarried state. She did not make the connection between the accusation her grandmother experienced to the broader premise of colonization which conflates evil with Igbo culture and the colonial demonization of Igbo ways of life, specifically Odinani.

Chioma in Enugu State Nigeria also makes several comments that points to an obvious denial of the reach and influence of colonial techniques particularly Christianity.

“Ekpemekpe ndị ụka Kraịst abughị ya gbochiri ụmụ nwaanyị Igbo ime omenaala”

“Christianity is not responsible for Igbo women not practicing Igbo traditional religion”.¹²⁹

She added.

“Ndị na-eme Omenaala (nke bụ aha ọzọ nye Ọdịnaani) ka na-eme ya. Ekpemekpe ụka Kraịst egbochighị ha. Nwanne m nwaanyị toro m na-eme Ọdịnaani, naanị ya ka ọ na-eme. Ọ naghi eme ya na-agakwa ụka dika ụfọdu mmadu si eme”.

¹²⁹ Chioma, 22-year-old student from Anambra State, Nnewi local government, interview conducted in Enugu State Nigeria

“People that are practicing Omenani (which is sometimes used to describe Odinani but loosely means culture) are still doing it. Christianity is not stopping them. My elder sister is a practitioner and that is all she does. She is not a Christian.”

The above comment points to the ways in which the proliferation of churches in southeastern Nigeria as opposed to Odinani places of worship/shrines, is not appreciated as a ripple effect of the colonial encroachment. The fact that Odinani shrines are not as accessible/visible as churches signals the ways in which Odinani occupies a secondary position in Igbo spiritual and cultural life.

“Hmmm... I understand your question but not really. Even when people leave and become Christians they usually “come back” to Odinani. It is inborn. People that are doing it are doing it and going on with their lives. Christians can say whatever they like about Odinani, but it does not change how people are practicing it. Christians are doing their thing, and traditionalists are also doing their own thing... we are all living together”.

The way in which coproducers like Chioma analyze the influence or lack of influence of colonization on spirituality, brings up other important issues that require further interrogation. The colonial mechanism can be in some regards quite insidious yet blatant in how it achieves its objectives. From the outset, British colonialism projected a self-serving ideology, with the “civilizing mission” enacting its brutality through repression and structural dominance. The British colonial capture of Nigeria exemplifies the strategic deployment of both overt violence and structural dominance, cloaked in rhetoric of progress and civilization. This process combined military conquest, legal coercion, manipulative governance, and cultural subjugation to firmly entrench colonial power by dismantling indigenous social and political orders. Through British colonial education which is still the model for Nigerian education, there remains a sustained erasure and a visible absence of a significant engagement with colonization and its afterlives. Igbo

history is not taught in schools; the curriculum of many schools in Nigeria follows the British educational system and the speaking of one's mother tongue (which is labeled as vernacular in the Nigerian school system) is punished in schools.

Some coproducers believe that there is no colonial influence on Odinani because we all worship the same God albeit differently. This group of coproducers point to the increase of *Ezenwanyi*/female native doctors on social media as an indicator that whatever influence Christianity has/had remains superficial. Udochukwu, a coproducer, had an interesting take on the influence of Christianity on Odinani. To her, Christianity does not have such a significant impact on Odinani as it seems on the "surface". She believes that the recent "return" to "old" religions and forms of spirituality (which has been made very popular through social media), serves as an indicator of the lack of impact of colonial erasure in Igbo communities.

"Ekpemekpe ụka Kraịst siri ike, mana Ọdịnaani ka ya sie ike. Ndị Igbo jisiri nkwenye ha ike nke mere na ha na-alaghachi n'omenaala ha makana ha ekwetala na omenaala ha bụ nke 'ezigbo' ma chọputa na ụka agharipula ha".

"Christianity is powerful, but Odinani is more powerful. Igbo people have always held on to their beliefs and people are returning to their traditional way because they see that the old ways are more potent, and Christianity has failed."

She continues in English.

“If Christianity is so powerful, it would have destroyed our old religions but that did not happen. Go to the internet and you will see many women practicing Odinani in the open, nobody is ashamed anymore. Most people are Christians by force and would never be if not for societal pressure”.¹³⁰

The question about Christian conversion is brought up again.

“You know Nigerians, we always like to copy people... always putting other people’s culture over our own... we don’t value our own thing”.

Her dismissive answer points directly to the effects of colonization, which insists on the devaluing of one’s culture over the colonizers culture, unfortunately she does not make that connection. Through both direct coercion and ideological seduction, colonial powers framed traditional belief systems as backward, barbaric, and satanic, establishing Christianity as the only legitimate form of religiosity. Converts were encouraged, sometimes forced, to publicly renounce their traditional beliefs, burn sacred objects, and take Christian names, actions that symbolized not only spiritual conversion but cultural disavowal (Hastings, 2000; Njoku, 2014; Okeke et. al, 2017; Sanneh, 2003). Most importantly, the “power” of this conversion lay not only in its religious message, but in the institutional advantages it conferred. Scholars like Mudimbe (1988), argue that “missionary Christianity functioned as a technology of colonial governance, offering social mobility, education, and employment to those who embraced its teachings, Christianity thus became tied to modernity, while traditional religion was linked to primitiveness” (p:57).

The lack of a critical engagement that dismisses the cause and effect of colonization and its afterlives on the practice, and perception of Odinani is witnessed noticeably through this exchange with Udochukwu. The connection of Odinani with the occult or evil, the societal pressure to

¹³⁰ Udochukwu, 22 year old student from Enugu State, Nsukka local government, interview conducted in Enugu State

convert and the shame that is associated with those who practice Odinani is not seen as a resulting effect of colonization through Christianity.

Offormata spoke critically on the question of the colonial influence on Igbo spirituality and insisted that the influence of colonization (if any) does not occur in a linear fashion. She insists that Christianity, especially in Nigeria has also been influenced by Odinani and other traditional religions. She argues that Christianity borrowed from our “old” religions and “watered” it down. She also identifies that the message of Christ was told in parables which is exactly how messages are transmitted in the practice of Odinani.

She has this to say on the issue of Christianity being influenced by Odinani.

“Ka m mee ka akpataoyi wuọ gi... Ekpemekpe uka Kraịst ji nwayọ nwayọ anwu n’obodo anyị”

“Let me shock you... Christianity is dying in our communities”.

She added.

“It’s just business, Christianity did not affect our traditional religions Christianity is nothing to be compared to our religion. Igbo spiritual beliefs are always there that is why many women are now becoming *Ezenwanyi*”.¹³¹

This statement by Offormata contradicts some of the earlier conversations we had where she identifies some of the effects of colonization in Igbo communities including an increase in crime, and the devaluing of our traditions.

¹³¹ Offormata 65-year-old Professor of Igbo history from Anambra State, *Orumba* South local government, interview conducted in Enugu State Nigeria.

She continues in English.

“When you go to churches, you will see people on their phone no one is listening to the homily. They have seen that Christianity has “failed” them. When you go to Pentecostal churches you will see them mimicking Odinani in how they sing and pray”.

To add some context to Offormata’s position above, Anizoba and Aande (2021), observe that the interaction between Christianity and Odinani did not result in the wholesale replacement of indigenous cosmologies. However, it is pivotal to recognize that the Christian way of life is still largely the most recognized and accepted in Igbo communities, regardless of how much it “borrows” or attempts to mimic Odinani. The effect of colonization is not only recognized through the effects it has on the practice and perception of gendered spiritual practices, but most significantly in the almost complete lack of knowledge of traditional Igbo spirituality that is reflected by some coproducers. The sustained and effective demonizing of Igbo spirituality and its practitioners, the conflation of Odinani with evil and the occult, and the fear and avoidance of everything associated with traditional Igbo spirituality, are constant afterlives of colonization. The ways in which colonization through Christianity is understood by some of my coproducers reveals several important realities. Firstly, I am left wondering if this denial is the way they make sense of their world, or if the lack of an acknowledgement of colonial erasure is simply connected to an absence of a critical engagement with colonization and its afterlives. Secondly, could this limited perception of the effect of colonization be connected to the colonial technique of manipulating indigenous peoples into perceiving them (colonizers/whiteness) as good, benevolent, generous, civilized and godly? Or does this denial require further nuanced interpretation?

The British colonial period in Igboland aimed not only to conquer territory but to eradicate indigenous spiritual epistemologies, branding them primitive, superstitious, or evil. Missionaries

commanded converts to dismantle shrines and burn sacred objects; colonial schools suppressed oral traditions and ancestral rites (Nwuba, 2021). Yet, Igbo spiritual systems have proved remarkably resilient. Additionally, Igbo spiritual concepts like *Chi* and *Ala*, continue to retain its relevance, Nwuba (2021). Most significantly, the broader African spiritual revival movement confirms indigenous spirituality's persistence as Nweke (2020), observes a rise in public interest in ancestral rites, shrine restoration, and ritual healing driven by both pride and postcolonial skepticism of state and religious authority. This resurgence, marks a decolonial reclamation, asserting that indigenous spirituality was never truly eradicated.

Where then does this denial fit? I posit that denial functions as a way of distancing themselves from the persona of victimhood. Denial serves as a form of “protection” from the violent history of colonization while positioning themselves as authors of their own history and future and serves as a form of resistance to counter the colonial narratives. Ultimately colonization was not an event or a historical episode with a clear beginning and end. It is a system of power, knowledge, and social organization, which reorganized relationships to land, culture, identity, labor, and spirituality and continues to alter peoples and structures till this day.

6.3 Gendered Spirituality and its Connections to the Coloniality of Knowledge and Being.

Epistemological colonization which amounts to colonization of the mind and imagination affected African modes of knowing, of producing knowledge, of producing perspectives, images and systems of images, symbols, modes of signification, over the resources, patterns, and instruments of formalized and objectivized expression including intellectual and visual forms. Having performed these “epistemicides”, the constructors and drivers of global coloniality that included Christian missionaries, proceeded to make their own patterns of producing knowledge and modes of knowing to be the only legitimate and scientific ways of understanding the world. They mystified their own patterns of knowing and knowledge production. But they also tried to consistently these Euro-North American-centric patterns far out of reach of the dominated (Quijano 2007: 169).

According to Maldonado-Torres (2007) coloniality, “refers to the long-standing pattern of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, that defines culture, labor, intersubjectivity relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations” (p:243). More simply, coloniality is an afterlife of colonialism and is maintained and sustained through the adoption of several techniques. The “octopus nature” of coloniality is well articulated by Grosfoguel (2007) who identified its various entangled hierarchies such as complex class formations, male female hierarchies, heterosexual- homosexual hierarchies, religious/spiritual hierarchization and divisions, epistemic/knowledge hierarchies, linguistic hierarchies and aesthetic Some of these hierarchies identified by Grosfoguel are sustained through “books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in “common sense”, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007:243).

Global coloniality is a modern global power structure that has been in place since the dawn of Euro-north American-centric modernity. The Euro-north American-centric modernity inaugurated the coloniality of being, through its social classification of the human population according to race (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2014). While the processes of racialization took different forms and assumed different terms across different colonial spaces, the logic and purpose remained the same. Today, global coloniality operates as an invisible power matrix that is shaping and sustaining asymmetrical power relations between the global north and the global south (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2014; and Wynter, 2003). One of the major empirical effects of which would be the rise of Europe, was in the construction of the “world civilization” through African enslavement, Latin American conquest, and Asian subjugation (Wynter, 2003). Quijano (2000) rightly insists that race unlike

gender, is a purely invented construct “it was this construct that would enable the now globally expanding west to replace the earlier mortal/immortal, natural/supernatural, human/the ancestors, the gods/God, distinction as the one on whose basis all human groups had millennially “grounded” their descriptive statement/prescriptive statements of what it is to be human, and to reground its secularizing own on a newly projected human/subhuman distinction instead” (Quijano, 2000: 535).

The colonizers codified the phenotypic trait of the colonized as color, and they assumed it as the emblematic characteristic of racial category. Blacks were not only the most important exploited group (Quijano, 2000; and Wynter, 2003) since the principal part of the economy rested on their labor; they were, above all, “the most important colonized race” (Quijano, 2000: 537). Ndlovu Gatsheni (2013) listed the deficits that were attributed to the African subject as ranging from “lack of souls, writing, history, civilization, development, democracy, human rights, and ethics” (p:185). This gave birth to the colonial idea of people of African descent as the condemned people of the earth, the wretched of the earth that Frantz Fanon wrote about in his book aptly titled *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968). Other issues such as a sense of self-loathing, by ascribing the mark of negative to everything African, the decline of self-worth and self-determination/evolution (Tejumola, 2005 p273) the over dependence on aid and the obsession over the white skin/whiteness/colorism by African women.

The westernized structures and new ways of being introduced and enforced by the colonizers, are evident in the continent today through the demonizing of Igbo culture and the subsequent erasure of Odinani. The racist and discriminatory connection of Odinani with diabolism, the occult and evil, exposes the utility of systemic coloniality as an afterlife of colonialism. The interaction with my coproducers on the effects of colonization, allows for a critical unpacking of how the afterlife of colonization operates in Igbo communities particularly in how it connects to the coloniality of

knowledge and coloniality of being. It also allows for an appreciation of broader discourses into how meaning is made and sustained, and how such meanings (particularly concerning gendered spirituality) are interpreted among Igbo people. Some interaction with my coproducers also provides a similar opportunity to engage in discourse related to the colonial techniques that contribute to the devaluing of oneself, one's culture and sense of being, and how that is related to larger debates of internalized racism, shame and self-loathing.

Some coproducers used several negative words to describe the “nature” of Odinani. Some of these negative words include “evil”, “diabolic”, “fetish”, “ungodly” and “dirty” Other words like “unchristian” and “backward” were also used as a way of delegitimizing and describing Odinani. A critical unpacking of how Odinani remains closely associated with multiple negative connotations is central in developing a robust appreciation of the powerful reach of specific colonial techniques particularly religion (mostly Christian), western education, and the media. The sustained demonizing of Igbo culture and spirituality through false religious doctrines, the misrepresentation of Igbo spirituality through false and racist information and the demeaning, dismissal and ‘othering’ of Igbo modes of worship all contribute to the devaluing and vilifying of Igbo personhood.

Scholars like Ngugi wa Thiong’o emphasized the psychological/epistemological as well as cultural and linguistic impact of coloniality and correctly concluded that “the present predicaments of Africa are often not a matter of personal choice: they arise from an historical situation” (1986: xii). The demonizing of the way of life of Igbo people and their modes of spirituality was systematically carried out to diminish their way of life, their beliefs and their values. To wa Thiong’o “the effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in

themselves” (Ibid:3). It makes them devalue their very existence, distance themselves from their origins and attach themselves to the “foreign” and unattainable.

Proponents of Odinani believe that the ancestors are constantly looking over them to protect and guide them and that the role of women in Odinani is central and sacred. Igbo women have an important, and unique role in Odinani and their female essence, which is constructed through their nakedness, their blood and their ‘spirit’, set them completely apart from the men. For many of my coproducers the cause and effect between the Christianization of Igbo communities and the lost knowledges concerning Odinani was challenging to connect. For some coproducers that adopted a form of colonial denial that “showed up” in the denial of an acknowledgement of the events of colonization, and in the denial of the lack of accountability directed towards colonial institutions particularly Churches, the task of decolonizing gendered spirituality might have to go on without them.

Colonial denial contributes to a broader problem of democratization without decolonization. We cannot claim to be committed towards advancing the position, integrity, identity, and power of women in the African continent without conscious, deliberate, consistent dismantling of the structures and legacies of our colonial past. For the colonized, decolonization of the mind is about returning to the annals of history to find ourselves, to become fluent in our cultural knowledge systems, to cultivate critical consciousness and to reclaim our humanity (Tamale, 2020). We must be ready to confront our previously held beliefs and realities, in other words, to decolonize our understanding of ourselves, while working systematically to create our own knowledge, our own stories and forge our own future and destiny. This future will not be a game of chance. It will be a product of present day struggles against coloniality of power, coloniality of knowledge and

coloniality of being as constitutive elements of global coloniality. “We must never forget that turning the colonized into human beings was not a colonial goal” (Lugones, 2017:3).

GENDERED POWER THROUGH SPIRITUAL PRACTICES THE WAY FORWARD

Because of the colonizing structure, a dichotomizing system has emerged, and with it a great number of current paradigmatic oppositions have developed: traditional versus modern; oral versus written and printed; agrarian and customary communities versus urban and industrialized civilization; subsistence economies versus highly productive economies. In Africa a great deal of attention is generally given to the evolution implied and promised by the passage from the former paradigms to the latter.

– *Mudimbe, The Invention of Africa.*

7.0 Overview of Thesis.

Embarking on this research is driven by a restlessness and a desire to investigate the nature of gendered power in Igbo communities and the role of spirituality in enacting and negotiating such power. I do this work by problematizing several colonial mechanisms, mostly Christianity and the effects it has/had in the administration, perception, and acceptance of gendered spirituality. This research connects the advent of Christianity and missionary education in Igbo and Anioma communities of West Africa to the sustained and subsequent decline of the status of women in postcolonial Igbo society. I ultimately posit that Christianity insisted on the dismissal and erasure of unique forms of spirituality that contributed to the way Igbo women accessed, negotiated, and utilized power. This dismissal brought about new forms of gender relations and patriarchy that “inferiorized” women, positioned them as subordinate to men, stripped them of their connections to their ancestors, and, by extension, their power. The introduction of Christianity also transformed the nature of Igbo spirituality/Odinani and ascribed it with the mark of diabolism, “uncivilized”, barbaric, and evil. Ultimately, plaguing the ways in which some Igbo women have come to associate Odinani in contemporary Igbo society.

In Igbo cosmology, spirituality is not merely a belief system; it is a lived, embodied, and communal ontology that governs the relationship between humans, nature, ancestors, deities (alusi), and the Supreme Being, *Chukwu*. Far from being abstract or individualized, Igbo spirituality is deeply relational and practical, woven into everyday life through rituals, moral codes, ancestral reverence, festivals, healing practices, and agricultural cycles. In addition, Igbo gendered spiritual power is not monolithically patriarchal (Amadiume, 1987), instead, it is historically organized around a complementary gender system in which both men and women hold distinct, yet overlapping, spiritual responsibilities and authorities. This is best illustrated through the dual-sex political and religious institutions that governed precolonial Igbo society. Women were not spiritual subordinates; they were custodians of shrines, priestesses, diviners, mediums, and ritual specialists. Deities such as Ala/earth goddess, who governs morality, fertility, and justice, exemplify how feminine spiritual authority is central to Igbo spiritual worldview. In this respect, spirituality in Igbo cosmology is inherently gendered, but not hierarchically so, as it recognizes and reveres the sacred feminine that is central to communal survival and cosmic balance.

My desire to investigate the nature of gendered power embedded in Odinani required a decolonial historical excavation of the past (precolonial and colonial Igbo society) to critically appreciate how spiritual practices and their acceptance have evolved. This decolonial excavation exercise provides an appreciation of the insidious yet blatant nature of colonization and its multiple afterlives, particularly in how they continue to affect the practice of gendered power through spirituality. The exercise of “looking to the past” brought into conversation the need to critically “decolonize” the meanings of gendered power and spirituality, and the utility of such power configurations in contemporary Igbo society. It is for this reason that my research employs a critical African decolonial feminist approach to look beyond the surface to understand both terms, but to provide

a more nuanced understanding of how power plays a central role in the oppression and exploitation of people, especially women. “Decolonization is only made necessary as a consequence of the depredations of colonialism” (Bhambra, 2014:120). This task of “decolonizing” gendered power through spirituality means that the western understanding of both concepts needs to be replaced with a more nuanced and robust understanding. An understanding that prioritizes the uniqueness, complexity, and diversity of modes of power that divorces itself from the rigidity and hierarchical nature that is central to western understandings of power. To decolonize means to create new meanings of spirituality that prioritizes the central role of culture, elders, indigenous/traditional knowledge, and reverence for nature, in its understanding. This new meaning does not romanticize precolonial Igbo culture but rather provides a balanced and critical appreciation of its central role in the lives of Igbo women.

This research exposes the intricacies of power and the ways in which it is sustained or dismissed by women in contemporary Igbo communities. From the belief that power is not gendered, and as such cannot “belong” to women, or that the idea of power being “gendered” must be “feminist” with western origins. These kinds of views villainize gendered power through Igbo spirituality and associate it with diabolism; and being “uncivilized”. Other views position gendered power as a viable and tangible source of unique power that is/was available to Igbo women, which set them apart from men. The different views on Igbo gendered power; show the diversity and robustness in the way power is interpreted. It also shows that the question of power is complicated and worthy of thorough investigation. Other more complex beliefs surrounding gendered power associated with spirituality, expose the ways in which the practice of both belief systems, (traditional/indigenous Igbo culture and Christianity) are negotiated and enacted side by side but

separately in the daily lives of Igbo women without conflict¹³². This “gendering” of power allows us to appreciate how women have and continue to establish positions of influence in an environment where Christian dogma insists that men and women must exist in a hierarchical position that always places men above women.

The colonizing transformation mission justified the colonization of memory, and thus of people’s senses of self, of intersubjective relation, of their relation to the spirit world, to land, to the very fabric of their conception of reality, identity, and social, ecological, and cosmological organization. It invented the colonized and attempted a full reduction of them to less than human primitives, satanically possessed, infantile, aggressively sexual, and in need of transformation (Lugones, 2007:4-5).

It is crucial to acknowledge that colonization was not only about seizing land or resources but about redefining humanity in a way that privileged European subjectivity while relegating African and other indigenous peoples to the margins of existence. Lugones captures the deeply insidious nature of colonialism as not merely a political or economic project but as a colonization of memory, identity, and being. Her statement foregrounds how colonization functioned through an epistemic and ontological violence that sought to remake the very fabric of life for colonized peoples. According to Lugones, the “colonizing transformation mission” did not simply subjugate bodies or territories; it deliberately targeted the senses of self, the spiritual cosmologies, and the intersubjective relations that defined precolonial worlds. Lugones’ invocation of the “colonization of memory” speaks to the long-term psychological and cultural erasure of indigenous identities. Colonialism imposed western ontologies that devalued African spiritualities, labeling them “primitive” or “satanic,” while replacing them with Eurocentric norms of morality, religion, and social organization (Mudimbe, 1988). This process was not passive but active dehumanization,

¹³² For my coproducers that practice both Odinani and Christianity side by side, they insist that they can do so without conflict, guilt or tension. I believe that because they practice both separately, it reduces the possibility of “conflict”.

inventing the colonized as the “Other,” defined as infantile, hypersexual, and less than human narrative that justified both spiritual and material domination (Fanon, 2004).

Furthermore, the quote highlights how colonialism disrupted the ecological relations that were central to indigenous cosmologies. Colonial interventions through Christianity and western governance, sought to dismantle these traditional systems, portraying them as barriers to modernity (Mignolo, 2011). By depicting colonized peoples as “satanically possessed” or morally corrupt, the colonial mission presented itself as a civilizing force that would rescue and reform the “primitive.” This mirrors the Christian missionary agenda, which operated as a mechanism of colonial governance, reshaping moral and gendered codes of conduct (Lugones, 2010). However, it is vital to recognize that the colonial project did not succeed fully as contemporary Igbo women continue to resist and reinvent themselves in present postcolonial Nigeria.

The ways in which “the colonized” continue to resist, and uphold their humanity in Igbo postcolonial society, is achieved through several mechanisms, including story telling. Through stories, coproducers relive their past, honor their present, and envision their future. Their stories are living, breathing accounts of their significance, their humanity, their desires and their resistance. The violence and erasure caused by colonization create gaps and silences in the histories of people. The gaps and silences run deeper in accounts of women’s history; which make the role of storytelling more pivotal in reclaiming and retelling the histories of Igbo women.

7.1 Storytelling is Spiritual.

African women have long used oral traditions and storytelling as methods of reclaiming and reasserting their identities, histories, and societal roles. These narratives are not merely entertainment; they are deeply embedded with wisdom, moral guidance, and spiritual philosophies. Through storytelling, women engage in acts of cultural preservation, transmitting not only knowledge but also resistance to erasure and marginalization.

My entire research pays homage to the power and centrality of Igbo women storytellers. In Igbo cosmology, storytelling is closely linked to spirituality. Storytelling is an integral part of oral tradition and is regarded as a deeply spiritual act in Igbo cosmology (Nwoye, 2009). In Igbo cultural milieu, storytelling transcends beyond mere communication to become a sacred conduit by which the preservation, and transmission of Igbo cultural history and identity is expressed and protected (Ibid). As George Dei notes, "storytelling is central to Indigenous ways of knowing, (Indigenous here signals Indigenous Igbo people) offering a means to share collective knowledge while reflecting on our spiritual and communal relationships" (Dei, 2000:17). According to Oyěwùmì, (1997), African women storytelling holds resonance as a method of self expression, serving as both a tool for reclaiming agency and a pathway to spiritual connection. Through the art of storytelling, African women not only narrate their experiences but also create spaces for healing, empowerment, and the preservation of collective memory (Bamikunle, 2018). At its core, it is an act of creation that centers spiritual significance, often linked to ancestral wisdom and divine guidance (Abrahams, 1983). The storyteller assumes the role of a messenger, channeling the voices of those who came before and weaving them into the present (Vansina, 1985). This act of storytelling becomes a ritual, one that bridges the physical and metaphysical realms, connecting the storyteller, their audience, and the spiritual forces that govern existence.

As the call for a paradigm shift particularly in the growing desire to develop inclusive knowledge systems, the place of oral history through storytelling has taken center stage. Knowledge must be consistent with the needs of various people, especially those that are marginalized, minoritized and related to the margins. Research, particularly within African contexts, often transcends the boundaries of academia to encompass lived realities and cultural practices. Dei (1999) posits that

the relevance of indigenous/traditional knowledge systems brought about through oral history and storytelling must be prioritized particularly in academia. Its unique ability to deconstruct hierarchical mainstream knowledge frameworks which prioritize western models above other forms of knowledge and exclude the concerns of minoritized and marginalized people, must be discarded. The power of storytelling resides in its ability to resist colonialism, restore historical agency and the history and realities of Igbo people particularly its women.

7.2 Key Contributions of Thesis

1. Power is Intangible: Decolonizing Foucault's Notion of Power

From a decolonial African feminist perspective, power must be redefined outside of this colonial matrix. Power is not a fixed possession, or a static force wielded from above; rather, it is a relational, situated, and multifaceted dynamic that structures the conditions of being, knowing, and becoming. Gendered power in Igbo cosmology refers to a relational and complementary distribution of spiritual authority and responsibility between women and men, grounded in cosmologies that recognize multiple, non-hierarchical sources of power. Unlike Western gender ontologies that are structured around binary and hierarchical divisions of male over female, Igbo spiritual systems historically functioned through what Ifi Amadiume (1987) terms a dual-sex system, a structure that allowed both masculine and feminine identities to possess distinct and intersecting realms of influence in spiritual, political, and social life.

My research on gendered power through spirituality seeks to focus on the ways in which the gendering of power through spirituality could innovate, complexify, and decolonize critical understandings of power by mobilizing its unique characteristics and ideas and make it more readily applicable in discourses surrounding gender empowerment. This research seeks to

contribute to a more inclusive appreciation of power, which that strongly opposes the dominant discourse on power by insisting that power takes on many forms and should be instrumentalized for different reasons beyond subjugation, violence, and erasure. One of the most sustained feminist critiques of Foucault is his inattention to gender as a structuring axis of power (McNay, 1992). Scholars such as Bartky (1990) and McNay (1992), have noted that while Foucault explores how bodies are regulated, he tends to treat the body as abstract and ungendered, thereby ignoring the specific ways in which power operates differently on female, queer, and racialized bodies. In African contexts, this absence is even more glaring.

Foucault's failure to engage with these dynamics reinforces what Oyěwùmí (1997) calls "epistemic imperialism", which generally explains the imposition of Eurocentric categories that erase African ways of organizing gender and power. In precolonial Igbo societies, for example, power was not always patriarchal, but complementary, with women exercising spiritual and political authority. These forms of gendered spiritual power are illegible in Foucault's framework because it relies on a secular ontology that dismisses spirituality as irrational or peripheral. In addition, Foucault's secularism also limits his analysis of power because his theories are grounded in European Enlightenment rationality, where religion is treated as a historical object of inquiry (e.g., in *The History of Sexuality*, he critiques the Christian confessional) but never as a contemporary and active field of power relations, especially outside the West. This omission is deeply problematic for decolonial African scholarship, where spirituality is not separate from politics, ethics, or ontology, but a central and embodied force that governs social life. Finally, in African cosmologies (especially among the Igbo) spiritual power is not metaphorical, it manifests through rituals, deities, and ancestral practices that regulate morality, kinship, and healing. When colonial Christianity and its institutions displaced these systems, they did not merely change

beliefs but restructured power itself, especially the gendered distribution of authority (Nzegwu, 2006). Foucault's silence on this spiritual terrain renders his theory incapable of analyzing the coloniality of power in Africa and as such redundant in critically contributing to discourse of power in contemporary African society. Ultimately, my research aspires to contribute to the existing literature on power to center the creation of culturally and historically relevant theories and ideological frameworks, while problematizing the ways in which gendered power through spirituality can be utilized in contemporary societies beyond Africa.

2. Dualistic Fluidity as a Response to the Dual Spiritual and Colonial Identities.

In addition to my contribution to the concept of power, my creation of the concept "*Dualistic Fluidity*" serves to legitimize the ways in which Igbo women and by extension women from other colonized regions of the world grapple and make sense of their "traditional" and colonial spiritual identities. Dualistic Fluidity is a concept that I developed that helps to explain and legitimize the side by side, yet separate, practice of Christianity and Odinani by women, without conflict. It serves as a concept for unpacking, interrogating and dismantling the nuance associated with the gendered practice of Odinani in contemporary Igbo communities, specifically in the way Igbo women separate both practices in their daily lives. A dualistic, yet fluid interpretation of the practice of Odinani and Christianity, emphasizes the existence of the two spiritual world views while exposing how said varying world views are negotiated in different circumstances and times to achieve different outcomes. Central to the tenets of dualist fluidity is the reality that we (colonized people) exist in a "dual/split identities, where the desire to sustain the past while living in the present is a constant "battle".

Some women in contemporary Igbo society continue to practice and respect several aspects of their traditional spiritual heritage. Over time, they realize that ancient Igbo spiritual practices

cannot be easily and realistically unified with Christian doctrine and as such they decide to practice both spiritual beliefs separately. They make this separation out of respect for both spiritual world views and they perform it as a kind of “*spiritual switching*”,¹³³ whereby they fully practice Odinani or Christianity (side by side but separately), depending on the location and circumstance. Dualistic fluidity offers a nuanced understanding that acknowledges the ways in which colonization creates unique complexities that inadvertently “split” Igbo women’s consciousness, thereby resulting in the creation of two distinct spiritual identities. Most importantly, my findings emphasize that the separation is valid, important, and relevant to the lives and realities of people from colonized backgrounds as it serves a form of resistance because preserving Igbo and by extension African culture in the aftermath of colonization is not simply an act of nostalgia or tradition; it is a powerful form of resistance to the epistemic, cultural, and ontological violence of colonialism. As colonial regimes sought to erase, distort, or subordinate African ways of knowing, being, and organizing society, cultural preservation has emerged as a crucial site of decolonial struggle. This resistance is both symbolic and material as the insistence desire to still practice Odinani while being Christian reveals a strong position to retain and assert a continued relationship to land, ancestors, and power.

It is important to conclude that dualistic fluidity is distinct from other postcolonial theories designed to analyze the impact and afterlives of colonization in Africa. For example, religious syncretism, (which is the closest in meaning to dualistic fluidity) refers to the blending of different religious traditions to create a hybrid belief system/religion. Another concept similar yet distinct

¹³³ I use the term “spiritual switching” to help explain the nature of switching between beliefs and realities. For example, code switching is the practice of alternating between two or more languages, dialects, or linguistic styles within a conversation, sentence, or communicative context. It also involves shifts in tone, grammar, vocabulary, or cultural references depending on audience, setting, or social expectations. A significant difference between code switching and dualistic fluidity is that code switching occurs sometimes within the same conversation, however this is not the case for dualistic fluidity whereby the “spiritual switching” only happens separately and not at the same time.

from dualistic fluidity is Mazrui's (1986) concept of *Triple Heritage*. The concept of triple heritage interrogates the three foundational influences on African culture which include indigenous African traditions, Islam, and western Christianity. According to Mazrui, (1986), rather than displacing each other entirely, these heritages co-exist, overlap, and contend within African societies, particularly in the realm of religion. My work on dualistic fluidity does not attempt to negate or contradict these important concepts. It however, seeks to investigate the other less researched ways in which Igbo women practice both beliefs as separate entities. My research acknowledges that for contemporary Igbo women, the outward image of Christianity coexists with the private image of Odinani and both do not always overlap, blend, and interact.

Moving forward, I believe that the application of a dualistic fluidity framework will be pivotal in understanding how colonization created spaces of people living unique forms of dual existence. For example, it will be beneficial in understanding how customary law remains intact (in some regards), irrespective of the prevailing "civil"/western applications of law. Or provide an appreciation on the ways in which traditional understandings of education, sexuality, healthcare, environmental conservation, and many others, are still practiced with respect and an acknowledgement for traditional understanding regardless of westernization. Ultimately, an appreciation of how colonization brought about a dual yet fluid reality and experience for people across the globe is essential in identifying the uniqueness and resilience of people that are confronted with the erasure of their traditions while creatively resisting the complete and total imposition of colonial stronghold.

3. Decolonizing the Respondent.

My research centers a uniquely decolonial perspective in the ways it interacts with people I encountered in the "field". In line with the decolonial ambitions of this research, I use the term

“coproducers” to replace several indifferent/passive terms used in qualitative research such as “interviewee”, “respondents” or “participants”. I recognize that this research will not exist without the generosity, humility and vulnerability of the women who graciously agreed to be a part of my work. Because of this, they are adequately identified as coproducers not participants and definitely not respondents. The engagement I had with my coproducers through their accounts of Igbo women’s oral history remains the foundation by which this research is made possible.

7.3 Confronting Ongoing Coloniality Through Dualistic Fluidity and Colonial Denial.

A dual yet fluid appreciation of the practice of Odinani and Christianity emphasizes the way in which Igbo women navigate their spiritual agency in the face of continuous colonial historical trauma. The concept of dualistic fluidity allows for a critical engagement of the unique ways contemporary Igbo women who embrace Christianity and Odinani, practice each spiritual belief system side by side, but separately depending on location, circumstance and context. The uniqueness of existing in dual forms of spiritual identities, reflects the complexity and resilience of Igbo modes of spirituality, and the creativity and spiritual agency of Igbo women in maintaining its relevance. In a dualist yet fluid interpretation, Igbo women will attend church services and live by Christian moral codes, while actively consulting *Dibia/Ezenwanyi*, owning household shrines to *Ala* or *Chi*, or attending Igbo traditional festivals. More specifically, these women “split” themselves into two halves, with one half fully practicing, respecting, and abiding by the dictates of whichever Igbo traditional spiritual belief they are engaged in, while the other half being “fully” Christian. This bifurcation is not contradictory; rather, it is strategic compartmentalization used to circumvent ongoing spiritual repression. It thus challenges colonial epistemologies by creating plural spiritual subjectivity, where Igbo women sustain ancestral cosmologies, while living within Western spiritual frameworks.

Where the practice of dualistic fluidity responds to coloniality by continuously practicing *Odinani* in the face of sustained Christian encroachment, colonial denial responds to ongoing coloniality by exhibiting denial, avoidance, and refusal. Colonial denial encompasses the intentional erasure, minimization, or distortion of colonial violence across history and into the present. At the heart of colonial denial lies the willful and uncritical refusal to confront the reality of colonization and its existing legacy of coloniality. In addition, colonial denial also takes the form of intellectual and discursive minimization, portraying colonialism as benign or benevolent as was witnessed by the responses of some of my coproducers. Yet, paradoxically, “colonized individuals” and communities frequently engage in forms of denial as strategies of resilience, survival, and resistance to the harsh reality of colonial violence and erasure. For Igbo women facing relentless marginalization, denial acts as a self-preserving defense, enabling them to function daily and reclaim a sense of spiritual agency. Frantz Fanon argues that colonized subjects sometimes adopt “falsehoods” (p:12), which are acts of psychological and political resistance to create and illusionary narrative and distance themselves from the persona of victimhood. I appreciate this “adoption of falsehoods”; however, it is vital that discourses on colonial denial must prioritize the ways in which it invalidates decolonial aspirations, which demands the “tearing down” of existing structures. How can we “tear down” structures if we deny their existence?

The utility of dualist fluidity and colonial denial serves as an important reminder that people are complex, and that the response to coloniality is diverse. For the coproducers that live in a spiritual existence of dual fluidity, their response to colonial imposition reveals their creativity, and their desire to “hold” on to their traditional spiritual identity amid Christian domination. For the coproducers that portray different forms of colonial denial, their response to colonial imposition exhibits a lack of acknowledgement, a refusal, a denial. Their denial serves as a psychological

defense where they refuse to accept reality or facts of colonisation, thereby protecting themselves from anxiety or trauma. Denial also serves as a way of limiting mental discomfort experienced when holding two or more conflicting beliefs or values, since for most “colonial deniers,” they believe that Christianity was beneficial in Igbo society.

Finally, and most importantly, regardless of the reason for denial, we cannot become too uncomfortable in confronting our colonial history and inadvertently succumb and deny the blatant reality that actively works to diminish us. Ultimately, in interrogating the unique responses to coloniality by contemporary Igbo women, the question of power, agency, and heritage is centered. The dual yet fluid response to the practice of *Odinani* and Christianity can be viewed as a deliberate form of resistance (especially compared to colonial denial) however, critical questions regarding the impact of such “spiritual switching” must be considered. Does the dual spiritual identity and subsequent dual forms of existence provide an agentic function, or does it create a “confusion of consciousness”? If it provides an agentic function, how does it materialize and how is it utilized? In critically assessing the afterlives of colonization and the attempts and efforts to “counter” it, we must be thoughtful in how we analyze the way people with colonial backgrounds make sense of their lives, and the creative ways they respond to the multiple identities colonization demands.

7.4 Future Research and Moving Forward

Going forward, I plan on continuing to build on this important work of providing a more nuanced understanding of gendered power through spirituality, by making it more accessible, and more culturally relevant. By continuing to explore a more critical understanding of the ways in which women can develop a deeper appreciation of the unique power that resides in spirituality, it can hopefully be utilized as a unique site of power in their current lives. While conducting fieldwork, I encountered a significant trend that led me to conclude that the contemporary practice of

Odinani/traditional spirituality is being co-opted by western conceptualizations. The outcome of this co-option is witnessed in the noticeable emergence of “online¹³⁴ prophetesses” that monetize Igbo spirituality. In the future, I will be looking to understand the monetization/capitalist persona of spirituality, and the impact on its perception and acceptance. I will also be investigating why the noticeable majority of online spiritual observers are women and if that could be traced back to the Igbo cultural belief that women are more connected with the “spirits”.

Secondly, I am also interested in exploring why women are villainized in Christian denominations and how the label of “witch” is, easily and readily ascribed to women. In many Churches in Igbo communities, the focus on witchcraft and “deliverance” is evident. The current studies on witchcraft in Africa (Kamps, 2020; Ikyer, 2023; Geschiere, 1997), shows that the concept is no longer viewed through the lens of tradition, but rather operates as a very important aspect of “modernity” through Christianity (Geschiere, 1997). The deliverance ministry is the domain by which indigenous Igbo churches operate and remains the site by which the diminishing of women is legitimized. In the future, I will confront the ways in which women are “transformed” into “witches”, and how that label troubles discourse of modernity and westernization.

I will be remiss to ignore the spiritual separation I confront in my work. This “separation” between Odinani and Christianity (I put “separation” in air quotes to signal its complexity) needs to be further analyzed to better conceptualize. Since both practices are separate, an understanding of where one “begins” and “ends” is vital in strengthening the concept of dualist fluidity. How separate are both practices? A critical appreciation of how Igbo women exist in dual forms of existence that equally values both views is also needed. In addition, some of my coproducers

¹³⁴ Particularly on Instagram and YouTube

describe that the separation of both spiritual world views happens without conflict. It is therefore important that this idea of “no conflict” be troubled. I insist that greater care must be applied in measuring what “no conflict” means. Does hierarchy exist between the two belief systems? If Odinani remains in the “shadows”/private, and is only practiced in shame, how does that connect with discourses about the practice of Odinani as resistance? A critical interrogation of these discourses will further enrich the question of power particularly in how hierarchical formations are central in how it is perceived and accepted.

Thirdly, I would like to investigate the ways in which Igbo spirituality has travelled and continues to travel across borders and cultures. I am mostly interested in how the concept of dualistic fluidity applies in the way diaspora Igbos operate in dual forms of existence. In Canadian cities such as Toronto, Ottawa, Nova Scotia, and British Columbia, Igbo diaspora communities have established formal organizations like the Igbo Canadian Community Association (ICCA)¹³⁵ and the Igbo Development Association of BC (IDAIBC)¹³⁶ dedicated to cultural preservation, youth education, and reviving ancestral practices. These associations hold cultural webinars, children’s language programs, and festivals that include rituals around naming ceremonies, ancestral acknowledgment, and traditional music elements deeply rooted in Odinani. Ritual specialists/*Dibia*’s and *Ezenwanyi*’s continue to function in diaspora settings and Igbo divination, incantations, and ancestral communication are practiced often privately mirroring how Igbo and indeed African cosmologies persist.

¹³⁵ <https://igbocanada.ca/>

¹³⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/IgboBC/>

Lastly and more broadly, I am interested in exploring how the Brazilian town of Salvador, Bahia¹³⁷, remains the epicenter of Afro-Brazilian spirituality and a living bridge to African cosmologies. With over 75% of its population of African descent, it embodies the diasporic continuity of Yoruba, Bantu, and Fon traditions in its music, cuisine, and sacred practices (Matory 2009). I want to explore how, even after the trauma of slavery, these spiritual systems survived and continue to be sustained. Salvador de Bahia exemplifies how African spirituality traveled, transformed, and remains vital in the diaspora, not as archaic relics but as lively, syncretic, public, and cosmologically meaningful practices through festivals, cuisine, and music. In doing so, they refuse erasure and reaffirm that African spirituality is modernity.

7.5 Limitations

Like all research, my work is bound by some methodological, empirical, and practical limitations. This research would have benefited from a more substantive presence of Igbo female prophetesses across Igbo land. Although I spoke to Igbo Queens and some practitioners of Odinani, an inclusion of Igbo prophetesses/*Ezenwanyi* would have contributed a more detailed assessment of the subject matter. In addition, this research could also have been more robustly informed by perspectives of Muslim Igbo women. Islam like Christianity, is an Abrahamic religion and the inclusion of an Islamic perspective would have been valuable in generating a more complete account of the differences in the way Odinani shows up for a Christian as opposed to a Muslim.

Another limitation of my research is related to the type of interview questions I asked while conducting field work. Considering that this was a study to provide more nuance to a generally misunderstood concept, some of the questions that I was asking my coproducers evolved over the

¹³⁷ Salvador, Bahia is often described as Brazil's most African city due to its strong Afro-Brazilian cultural heritage and the significant African diaspora presence.

course of the project in response to the answers I was receiving from previous coproducers, and because of my own ongoing reflexivity. I believe my work would have benefited from an initial selection and development of questions through greater collaboration with the coproducers through a pilot-based delivery. This would have helped me to refine the relevant themes that guided the data gathering portion of my fieldwork.

7.6 Looking to the Future: Power, Spirituality and Decolonial Ambitions.

This thesis has argued that contemporary postcolonial Igbo women navigate dual spiritual identities separately by engaging with Christianity and traditional Igbo spirituality/Odinani in a practice I define as Dualistic Fluidity. This phenomenon is not merely an adaptive response to modernity but a deliberate exercise of spiritual agency, allowing women to compartmentalize and selectively enact different belief systems depending on context, location, and purpose. Rather than reflecting fragmentation or conflict, this duality underscores the resilience of Igbo women in preserving their spiritual heritage, even within a society still shaped by the colonial imposition of western religion. By foregrounding this gendered spiritual agency, my research illuminates how spiritual switching functions as a subtle yet profound resistance to historical trauma, a trauma rooted in the denigration of African spirituality, the colonial displacement of traditional cosmologies, and the gendered moral codes imposed by missionary Christianity. Igbo women's ability to "split" and inhabit these dual spiritual realities demonstrates their capacity to negotiate power and reclaim ancestral connections without abandoning the religious structures now dominant in their society. This study therefore challenges the colonial narrative that positions Christianity as "civilized" and Igbo spirituality as "primitive." Instead, it affirms the fluidity, complexity, and nuance of postcolonial spiritual life. Recognizing this spiritual duality as both a survival strategy and a site of decolonial healing. I also

argue for a broader revaluation of African women's spiritual practices as legitimate, powerful, and foundational to cultural renewal in the face of ongoing coloniality.

In conclusion, as I reflect on all the many directions my research has "travelled" I am sure about two things. Firstly, the implication of colonization on the lives of African women are almost impossible to measure. Sadly, the loss and erasure created by the colonial encounter will never be accurately captured, and the depths of that erasure will never be completely accounted for. Secondly, although it is a great task to accurately measure the impact of colonization, my research reemphasizes the importance of attempting to confront that erasure, while acknowledging the complexity of colonization and its multiple afterlives. As I grapple with the idea of what the "future of African women" implies, and the erasures prevalent in conducting anti-colonial work, I am left wondering how the practice of *Odinani* could be instrumental in advancing the lives and status of contemporary Igbo women. Understandably like Tamale (2019), I acknowledge the value of knowing one's history and connecting with one's origins, but I am cautiously optimistic about how useful knowledge of one's spirituality can materially contribute to accelerating the status of African women. In addition, and more broadly, I also wonder if decolonial ambitions are overly aspirational or naive in the face of sustained colonial violence.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2014) expresses my dilemma accurately:

Transcending the edifice of Euro-North American modernity, particularly its globalized grammars, inventories and rhetoric has proven to be a major challenge for Africans, breathing, as they do, modernity and coloniality every day. The institutions that were bequeathed by modernity in the world such as the nation-state and capitalist economic management have somehow been naturalized. Euro-normativity has routinised and naturalized itself. Euro-North American epistemology has been globalized. African minds have been colonized (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2014:36).

The position above is sadly accurate. Ndlovu-Gatsheni's compelling diagnosis highlights the deep roots coloniality has taken in African institutions and minds. He frames "Euro-North American modernity not as a neutral or universal stage of development, but as a structured and ideological construct whose languages, systems, and logic have been imposed globally. These include capitalist modes of production, nation-state governance, and epistemic superiority, elements taken as natural but deeply rooted in colonial projects. The global appreciation of power is "naturalized" to center masculinity, dominance, violence, theft and subjugation and most significantly, discourses and belief systems concerning power are generally not analyzed or understood through a gendered lens. Institutions of modernity, in this case western religion, are complicit in naturalizing and routinising these kinds of rhetoric that justify and sustain gender inequality.

Although I fully recognize the edifice (as Ndlovu- Gathesini describes it) of colonization, I strive to present a balanced argument that critically confronts the many "colonial interlocutors" that assisted in the colonial mission. Because of this, I suggest that there is a need to unpack the many contradictions found within Igbo spirituality and Igbo custom regarding the status of women. In Igbo cosmology a woman is understood as being "closer to the spirits", she is believed to have power residing in her blood, her pronouncements, and even in her body. Her closeness to nature/the invisible universe, positions her as being uniquely powerful and, in some cases, is feared and revered for this unique "power". In addition, the spirituality of an Igbo woman is seen as innate and not derived through her connection to a man or only through her attainment of motherhood. With all these cultural belief systems associated to Igbo women, why is the status of Igbo women still viewed as secondary? Why does Igbo culture still prioritize male children? Why are Igbo women still denied inheritance rights, especially in patrilineal families.? Why are Igbo widows, divorced women, or women who resist heteronormative roles remain heavily stigmatized? Can we blame

colonization for these clear markers of gender inequality in Igbo culture, or is Igbo culture inherently patriarchal? Could the answer be found in Segato and Monque (2021) argument of low intensity patriarchy? Or does the answer involve a combination of all the factors identified.

As colonial regimes sought to erase, distort, or subordinate African ways of knowing, being, and organizing society, cultural preservation has emerged as a crucial site of decolonial struggle. This resistance is both symbolic and material, embedded in language, ritual, aesthetics, kinship, spirituality, and everyday practices. As the growing movement/push/call to action to decolonize continues to gain momentum in continental Africa, the focus remains mostly on the task of decolonizing intellect or knowledge, including knowledge production in academia (Mianda, 2002, 2022; Tamale, 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Tuck and Yang, 2012; Sefa-Dei, 2020; Le Grange, 2016). Other more noticeable sites of decolonial ambition in Africa involve the decolonizing of scholarship and efforts at “Africanising” the curriculum, (Ajani, 2019; Abdi, 2021; Le Grange, 2020; Mahabeer, 2018; Shizha, 2013; Zeleta, 2009). Discourses surrounding the need to decolonize other aspects of African life, such as spirituality and religion, have not necessarily “taken off” in the same way that the call to decolonize knowledge has, as my rigorous search in physical and online locations has proved. It is difficult to determine exactly why this is the case. I can only assume that the scarcity of scholarship related to decolonising spirituality can be traced to the sensitivity regarding issues surrounding spirituality, and the fanatical acceptance of western religion in many African communities.

For the colonized, decolonization of the mind is not only about returning to the annals of history to “find ourselves”, to become fluent in our cultural knowledge systems, to cultivate critical consciousness and to reclaim our humanity (Tamale, 2020). It demands that we must be ready to confront our previously held beliefs, in other words, to “decolonize” our understanding of ourselves,

while working systematically to create our own knowledge, our own stories and forge our own future and destiny. Mianda (2024:230) argues that the goal of such an archeological approach is not intended to excavate the past but rather to draw lessons from it to evaluate the best way we can fit into the present. This is because “the past can offer helpful lessons for the present” Mianda (2024:230). According to Mudimbe, (1994: 121) it is “a necessary step that can allow us to decide whether and how to maintain or rid ourselves of our heritage”. We must never forget that the colonial goal was never to elevate the humanity of the colonized.

As this thesis comes to an end, it is important to remember that my work intends to change the way power is framed, understood and interpreted. It seeks to change the understanding of how gendered power is unique and how spirituality can be utilized to create that uniqueness. As an Igbo woman, I also do this work to connect back to my roots, to understand my present by tracing the past. To confront the complexity of African spirituality and to demystify it. Through this research, I have come to appreciate and understand my culture more and I am more sympathetic and prouder of the experiences and courage of my foremothers. I conclude that as a people, we cannot claim to be committed towards advancing the position, integrity, identity, and power of women in the African continent without conscious, deliberate, consistent dismantling of the structures and legacies of our colonial past. As African feminists, it is vital that we live our lives “intersectionally” which means to live consciously while being fully aware of the complex levels of power and privilege that are constantly at play in our daily lives.

Whittingdale (2021) posits that “crucially feminist methodologies emerged from a pioneering turn against, the destabilization of, positivist emphases on objectivity and neutrality” (p:13). Grosfoguel (2007) argues that “the hegemonic Euro-centric paradigms that have informed western philosophy and sciences in the ‘modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system’ for the last

five hundred, years assumes a universalistic, neutral, objective point of view” (Grosfoguel, 2007:213). This universalistic point of view is what a decolonial perspective attempts to disrupt and its instrumentality in this research cannot be overstated. Ultimately, Smith (1999) argues that all decolonizing agenda must help Indigenous peoples (in my case Igbo West African peoples) to create and revitalize our own frameworks, language, theories, methodologies, and practices that work for us. For the colonized, decolonization requires a return to the annals of history not just to “find ourselves”, but become fluent in our cultural knowledge systems, to cultivate critical consciousness and to reclaim our humanity (Tamale, 2020). We must be ready to confront our previously held beliefs and realities, in other words, to decolonize our understanding of ourselves, while working systematically to create our own knowledge, our own stories and forge our own future and destiny.

Ndi umunwanyị Igbo n'ebe nile, imere nke oma!

To Igbo women everywhere, well done!

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APPENDIX A

COPRODUCERS

List of younger coproducers (21-40 years old)

Presented in no particular order.

1. Adaeze, 24-year-old student and model from Delta State, *Ogwashi Ukwu* Local government. In person interview conducted in Enugu State Nigeria.
2. Chioma, 22-year-old Student from Anambra State, *Nnewi* local government. In person interview conducted in Enugu State Nigeria.
3. Uju, 23-year-old student from Enugu State, Enugu East local government. In person interview conducted in Enugu State Nigeria.
4. Amarachi, 21-year-old Student from Imo state, *Ideato* South Local government. In person interview conducted in Enugu State Nigeria.
5. Udochukwu, 22-year-old student from Enugu State, *Nsukka* local government. In person interview conducted in Enugu State Nigeria.
6. Oluebube, 22-year-old student from Enugu State, *Nkanu* Local government. In person interview conducted in Enugu State Nigeria.
7. Uche, 37-year-old businesswomen from Imo State, *Oguta* local government. In person interview conducted in Onitsha Anambra State Nigeria.
8. Onyinyechukwu, 27-year-old government worker from Abia State, *Ohafia* local government. In person interview conducted in Onitsha Anambra State Nigeria.
9. Ifunaya, 22-year-old student from Enugu state, *Isi-Uzo* local government area. In person interview conducted in Enugu State Nigeria.
10. Chizzy, 23-year-old student from Ebonyi State, *Ikwo* local government area. In person interview conducted in Enugu State Nigeria.

List of older coproducers (40 -90 years and beyond)

APPENDIX B

Presented in no particular order.

1. Her Royal Highness, Omu Oyebuchibe Okonkwo, Omu Obior. In person interview conducted in her palace at *Obior* Delta State Nigeria.
2. Her Royal Highness, Obi Isioma Nwannabuogwu, Omu Ibusa. In person interview conducted at her place in Ibusa Delta State Nigeria.
3. Her Royal Highness, Adafo Onwordi, Omu *Isselu-Uku*. In person interview conducted at her palace in *Isselu-Uku* Delta State Nigeria.
4. Ugonna, 68-year-old Chief from Delta State, *Oshimili* South Local government. In person interview conducted in Asaba Delta State Nigeria.
5. Ngozi, 59-year-old, Justice of the customary court of appeals Asaba. From Asaba, *Oshimili* South local government. I person interview conducted in Asaba Delta State Nigeria.
6. Offormata 65-year-old Professor of Igbo history from Anambra State, *Orumba* South local government. In person interview conducted in Enugu State Nigeria.
7. Adaku, 43-year-old businesswomen from Abia State, *Arochukwu* local government. In person interview conducted in Onitsha Anambra State Nigeria.
8. Chi Chi, a 41-year-old writer from Anambra State. *Anaocha* local government. In person Interview conducted in Onitsha Anambra State.
9. Mama Ifatu, 90-year-old woman and mother to a Roman catholic priest. From Enugu State, *Oji-River* local government. In person interview conducted in Enugu State Nigeria.
10. Mama Idumuogbele, from Delta State, *Anioca* North, local government. In person interview conducted in *Onicha Ugbo* Delta State Nigeria.

APPENDIX C

Informed Consent Form

This consent form has been modified for use to obtain written consent from Female Igbo/Anioma Chieftains, female title holders and mature Igbo/Anioma women **(40 years and beyond)**.

Date:

Study Name: (Working Title) **MAINSTREAMING THE MYSTIC: GENDERED POWER THROUGH RITUALS IN IGBO/ANIOMA NIGERIA**

Researchers: Ifeyinwa (Ify) Okadigbo, Teaching and Research Assistant, Founders College, Room 206 G, 4700 Keele Street Toronto Ontario. M3J 1P3. PhD. Candidate at the School of PhD. School of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies, York University Toronto. Graduate Supervisor- Professor Gertrude Mianda.

Purpose of the Research: This research seeks to contribute new ways of understanding gendered power relations, it aims to contribute to decolonizing initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa, and globally to ultimately contribute to expand efforts that promote gender equality through feminist initiatives. This research also seeks to prioritize the unique place of spirituality in the lives of women and how it can be instrumentalized in reshaping the way gender power is framed, perceived, and utilized.

What You Will Be Asked to Do in the Research: I will be asking respondents to unpack their understanding, knowledge, and insights of gendered power particularly in how specific gendered rituals in Igbo culture (including *Itu Aja* and *Igba Afa*) is utilized in contemporary Igbo society. I will also be asking them their thoughts on decolonizing West African spirituality. Each interview will be a one-off interaction for a duration of 45 minutes – 1 hour at whatever location the respondent feels most comfortable.

Risks and Discomforts: I do not foresee any risks or discomfort from your participation in the research.

Benefits of the Research and Benefits to You: I believe that this research will be mutually beneficial to myself and my respondents. The educational/knowledge benefits to my respondents cannot be quantified as I will be expanding their understanding on the reach and aspirations of decolonization and specifically African decolonial futures. I will also be challenging their

understanding of traditional African spirituality especially in the way it is constructed in contemporary Nigerian society. As for me, I will have the opportunity to gain a more nuanced understanding of how Igbo spirituality is negotiated especially in how gendered power can be derived from it.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. In the event you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible. Or, should you wish to withdraw after the study, you will have the option to also withdraw your data up until the analysis is complete

Confidentiality: Unless you choose otherwise the recording (video, audio, and photograph) will present your full name and customary title and state of origin.

Your data (audio, video, and photographic materials) will be safely stored in a flash/USB drive that will be password encrypted and will be safely stored away in a secured filing cabinet. All materials will be accessed solely by me, and no other person will have access to the physical drives or have knowledge of the password. All data will be safely stored for 5 years after which it will be destroyed and adequately disposed of by myself.

ALL DATA COLLECTED DURING THIS INTERVIEW WILL BE PRESENTED WITH YOUR FULL NAME, AND IDENTITY. THIS IS DONE BECAUSE YOU ARE AN IGBO CULTURAL FIGURE AND AS SUCH REPRESENTING YOU ACCURATELY IS A SIGN OF RESPECT. ANY SECONDARY USE OF PERSONAL DATA BY MYSELF, THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR WILL BE TREATED IN THE SAME WAY AS THE ORIGINAL RESEARCH PROJECT.

Questions About the Research? If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact my project supervisor Professor Gertrude Mianda either by telephone at +1 (416) 736-2100, extension 88198 or by email at mianda@yorku.ca. You can also reach me at , Founders College, Room 206 G, 4700 Keele Street Toronto Ontario or via email at ify.okad7@yorku.ca. This research has received ethics review and approval by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process, or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact the Director, Research Ethics in the Office of Research Ethics, 3rd Floor, Kaneff Tower, York University.

Legal Rights and Signatures:

I _____ consent to participate in MAINSTREAMING THE MYSTIC: GENDERED POWER THROUGH RITUALS IN IGBO NIGERIA conducted by *IFEYINWA OKADIGBO*. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Signature _____

Date _____

Participant

Signature _____

Date _____

Principal Investigator

Additional consent (where applicable)

You must seek additional consent by including check boxes or requesting additional signatures for the following:

1. Audio recording

☐ I consent to the audio-recording of my interview(s).

2. Video recording

I _____ consent to the use of images of me (including video and other moving images), my environment and property in the following ways (please check all that apply):

In academic articles	☐ N	☐ Y
In print, digital and slide form	☐ N	☐ Y
In academic presentations	☐ N	☐ Y
In media	☐ N	☐ Y
In thesis materials	☐ N	☐ Y

3. Photographs

I _____ consent to the use of images of me, my environment and property in the following ways (please check all that apply):

In academic articles	☐ N	☐ Y
In print, digital and slide form	☐ N	☐ Y
In academic presentations	☐ N	☐ Y
In media	☐ N	☐ Y
In thesis materials	☐ N	☐ Y

4. Consent to waive anonymity.

I, consent to the use of my name in the publications arising from this research.

5. Consent to the use of quotes.

I consent to the use of quotations in any final reports/ publications of the research? Y / N

APPENDIX D

Informed Consent Form

This consent form has been modified for use to obtain written consent from young Igbo women ages between **21-40 years old**.

Date:

Study Name: (Working Title). **MAINSTREAMING THE MYSTIC: GENDERED POWER THROUGH RITUALS IN IGBO/ANIOMA NIGERIA**

Researchers: Ifeyinwa (Ify) Okadigbo, Teaching and Research Assistant, Founders College, Room 206 G, 4700 Keele Street Toronto Ontario. M3J 1P3. PhD. Candidate at the School of PhD. School of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies, York University Toronto. Graduate Supervisor-Professor Gertrude Mianda.

Purpose of the Research: This research seeks to contribute new ways of understanding gender power relations, it aims to contribute to decolonizing initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa, and globally to ultimately contribute to expand efforts that promote gender equality through feminist initiatives. This research also seeks to prioritize the unique place of spirituality in the lives of women and how it can be instrumentalized in reshaping the way gender power is framed, perceived, and utilized.

What You Will Be Asked to Do in the Research: I will be asking respondents to unpack their understanding, knowledge, and insights of gendered power particularly in how specific gendered rituals in Igbo culture (including *Itu Aja* and *Igba Afa*) is utilized in contemporary Igbo society. I will also be asking them their thoughts on decolonizing West African spirituality. Each interview will be a one-off interaction for a duration of 45 minutes to 1 hour at whatever location the participant feels most comfortable, preferably indoors.

Risks and Discomforts- Because of my research focus, which is on African spirituality, there is a possibility that some participants may feel some level of discomfort disclosing the full extent of their acceptance and possible use of traditional modes of spirituality. Because of the false association of African spirituality in Western knowledge systems as diabolic and “evil” I suspect some participants who engage in traditional modes of Igbo spirituality may be uncomfortable with that information being public for fear of being stigmatized. Because of this, I will ensure that the identity of my “everyday” participants is completely anonymous, and that written and verbal

consent is understood and obtained before any interviews commence. I will also end/redirect the interview if participants feel uncomfortable with questions.

Benefits of the Research and Benefits to You: I believe that this research will be mutually beneficial to myself and my respondents. The educational/knowledge benefits to my respondents cannot be quantified as I will be expanding their understanding on the reach and aspirations of decolonization and specifically African decolonial futures. I will also be challenging their understanding of traditional African spirituality especially in the way it is constructed in contemporary Nigerian society. As for me, I will have the opportunity to gain a more nuanced understating of how Igbo spirituality is negotiated especially in how gendered power can be derived from it.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. In the event you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible. Or should you wish to withdraw after the study, you will have the option to also withdraw your data up until the analysis is complete.

Confidentiality: Your interview will be fully confidential with your real name replaced by a fake name, the only personal information that will be documented is your age, and state of origin because of its centrality to my research method. All information you supply during the research will be held in confidence, and your identity will always appear anonymous in all publications concerning this research.

Your data (audio recording) will be safely stored in a flash/USB drive that will be password encrypted. When I am not engaged in the field, it will be safely stored away in a secured filing cabinet. All materials will be accessed solely by me, and no other person will have access to the physical drives or have knowledge of the password. All data will be stored for 5 years and after which it will be destroyed and adequately disposed of destroyed.

Ongoing Confidentiality

ALL DATA COLLECTED DURING THIS INTERVIEW WILL BE PRESENTED ANONYMOUSLY. YOUR NAME AND ALL OTHER IDENTIFYING MARKERS WILL BE REPLACED WITH A FAKE NAME. ANY AND ALL SECONDARY USE OF YOUR DATA WILL APPEAR ANONYMOUSLY AND WILL BE TREATED WITH THE SAME DEGREE OF CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY AS THE ORIGINAL PROJECT

Questions About Research? If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact my project supervisor Professor Gertrude Mianda either by telephone at +1 (416) 736-2100, extension 88198 or by email at mianda@yorku.ca. You can also reach me at Founders College, Room 206 G, 4700 Keele Street Toronto Ontario or via email at ify.okad7@yorku.ca. This research has received ethics review and approval by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process, or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact the Director, Research Ethics in the Office of Research Ethics, 3rd Floor, Kaneff Tower, York University.

Legal Rights and Signatures:

I _____ consent to participate in MAINSTREAMING THE MYSTIC: GENDERED POWER THROUGH RITUALS IN IGBO NIGERIA conducted by *IFEYINWA OKADIGBO*. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Signature _____

Date _____

Participant

Signature _____

Date _____

Principal Investigator

Additional consent (where applicable)

You must seek additional consent by including check boxes or requesting additional signatures for the following:

6. Audio recording

☐ I consent to the audio-recording of my interview(s).

7. Consent to the use of quotes.

I consent to the use of quotations in any final reports/ publications of the research? Y / N

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What name will you like me to use in my research (note- I only ask that the name you provide be an Igbo and or Anioma name).
2. Do you identify as female?
3. What is your age (21years 40 years)- (41years -80 years) (81years plus)
4. State of origin and local government
5. How would you describe power?
6. Do you think Igbo or Anioma women have power or are powerful? (Yes) (No) Explain?
7. What do you know about traditional Igbo and or Anioma spirituality?
8. Where did you learn about Igbo and or Anioma spirituality?
9. Do you think spirituality is a form of power? (Yes) (No) Explain?
10. What role (if any) do you think traditional Igbo and or Anioma spirituality plays in transmitting power particularly for women?
11. What do you think about Igbo/Anioma spirituality being a form of power that women use/have used or can use?
12. Do you think western religion has affected Igbo/Anioma spirituality? (Yes) (No) Explain?
13. Have you seen an uprise in the acceptance of traditional spirituality among young people (particularly young Igbo women) on social media? (Yes) (No)? If yes, what do you think of these female spiritualists?
14. Do you believe there is a place for Igbo/Anioma spirituality in contemporary Igbo society? (Yes) (No) Explain?

15. Do you think the feminization of African female power can be mainstreamed to benefit not only African women, but other colonized and racialized women?
16. How could the acknowledgement of other forms of power that depart from the dominant western conceptualizations be included and taken up in dominant discourses regarding power?
17. Could a theory of power that centers spirituality be replicable in other locations that do not prioritize spirituality?
18. How can Igbo/Anioma women renew their connections to the spirits and by extension their power, by reclaiming some of their rituals that has been lost through westernization?
19. Thank you for your interview. Can I contact you if I have further questions?

APPENDIX F



Certificate #: STU 2024-032

Approval Period: 04/10/24-04/10/25

ETHICS APPROVAL

To: Ifeyinwa Okadigbo

Graduate Student of Gender, Feminist & Women's Studies ifyokad7@yorku.ca

From: Alison M. Collins-Mrakas, Director, Research Ethics
(on behalf of You-ta Chuang, Chair, Human Participants Review Committee)

Date: Wednesday, April 10, 2024

Title: Mainstreaming the Mystic: Gendered Power through
Rituals in Igbo Nigeria

Risk Level: ☒ Minimal Risk ☐ More than Minimal Risk

Level of Review: ☒ Delegated Review ☐ Full Committee Review

I am writing to inform you that this research project, “**Mainstreaming the Mystic: Gendered Power through Rituals in Igbo Nigeria**” has received ethics review and approval by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University’s Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines.

Note that approval is granted for one year. Ongoing research – research that extends beyond one year – must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

Any changes to the approved protocol must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process by submission of an amendment application to the HPRC prior to its implementation.

Any adverse or unanticipated events in the research should be reported to the Office of Research ethics (ore@yorku.ca) as soon as possible.

For further information on researcher responsibilities as it pertains to this approved research ethics protocol, please refer to the attached document, “**RESEARCH ETHICS: PROCEDURES to ENSURE ONGOING COMPLIANCE**”.

Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at acollins@yorku.ca.

Yours sincerely,

RESEARCH ETHICS: PROCEDURES to ENSURE ONGOING COMPLIANCE

Upon receipt of an ethics approval certificate, researchers are reminded that they are required to ensure that the following measures are undertaken so as to ensure on-going compliance with Senate and TCPS ethics guidelines:

1. **RENEWALS:** Research Ethics Approval certificates are subject to annual renewal. **Failure to renew an ethics approval certificate or (to notify ORE that no further research involving human participants will be undertaken) will result in the closure of the protocol.** No further research activities may be undertaken until such time as a new protocol has been reviewed and approved. **Further, it may result in suspension of research cost fund and access to research funds may be suspended/withheld;**
2. **AMENDMENTS:** Amendments must be reviewed and approved **PRIOR** to undertaking/making the proposed amendments to an approved ethics protocol;
3. **END OF PROJECT:** ORE must be notified when a project is complete;
4. **ADVERSE EVENTS:** Adverse events must be reported to ORE as soon as possible;
5. **POST APPROVAL MONITORING:**
 - a. More than minimal risk research may be subject to post approval monitoring as per TCPS guidelines;
 - b. A spot sample of minimal risk research may similarly be subject to Post Approval Monitoring as per TCPS guidelines.

- FORMS:** As per the above, the following forms relating to on-going research ethics compliance are available on the Research website:
- a. Renewal
 - b. Amendment
 - c. End of Project
 - d. Adverse Event