FROM SHRINES TO PRAYER HOUSES: A RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF IGBO WOMEN, 1900-1970

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

History – Doctor of Philosophy

2013

ABSTRACT

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This dissertation argues that Igbo women in southeastern Nigeria played active roles in the religious transformations that occurred in their communities between 1900 and 1970. This time period is chosen to permit an exploration of the changes and continuities in Igbo women's religious experience in three successive periods: the late pre-missionary (before 1910), missionary (c. 1900—1940), and independence (c. 1940—1970). Focusing on the Ufuma-Igbo, this project first highlights the changes that occurred in Igbo women's religious experience on the eve of missionary incursion and British colonial rule by examining the role of women's personal shrines in spreading culture-specific ideas. Next, this study examines the ways in which indigenous women influenced European missionary strategies during the encounter between Ufuma and CMS (Church Missionary Society) missionaries. It particularly explores the role of early indigenous female Christians (remembered as "Bible women") in the mass conversion of Ufuma in the 1930s. Turning to the late colonial period, this project then surveys the conditions that led to the rise of spiritual churches founded by Igbo women. It also examines some of the ways in which Igbo men and women came to trust in "prayer houses" as auxiliaries to main-line churches.

This study makes a number of contributions to African women's history as well as to African religious historiography. First, it highlights the dominant position that indigenous Igbo women occupied in the religious realm in pre-colonial times. Next, it clarifies Africa's religious history by identifying Ufuma women as key players in the religious changes occurring on the eve of

colonial rule and European missionary incursions. Furthermore, by examining the ways in which Ufuma women drew closer to the church when they took advantage of maternity supplies provided by missionaries, this study shifts the focus from educational missionary strategies to the importance of medical missions in African church history. What is more, this study prioritizes the importance of local indigenous women missionaries ("Bible Women") in the evangelical project of the CMS in Nigeria in the 20th century. Finally, this study enriches our understanding of independent Christian movements by exploring the gendered character of "prayer houses" as a 20th century Christian phenomenon in African history. Prayer houses prompt us to reconsider women's religious experience and African Christian categories in the 20th century and raise the question whether we can speak about womanist churches in African History.

DEDICATION

To my Mother (Frances Onyenagolum Nwaefido)
To my American Parents (Jamaine and Deji Abidogun)
To my Husband Casmir and our Daughter Heaven

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In my search for a word that best conveys the unsaid thoughts and feelings I have for the many wonderful people that lifted me to this chapter of my life, I turn to the Igbo word daalu. Daalu captures not just the general meaning of the English "thank you" but also some other thoughts that words alone cannot express. Daalu is loaded with the history of a relationship and most importantly it speaks of a continued association. So, when I say daalu to my advisor Professor Walter Hawthorne and my rock Professor Laura Fair, I say thank you in arrears and may our relationship last a lifetime. I sincerely and deeply appreciate the time and effort you both have spent on my dissertation and the time you have spent guiding me academically. I am especially grateful for the detailed comments you gave on my dissertation proposal and the many letters you have written and will write on my behalf. To my outside committee members, Professors Gordon Stewart, Mara Leichtman, and Rita Kiki Edozie you have played key roles in seeing to the completion of this study. Through various seminars, independent studies, research guidance, and well-intended thoughts you have in many ways impacted my academic career and have prepared me for the successes that lay ahead. To you I say daalu. I am also indebted to the Department of History and the Graduate School at Michigan State University for funding the field work for this dissertation in 2011.

Futhermore, I am grateful to many other academic professionals here at Michigan State University (History Department and the African Studies Center) and at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka who have in many ways contributed to this excellence: Professor Emeritus David Robinson, Professors Peter Limb, Peter Alegi, Ken Harrow, Aminda Smith, Erica Windler, P.O. Esedebe, O.N Njoku, J.O Ijoma, J. Ahazuem, U.C Anyanwu, Egodi Uchendu, P.O Obi-ani, C.C

Opata, and A. Apeh. To you and others that I may have missed indeliberately I say many THANKS. To my friends and colleagues at the University of Nigeria who in their kindness asked follow-up questions and revisited archives I owe much gratitude as well: Ogechukwu Ezekwem and Kingsley Udegbunam may our friendship last a lifetime. To my friends and colleagues here at Michigan State University past and present, I am most grateful for your encouragement and individual insight into my overall scholarly development: Assan Sarr, Leslie Hadfield, Bala Saho, Jill Kelly, Joshua Grace, Matthew Park, Emily Riley, Bre Grace, April Greenwood, Benjamin Bruwyler, Lumumba Shabaka, Blair Zaid, Dr. Austin Okigbo, Ijeoma Odoh, and many others. I am thankful for the great insights, guidance, and motivation you individually brought to this project.

It is difficult to name everyone that has been part of this research since 2009 when I first began exploring this dissertation. At the archives in London, Birmingham and Oxford, I took for granted the generosity of willing research aides whose names I am unable to recall at the moment. I appreciate you all and especially grateful to Ken Osborne at CMS Oxford for the many days he closed late because I lingered on a document. I cannot also forget the tremendous help of research aides at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nnamdi Azikwe University, Awka, and the Federal Polytechnic Oko. Thank you one and all for directing me to the right document and for expanding my research parameter. To the many willing informants, research collaborators and interviewees who in all kindness and selflessness spent time with me, answering questions, providing the much needed connection to members of the community, and pouring out their personal life histories to me, Daalu. With every historical detail you walked me through, you especially made this work a success and I am ever grateful. I cannot name you all here but know that I am very grateful. Mr. and Mrs. Asiegbunam, Mr. and Mrs. Mogbo, Mr. and

Mrs. Okoli, Mrs. Chukwu, Mrs. Okafor, Mr and Mrs Nwokolo, Mrs. Ugwuanyi, Mr. and Mrs. Ugwori to menton a few. I also enjoyed the generosity of *okada* men and other resourceful persons who spared no time in taking me from one house to the other even when I did not have an exact address in Ufuma and Ovoko. God bless you all.

I also benefitted from many helpers in the course of writing this dissertation, helpers who read my dissertation, babysat my daughter, and gave the much needed encouragement and assistance as I straddled family and dissertation. To Pastor Christopher and his wife Priscilla Smith, Chris and Ashley Ahlin, Hope and Henry Akaeze, Pastor Kevin and BethAnne Shoemaker and family, Emma Ogutu, Laura Ballard, Camille Asher, Julie Forehand, Jenny Cairns, Francis Smart, Emilie Diouf and family, Felix Umeana and family, and the entire Capital City Vineyard Church, Graduate Intervarsity, and Intentional Faith Living crew daalu for all your help, prayers, support, and encouragement.

In all, I am most thankful to God and my family for bringing this to completion. I have three families altogether, the first in Nigeria, a second in the United States and the third in London. In Nigeria, I enjoyed the prayers and support of my mother and four siblings. How can one say "thank you" alone for the many fasting and night vigil prayers said on my behalf? To my mother Mrs. Frances O. Nwaefido, who also took on roles as father and teacher over many years, I am thankful to God for sending you my way and appreciate you for bringing me up so strong in spite of the many challenges. I am thankful for your selflessness, patience and fervent prayers. To my sister Mrs. Joanne Aluko and family, thank you for being the best big sister ever. And to Janefrances, Justus and Perpetual you are all loved and appreciated for everything that you made happen. Justus, I will never forget how you left the conforts of home in Lagos to accompany me to the research fields in Ufuma, Enugu, and Nsukka. To Janefrances, I will not forget your many

calls and prayers on the phone. To you all and my extended family, the Emeshies, Ogonenwes, and Bienues, I am equally thankful.

Daalu to my god-parents, Dr. Jamaine & Deji Abidogun in the United States who did not only provide the academic support that has produced this excellence in me but also made America home to a foreigner. To my adopted sisters and brothers who have been rooting for me even before they met me Craig and Samantha, Shambrecia and Mario, Shauntoya and all my adopted nieces, cousins, aunts and uncles, Daalu for the many gifts that made life bearable for a 'non-immigrant alien.' I love you all and God loves you even more. May the bond between us wax stronger. To my husband and daughter, what is there not to say…

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CHAPTER FIVE – WOMANIST AFRICAN INDEPENDENT CHRISTIAN MOVEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

In 1990 the Anglican Diocese of Awka set up a committee to dialogue with All Christian Practical Praying Band (ACPPB), a pioneer "independent" religious movement in Igboland that was founded by Madam Nwokolo between the late 1940s and early 1950s.[1] The committee's responsibility was to reconcile the practices of the Praying Band with those of the Church of England in Nigeria, also known as the Anglican Communion. After a series of meetings between 1990 and 1995, the committee revealed its findings and registered ACPPB as an independent organization.[2] Although the committee recommended that the Anglican Church declare unequivocally that the ACPPB had no relationship with the Anglican Church and that both the clergy and laity of the Anglican Church should be barred from participating in its religious activities or face excommunication, the ACPPB continues to exert influence on Igbo Christians and many still view it as an affiliate of the Anglican Communion in Ufuma.[3]

This tenuous relationship between the Anglican Church and ACPPB, which has persisted since the beginnings of the Praying Band between the late 1940s and early 1950s, raises questions about the actual meaning of "independence" when it comes to African Independent Churches (AICs), that is, the extent to which homegrown expressions of Christianity in Africa

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[1] The founding date of All Christian Practical Praying Band is a subject of controversy. However, more sources point to the late 1940s than to a later date in the early 1950.

[2] ACPPB (or *Uka Ekpere Ufuma* as it is popularly called) continues to see itself as an affiliate of the Anglican Communion and in fact, a dying prophetess (Madam Nwokolo) made her sons (now elders and leaders within the movement) promise to keep the "Praying Band" an affiliate of the Anglican Communion.

[3] 2003 Synod Report (The Church of Nigeria, Diocese of Awka: Awka, 14-18 June 2003) 78-79

are truly "independent."[4] It also raises important questions about religious and gender politicking in Africa, and it provides an opportunity to explore the positions that women leaders (especially church leaders) hold in African Christian organizations. What is more, it also highlights the question of Christian identities, showing that the use of analytical defining categories (Pentecostal, Orthodox, Nativist, etc.) can create confusion rather than clarity in the study of African religious history.

The proliferation of different expressions of Christianity in Africa has led scholars to create numerous categories of churches, from 'Mission/Mainline churches' to 'AICs' (African Independent/ Initiated/ Indigenous Churches), Charismatic, and Pentecostal. While some scholars like Donald Dayton[5] differentiate between Christian denominations by arguing that the African Pentecostal identity defers from mainline categories because of its revivalist nature and its emphasis on charisma, conversion and sanctification, others like Kalu insist that the doctrines, liturgical styles, devotional practices and economic strategies that the African Pentecostal movement shares with other non- Pentecostal churches indicate a convergence between these African Christian categories.[6] My study adds its voice to this debate by introducing yet another African Christian category, "Prayer Houses," (*Ulo Ekpere*) a non-denominational expression popular among Igbo women of Nigeria. Introducing Prayer Houses as a non-denominational category forces us to explore the possibility of a gendered Christian category in African history. In other words, while this study argues against the proliferation of Christian categories in African studies, it also presents an alternative argument for a gendered reading of Christian organizations

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[4] Birgit Meyer had asked similar questions in "Christianity in Africa: From African Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches," *Annual Review of Anthropology,* Vol. 33 (2004) 448

[5] D. W. Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987) 33

[6] Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 6

in African history. A gendered reading of African Christianity might help differentiate between African womanist churches and pro-male Christian institutions in Igboland and perhaps Africa.

Meanwhile, there is much to be said about the increased blurring of old denominational categories in the Nigerian Church today, especially in the eastern part of the country, where even Catholics observe religious practices that formerly were in the exclusive domain of the Pentecostals. The Charismatic movement within the Catholic Church, with its unorthodox 'night vigil' and 'deliverance'/'prayer-warrior' meetings, quickly comes to mind. Almost everyone in Igboland has heard of famous Catholic Charismatic priests including Father Ejike Mbaka and his contemporary who is popularly known as Father Dibia. Father Mbaka's Holy Ghost Adoration Crusades are held weekly and attended by Catholics and non-Catholics alike. They attract crowds through prophetic, deliverance, and 'signs-and-wonders' ministrations. It can be said fairly that their non-traditional approach and openness to the miraculous have not only checked the drift of Igbo Catholic faithfuls to African initiated churches; they have also colored the very nature of Igbo Catholicism.

Similar categorical blurrings are observed in most of the female-pioneered churches I encountered in and around Ufuma, including ACPPB. They draw their membership from several Christian denominations, to such an extent that Ufuma Christians typically navigate through a spectrum of Christian denominations during their lifetimes. In other words, Ufuma Christians generally go back and forth between church denominations so that at any given point, an Ufuma Christian might be not just an orthodox Christian (or Anglican) but also a Pentecostal attending the ACPPB.[7] Indeed, it is clear that Ufuma indigenes make claims and connections to specific

[7] Although Ufuma Christians generally claim allegiance to one denomination in my interviews with them, continued conversation often revealed consistent patronage of two or more denominations and in rare occasions of traditional healers/dibia in their lifetimes.

denominations depending on their immediate circumstances and needs, thus making it increasingly difficult to make generalizations about specific denominations. It is with this in mind that this study prefers to engage Christian categories based on gender affiliations and practices. This approach makes it necessary, but also easier, to differentiate between denominations by distinguishing those that are pro-male (mostly orthodox Christianities) from those that are pro-female (Prayer Houses, Aladura, Cherubim and Seraphim Churches and other African Initiated Churches).

This study began as a focus on one of the earliest "independent" Christian movements in eastern Nigeria, one pioneered by an Igbo woman (Madam Nwokolo), but it soon broadened to include others as I discovered some 10 independent churches founded by Igbo women in one single local government region: Anambra State, Nigeria. Beyond the fact that these churches (or "prayer houses," as some of them prefer to be called) are all run by women (sometimes in collaboration with their husbands), they share several other commonalities. They operate as non-denominational Christian movements, drawing their membership from Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, you name it. These churches are also prophetic and emphasize faith healing in their devotions. They also espouse a non-materialist outlook in their community that clearly upholds traditional ethics. They often double as church and home to members, providing comprehensively for their welfare by offering room and board, schools, a curfew and code of conduct, and prayer meetings, among other things. As grass-roots churches, they draw most of their membership from women and hence have a strong alliance with the ministries of prophetesses, female preachers, and female "prayer warriors." Yet men seem to play important roles as well, along with children, who in the ACPPB can be prophets and prophetesses within

the congregation. Very importantly, a majority of these movements transport indigenous ideas and principles into their Christian healing and deliverance practices.

This study makes three important contributions to African women's history as well as to African religious historiography spanning three periods of Africa's history: pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial. First, it highlights the dominant position indigenous Igbo women occupied in the religious realm in pre-colonial times by identifying Ufuma women as key players in the religious changes occurring on the eve of colonial rule and European missionary incursions. Second, this study demonstrates the importance of local indigenous women missionaries (known as "Bible Women") in the evangelistic project of the CMS (Church Missionary Society) in Nigeria in the 20th century. Third, this study enriches our understanding of independent Christian movements by exploring the peculiar character of "prayer houses" as a 20th century Christian phenomenon in African history. Prayer Houses prompt us to reconsider African Christian categories and raise the question of whether we can speak about womanist churches in African History.

Historiography

Gender and Religious Transformation in the Pre-colonial Era

"An old woman never forgets the dance she learned in her youth"[8]

This study builds upon a legacy of scholarship about African women's authority in the spiritual realm in pre-colonial times. This scholarship has shown to date that for Igbo women, the

[8] The Igbo proverb used throughout celebrates the importance of oral history in this project. The above is best explained in Jeff Friedman, "Muscle Memory: Performing Oral History" *Oral History,* Vol. 33, No. 2, Memory Work (2005) pp. 35-37

period before western incursion was a period of authority and power accessed through religion. Whereas in pre-colonial Ufuma political affairs the natural chairmanship fell on the most senior male (in the Village Council) and female (in the women's Council), in the spiritual or religious realm authority fell naturally on those who possessed powers, whether they were a man, woman, or child. Such powers were manifested in the ability to prophesy events that came to pass, to heal diseases, and make accurate divinations.[9] Gendered discrimination was relatively insignificant, hence in their capacity as rain makers, prophetesses, diviners, and medicine women, Ufuma women were able to wield power and authority that was on a par with that of their male counterparts, and sometimes even greater. In this atmosphere of religious freedom and self-authorization, Ufuma women easily tapped into power and became the hub of religious change in pre-historic Igboland.

Beyond the "women are hedged in by taboos" discourse, scholars of Africa are generally in consensus on the place of women in traditional African religion, where they occupied important religious positions as healers, diviners, priestesses, and prophetesses. Scholars argue that African indigenous religion made provisions for the balanced and active participation of men and women in the religious sphere, as illustrated in the priesthood system.[10] African literary writers such as Chinua Achebe and Elechi Amadi capture this visibility of women in traditional African religious activities in Igboland. In *Things Fall Apart*[11] the earth deity, considered a "female

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[9] Oyeronke Oyewumi, *African Gender Studies: A Reader* (New York: Palgrave, 2005) 24

[10] See F.I. Ekejiuba, Women in Igbo Religious Systems ', 1st Congress on Igbo Religion, Nsukka, Aug. 28 - 30, 1984; Margaret Strobel, Women in Religious and Secular Ideology, in M.J. Hay & S. Strichter (9eds), *African Women South of the Sahara*, London, Longman, 1984), 87-101.

[11] Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958)

principle"[12] and accorded prime religious influence in Igbo society, and Chielo the priestess cum prophetess of *Agbala* are portrayed as all powerful.[13] Likewise, Ihuoma in *The Concubine* exemplifies the phenomenon of women marrying deities, a religious and cultural phenomenon that rarely includes Igbo men.[14] The same idea of gender inclusion in the African priesthood formed an important root of womanist agitation in the last three decades, the continuing struggle to bring women to their rightful religious positions in the Christian priesthood since the colonial period.[15]

This study will therefore draw upon the legacy of this scholarship that has explored gender and religion in the pre-colonial period. However, it will also make a unique contribution, since the role of women in religious transformations predating the colonial period has not previously been given serious consideration, nor have Africanists explored the internal factors that may have driven such religious changes.[16]

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[12] Nwando Achebe, *Farmers, Traders, Warriors and Kings: Female Power and Authority in Northern Igboland, 1900-1960* (NH: Heinemann, 2005) 11

[13] Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Random Books, 1959) 50th Anniversary Edition. 49

[14] Elechi Amadi, *The Concubine* (London: Heinemann, 1966)

[15] Brigid M. Sackey, *New directions in Gender and Religion: The Changing Status of Women in African Independent Churches* (New York: Lexington Books, 2006) 63ff

[16] On early works on gender and religion among the Igbo see Udobata Onunwa, "Femininity in Igbo cosmology: paradoxes and Ambiguities," in Workshop on Igbo World View, Institute of African Studies, U.N.N., December 3-6, 1989; F.I. Ekejiuba, "Women in Igbo Religious Systems," in 1st Congress on Igbo Religion, Nsukka, August 28 - 30, 1984. Margaret Strobel, "Women in Religious and Secular Ideology," in M.J. Hay & S. Strichter (9eds), *African Women South of the Sahara*, London, Longman, 1984), 87-101; Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters Female Husbands, Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed. Books Ltd., 1987), 99-116; G.T. Basden, *Niger Ibos* (London, Frank Cass + Co. Ltd., 1966); M.M. Green, *Igbo Village Affairs* (London: Frank Cass, 1947); Sylvia Leith-Ross, *African Women* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939); J.S.

Thus, a distinctive input of this study is its discussion of the religious transformations that were taking place on the eve of colonial rule. Elsewhere in Africa, studies on pre-colonial religious change emphasize external factors fostering change and give less weight to internal causes. The literature argues that the violence and socio-economic uncertainties associated with the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade affected belief systems and religious practices in many decentralized West African communities. It also maintains that changes in the roles of sacred places and deities were the direct result of the trade in humans, noting that long before the invasion of colonizers from Europe, African societies, ravaged by slave trading and prolonged warfare, were discarding gods who failed to protect them and embracing new ones or reforming old ones who promised greater security.[17] Herskovits connects religious change and warfares associated with the slave trade this way:

> "In West Africa, tribal gods had been frequently borrowed, and there was no reason why the Christian concept of the universe and the powers that rule it…could not equally well be incorporated into their system of belief. West African gods are often described by the members of a tribe as having been taken over from another people and one native explanation why this was done shows such insight into the psychology of the matter that it should be noted here. When one group conquered another, the superior power of the gods of the conquerors was self-evident, and it was thus to the advantage of the conquered to appease them."[18]

Harris, "The Position of Women in a Nigerian Society," *Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences* 2:5 (1940)

[17] Rebecca Shumway, *The Fante and the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2011); Robert Baum, *Shrines of the slave Trade: Diola Religion and Society in Precolonial Senegambia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Sylviane Diouf, *Fighting the Slave Trade: West African Strategies* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003); Jean Allman and John Parker, *Tongnaab: The History of a West African God* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2005); Rosalind Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Sandra Greene, *Sacred Sites and the Colonial Encounter: A History of Meaning and Memory in Ghana* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002)

[18] M.J. Herskovits, *Man and His Works* (New York; Alfred A. Knopf, 1948) 552

This study builds on the work of Jean Allman and John Parker, among others. In their exploration of the Talensi god Tongnaab, Allman and Parker argue that the development of the trans-Atlantic slave trade initiated a process in which deities like Toongnaab gained followers across West Africa and eventually the globe. Faith in Toongnaab was resilient in the face of monumental changes during this turbulent period in African history. Allman and Parker demonstrate the vibrancy and transformations of an African god, arguing that Talensi religious beliefs adapted to changing times, defying every notion of "traditional" religion.[19] As was the case for the goddess Ajana-Ufuma in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Tongnaab's ritual power increased as its subjects, the Talensi, sought protection in the Tong Hills from slave raiders and colonial military forces over the course of two centuries. Tongnaab was worshipped as a source of protection even as the British brought the Talensi under civilian rule after 1907. Rebecca Shumway presents a similar argument in her assessment of the religious repercussions of the trans-Atlantic slave trade on the Fante. She argues that the increased importance of Nananom Mpow in eighteenth-century Fanteland must be understood as example of religious change that was both shaped by, and active in shaping, the Atlantic world. Nananom Mpow was needed to play a protective role to counter the violence caused by the slave trade, but in so doing, the worship of this god shaped the slave trade by affecting the timing of military activities, enslaving people through judicial processes, and strengthening the sense of unity among the Coastal Fante.[20]

Robert Baum's thesis in *Shrines of the Slave Trade*, that adherents of pre-colonial Esulalu religion borrowed new types of cults from their neighbors while modifying their ritual rules to

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[19] Jean Allman and John Parker, *Tongnaab: The History of a West African God,* 8ff

[20] Rebecca Shumway, *The Fante and the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2011) 142

meet changing needs in the era of the slave trade, could also be advanced for Ufuma, where Nri priests were often invited to rid the community and protect indigenes from witchcraft during the same period.[21] Baum demonstrates that the Diola of Senegal responded to the remarkable social changes introduced by trans-Atlantic trade by turning to spirit shrines, which were believed to have the power to protect both slave raiders and those who feared being kidnapped. In other words, Diola shrines changed dramatically in both form and function during the era of the slave trade to meet new and heightened needs for protection.[22] Increased participation in the slave trade created new forms of wealth and aggravated social inequalities starting in the eighteenth century. Throughout the nineteenth century, old shrines continued to be abandoned or modified and new ones created in an attempt to redress community problems, including the constant conflict among the Esulalu inhabitants over land and cattle, and to empower particular groups such as blacksmiths and women. In the absence of a state apparatus, the people of Esulalu turned to their spirit shrines, whose prestige and power were seen as an effective means to regulate the raiding and ransoming of captives.[23]

Like Shaw has argued among Temne-speaking communities, local Ufuma spirits underwent radical transformation in ways that seem to "crystallize historical processes associated with the Atlantic slave trade."[24] Just as the Temne came to associate many local spirits with

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[21] Robert Baum, *Shrines of the Slave Trade,* 103, 183

[22] Baum, *Shrines of the Slave Trade,* 117-127

[23] Baum, *Shrines of the Slave Trade,* 113; Only captives whose kin would not ransom them could be sold without spiritual sanction. Wooden slave-fetters were attached to shrines that took on the additional function of protecting the captives and those involved in their seizure. See page 118.

[24] Rosalind Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) 51

violence and raiding, so that by the nineteenth century they had banished most of them to the uninhabited areas outside human settlements as a means of protection from danger, so the Ufuma likewise witnessed the radicalization of the deity, Ajana-Ufuma, as the role of the goddess extended to the protection of its people. It is likewise arguable that it was during this time that Ufuma community deities transformed into household names, enshrined in individual family compounds. Shaw also notes in another study that during the four centuries of Atlantic slave trading in Sierra Leone, Temne witchfinding developed as a technique for the ritual production of slaves. In addition to driving understandings of witchcraft in particular directions, such as the identification of witches through divination, the Atlantic slave trade itself provided apt metaphors of wrongful "eating" that were deployed in rumors about slave trade agents and the traders.[25] Sandra Greene's study of cultural change among the Anlo-Ewe points to a similar dynamic in coastal Ghana and Togo. She highlights the important connection between warfare and spiritual authority during the period of the slave trade.[26] Noting that a deity perceived at one point in time as supreme could lose that designation if its power appeared to diminish in relation to other gods, Greene argues that Mawu, once a supreme deity, lost this significance by the eighteenth century. During the era of the slave trade, a deity's prowess in war was of far more importance than its ability to produce rain in drought.[27] Anne Bailey's dissertation points out that among the Ewe-Anlo a number of important indigenous values such as the principles of inclusiveness, openness, and secrecy were subverted for economic gains. She documents that

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[25] Rosalind Shaw, "The Production of Witchcraft/Witchcraft as Production: Memory, Modernity, and the Slave Trade in Sierra Leone," *American Ethnologist*, 24: 4 (1997), 867-868

[26] Greene, *Sacred Sites and the Colonial Encounter,* 16

[27] Greene, *Sacred Sites and the Colonial Encounter*, 17

slave traders used these principles to their own advantage, leading to the rise of several corrupt religious institutions in the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.[28]

However important, none of these studies consider religious changes in pre-colonial Africa that were affected by internal and autochthonous factors. While the literature provides useful background information on religious transformations in Igboland on the eve of colonial rule, the present study is necessary to fill a significant gap in our understanding. Where scholars of religion have propounded the notion that Christianity and colonialism were two essential factors engendering religious change in Africa's history, a deeper comparative study suggests that this is not necessarily the entire story. Although religious changes that took place among decentralized societies in southwestern Senegal and Sierra Leone bear a striking resemblance to those that occurred in Ufuma and in Igboland generally, the Igbo religious worldview and its high regard for women as religious practitioners are characteristics of Igbo uniqueness.

Whereas Igbo women of southeastern Nigeria were key to some of the major religious changes occurring on the eve of colonial rule in Nigeria, research into religious transformations in Igboland has so far emphasized the role of the Aro. The argument has been made that among the Igbo, the largest decentralized group in pre-colonial West Africa, the socio-cultural and political changes during the era of the slave trade coincided with the commercial dominance and expansion of the Aro. According to Nwokeji, in the first phase of the Biafran slave trade (1600-1720s), after the Igbo-Aka alliance, an Arochukwu confederacy was formed that united Ohafia, Abam and Ada lineages in a war against the Ibibio. This confederacy became a weapon for political action and served to create a facade of ethnic hegemony that strengthened the matriarchal Ohafia/Abam/Ada against the Ibibio. By the second phase, Nwokeji continues, the

[28] Anne Bailey, "The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on the Anlo Ewe of Southeastern Ghana" (University of Pennsylvania, History Department, Dissertation, 1998) 68-75

Igbo manifested greater organization. A "trust" system and network of Aro diasporas ensured a steady supply of captives at the coast.[29] At this point, kinship bonds were extended through marriage. Meanwhile, changes occurred in the religious landscape through the emergence of the Aro *Long Juju* (Ibinukpabi), which united several Igbo peoples in a cultural bond in the era of the slave trade. Although Nwokeji does not discuss this religious issue at length, it is clear that this episode resembles the religious changes that occurred among the decentralized Diola, who adopted and established new shrines to regulate the slave trade.[30]

One investigation that diverges from an Aro-centered analysis is Afigbo's field research, which documents that the end of the slave trade in the southeastern region led to an unprecedented increase in the incidence of human sacrifice, which was performed to propitiate the gods and in connection with the burying of prominent Igbo women and men. Families who previously could not afford such a costly practice as human sacrifice (or the "giving of humans to the gods") now found it within their reach, while those families who really were rich competed with one another over the number of slaves that each one killed for its dead or used to placate the gods.[31] Of course, the Aro stand out here, as during the era of the slave trade they performed the greatest numbers of human sacrifices in Igbo history, when they sacrificed at Arochukwu to the great oracle of *Chukwu* at the shrine known as *Ibinukpabi.* During this period, priests devised means of turning the devotees who came from different parts of the Igbo country into slaves and selling them abroad. The explanation usually given for their disappearance was

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[29] Nwokeji, *The Slave trade and culture in the Bight of Biafra,* 45

[30] Robin Horton's pioneering study of 'Stateless societies in the history of West Africa' has also pointed to this dialectic between religious ideas and principles of social organization in decentralized societies. One result of this dialectic in egalitarian societies was that positions of authority were usually defined in religious terms.

[31] Afigbo, *The Abolition of the Slave Trade in Southeastern Nigeria,* 38

that their offerings had proven unacceptable to *Chukwu* and that he had preferred to "eat them up" instead.[32] But these visitors were actually transported through a tunnel to the Port at Calabar, and taken to the New World. Other relevant studies include John Oriji's controversial piece on "Transformations in Igbo Cosmology during Slavery," which analyzes the evolution of totems and taboos and the new political-religious functions they performed in Igbo society. Oriji's argument is that new place names, totems and taboos emerged during the Aro slave trade and Abam raids in Igboland. Other scholars like McCall suggest that the Atlantic slave trade led to the rise of warrior cults among the Ohafia.[33]

What is clear is that from the seventeenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century, the southern coast of Nigeria was subject to intensive slaving activities conducted between indigenes and Europeans. According to the records, almost two million slaves were taken from the Igbo region.[34] A great deal of trading occurred in the region from the Niger River eastward to the Cross River, perhaps more than in southwestern Nigeria. Many Ibo were involved in this trade. Some lived in the small trading towns that developed in non-Ibo areas on the southeastern coast. Others acted as agents from Arochukwu, an Ibo group near the Cross River whose men moved relatively freely about large parts of Iboland and dominated much of the internal slave trade. As shown in the first part of this dissertation, this historical occurrence (the slave trade) would have a direct effect on the religious structure of the Ufuma.

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[32] Edmund Ilogu, *Igbo Life and Thought* (Onitsha, Nigeria: University Publishing Co., 1985) 9

[33] John McCall, "The Atlantic Slave Trade and the Ohafia Warrior Tradition" in *Repercussions of the Slave Trade* edited by Brown and Lovejoy (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2011) 71ff

[34] Carolyn Brown and Paul Lovejoy eds., *Repercussions of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2011) 3

To build on this existing research, the first section of this dissertation begins by explaining traditional structures and worldviews that enabled women gain power and authority in religion. A second chapter in the same section explains how mundane activities like migration (due to the exogamous nature of marriage practices) in Igbo society created avenues for female assertion of religious power and authority so that even though women were often categorized as social outsiders, they still created spaces of influence in their marital abode through religion. In Ufuma oral history, women are reported to have migrated to the communities into which they married with the deities of their birth communities and their accompanying religious ideas and practices. This became a medium for gaining and maintaining control in their new homes. Such practices made women vital to the enrichment of the religious pantheons of the communities in which they lived and placed them at the vanguard of religious politicking and evolution in Igbo religious history.

Gender and the Religious Encounter Between the Ufuma-Igbo and the Church Missionary Society (CMS) Missionaries

"These church goers have spoiled everything"[35]

The religious roles of Ufuma-Igbo women in pre-colonial history may seem to have declined with the advent of colonial rule in the early 1900s, as Ufuma-Igbo men became the favored group to hold positions in mission churches where the cosmology of a male God emphasized

[35] This popular saying among Igbo religious traditionalist bears a resemblance to Adeline Masquelier, *Prayer Has Spoiled Everything: Possession, Power and Identity in an Islamic Town of Niger* (Durhan, N.C: Duke University Press, 2001)

preference for male religious leaders.[36] Although this study affirms that the usurping of power and authority within the Christian church by men created a gender rupture as Igbo men filled positions socially constructed as female in mission churches, the story does not end there. It goes on to highlight how Ufuma women encountered, reacted, and negotiated this male confiscation of female religious and moral spaces during the missionary period. Of particular interest is how women challenged the new religious system and carved out spaces for themselves within mission churches, especially the CMS Anglican Church in Ufuma.

Africanists have been more interested in linking gender with other variables, such as politics and economics, while womanist scholars have been drawn to explore the operation of gender in social fields other than religion. Still, since the 1980s a growing number of works have addressed topics such as the role of female missionaries, women's activities within churches and the big, all-embracing question of how Christianity has affected the status and prospects of female authority in African history.[37]

Scholars have readily pointed out the preponderance of female adherents in Christianity despite concerted efforts by most mainstream missionary groups to convert men. Yet very few Africanists have bothered to inquire about the process and mechanisms that channeled women into mainstream Christianity and transformed the church in Africa from a church of men to one of women since the colonial period. A few Africanists have pointed that where missionary groups directed some efforts at converting and training African women, this was so that they could become "good wives and mothers," which was necessary for the propagation of the

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[36] Ifi Amadiume, Afrikan *Matriarchal Foundation: The Igbo Case*, (London: Karnak House, 1987) 134

[37] J.D.Y Peel, Gender in Yoruba Religious Change, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 32.2 (2002) 136-137

Christian family and the "domestic" duties of the Christian home—not necessarily so that these women could be Christian leaders in their own right.[38] These studies emerge mostly from South Africa, making a study of the Igbo in West Africa of great importance, since up to this point there has been very little historical work on gender and the Nigerian or Igbo Christian experience.

A consistent finding in studies of African churches is that more women than men are active members. Martin reports that 75% of adult evangelicals are women, and studies more narrowly focused on Pentecostal churches report similar percentages. In general, women outnumber men in Christianity.[39] Yet while early anthropologists and historians documented the fact that women are an integral part of the church throughout Africa, it is startling that, with some exceptions, the relations between religion and gender in Africa have not been given substantial attention. This dissertation seeks to redress this situation.

This dissertation also addresses another problematic argument that scholars make about the impact of Christianity on African women: that the Christian era led to a paramount destruction of women's power and authority. These arguments are observed across the board, in the works of both indigenous scholars and western scholars of religion in Africa, including Amadiume (1987)

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[38] Deborah Gaitskell, "Christian Compounds for Girls: Church Hostels for African Women in Johannesburg, 1907–1970" *Journal of Southern African Studies* Vol. 6 (1979) 44–69; Nancy Hunt, "Domesticity and Colonialism in Belgian Africa: Usumbura's Foyer Social, 1946–1960." *Signs* 15:3(1990)447–474; Tabitha Kanogo, "Mission Impact on Women in Colonial Kenya." in *Women and Missions: Past and Present,* ed. Fiona Bowie et al. Providence: Berg, 1993; Modupe Labode, "From Heathen Kraal to Christian Home: Anglican Mission Education and African Christian Girls, 1850–1900." in *Women and Missions: Pastand Present,* ed. Fiona Bowie et al. Providence: Berg, 1993.

[39] B. Martin, "The Pentecostal Gender Paradox: a Cautionary tale for the Sociology of Religion," *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) 56. Also see J. Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African Frontier* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985) 204

and Achebe (2005). Amadiume argues that as "Christianity introduced a male deity," religious beliefs and practices no longer focused on the female deity (Ani or Idemili), but on a male God, his son, his bishops, and his priests. The new gender ideology and realities that emerged were largely generated through patterns of Western education.[40] Although Achebe provides a more nuanced interpretation of the African-European encounter by highlighting the emergence of female prophetesses like Ngozika Ogbu in the post-colonial era, she nevertheless acquiesces to this all-powerful force of Christianity that reduced Nsukka women to voiceless benchwarmers within mission church in the colonial period.[41] Perhaps the utter lack of female voices in missionary records and early writings contributes to this trend. Similarly, Victoria Ibewuike's dissertation[42] describes how the religious and socio-political role of western Igbo women changed due to colonialism, modernization, Western Education and Christianity. She points out that while freeborn women in Asaba lost the authority to speak for themselves following Christianization, women of slave origin gained voice by adopting the new more egalitarian faith. Interestingly, the term 'lost' was used repeatedly, about 93 times, to emphasize the losses (in rights to "traditional freedom," their husbands, previous roles, prestige and so forth) that Asaba women suffered following the encounter.[43]

Hinfelaar's study among Bemba women seems to argue that the decline in women's religious status set in much earlier, around 1700, with the ascendancy of the Bemba, who successfully

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[40] Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in African Society* (London: Zed Books, 1987) 134ff

[41] Nwando Achebe, *Farmers Trader Warriors and Kings: Female Power and Authority in Northern Igboland* (Portsmouth NH: Heinemann, 2005) 64ff

[42] Victoria Ibewuike, "African Women and Religious Change: A Study of the Western Igbo of Nigeria with a Special Focus on Asaba" (Uppsala University, Sweden, PhD Thesis, 2006)

[43] Victoria Ibewuike, "African Women and Religious Change," Part 2

imposed a central cult of the royal ancestors at the expense of the domestic cult ("house religion") largely pioneered by women. However, he claims contrastingly that Christian missionaries liberated Bemba people from royal domination, which was one important reason why women welcomed Christians as allies. When new alliances were being forged between the religious and political powers of the day, first between the missionaries and Bemba royalty and later with the nationalist leaders, women became totally marginalized.[44] For Hinfelaar, Bemba women protested this critical encroachment on their spaces but inevitably their protest took a religious form which misnamed their oppressor. Bemba women's attempt at liberation was therefore self-destructive. Hinfelaar's work falls right in between what I consider the idealist approach to women's participation in mission churches. Studies like this ultimately ignore any womanist agency in mission churches. They suggest that African women were docile until the independence period, when they joined forces with men in politics as a subterfuge to regain religious authority. Hinfelaar actually suggests that Bemba women had no grasp of the extent of their subjugation under male/patriarchal hegemony during this period.[45] This study challenges such historical assertions by highlighting the spaces created by Ufuma-Igbo women within mission churches. It contributes to other studies that have brilliantly argued that most African women accommodated the new system, combining old and new tenets and that in some cases,

[44] Hugo Hinfelaar, *Bemba Speaking Women of Zambia in a Century of Religious Change* (New York: Leiden, 1994) 113ff

[45] Hugo Hinfelaar, *Bemba Speaking Women of Zambia in a Century of Religious Change*, 53

such as that of the Lumpa Church, women (e.g. Alice Lenshina) were able to restore the religious role of women as intercessors to the divine.[46]

Martin's recent study of Congolese women in the Catholic Church in Brazzaville, which traces the social and cultural attractions of the Catholic Church to Congolese women and the gradual transformation of a profoundly patriarchal institution into a "Church of Women," provided a useful model for this dissertation. The ways in which women were able to carve out spaces for themselves in Christian patriarchal institutions and the rhetoric of motherhood as a basis for organizing is an interesting analysis.[47] However, whereas Congolese women's first acquaintance with the church was prompted by an immediate need for security and "a religious power that could counter witchcraft accusations, sickness and misfortune,"[48] Ufuma women joined the church for other reasons besides insecurity. Ufuma women present no history of male chiefs lording over them rather a clear demarcation of spheres of influence between males and females gave older women some power over younger females.[49]

What is clear is that although many advances and contributions have been made to the study of Africa's religious experience in general and that of the Igbo in particular, much of the history is either fragmentary or misrepresented, producing new yet conflicting scholarship in the field over time. Even when scholars note the important roles that African women play within the

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[46] See John Hudson, *A time to mourn: a personal account of the 1964 Lumpa Church revolt in Zambia* (Lusaka, Zambia: Bookworld Publishers, 1999); David Gordon, *Invisible agents: spirits in a Central African History* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012)

[47] Phyllis Martin, *Catholic Women of Congo-Brazzaville: Mothers and Sisters in Troubled Times* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009)7

[48] Martin, *Catholic Women of Congo-Brazzaville: Mothers and Sisters in Troubled Times,* 70, 87

[49] Ufuma women make this claim in their conversations with me on the authority of daughters (umuada) over them as wives (Inyomdi) married into Ufuma villages especially in matters pertaining to arduous widowhood rites enforced by the umuada on Ufuma women.

church, the scholarship focuses more on African men. In addition, unfortunately very few of the scholars researching religion in Africa build connections with subjects involving indigenous religious cultures. Perhaps two excuses we might make for this scholarly disinclination are the dearth of written documents and the risks of depending largely on oral sources. There is therefore little wonder why social anthropologists and political scientists, but not historians, are prominent in the field.[50]

What is more, while the best of research on African women has incorporated the valuable insights of nationalist perspectives, there is an urgent need to view African and European religious cultures in interaction with one another and present women in particular and Africans in general not merely as victims or as those acted upon, but also as conscious actors in western religious history. The field has drawn great impetus from a series of historical/anthropological debates on conversion and the relative significance of missionary imperial hegemony and African agency. New areas for research must include the African Christian Diaspora and its impact on host communities. There is clearly a mandate for African gender history to move away from the stereotypical presentation of change only in the context of colonial rule. Historians still hung up on colonial histories may have to consider "colonial changes" in *long durée.* Strategies of resistance against any particular hegemonic structure may not necessary be new or emerging within a colonial/foreign background. Rather, it may represent the continuation of an age-long process of transformation within African societies. Beyond this, the blind presentation of gender history as an isolated discussion of African women without any reference to the history of men may be retarding developments in the field.

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[50] See Ogbu Kalu, "The God's in Retreat: Models for Interpreting Religious Change in Africa" in *The Gods in Retreat: Continuity and Change in African Religion* edited by Emefie Ikenga Metuh. (Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd., 1985) 2.

As Peel has rightly pointed out, it is problematic to argue that under colonial conditions a Euro-patriarchal ideology, supported by mission teaching, stamps itself forcefully on indigenous gender regimes that were formerly more female-friendly, if one does not also present a discourse on African women's counter-hegemonic reactions.[51] It is important to bear in mind that African women's fate under Christianity at the earliest period of the religious encounter, before the massive weight of material advantage swung decisively behind the missions, was dictated by choice and not coercion. African women made choices and locating the reasons behind those choices unveils their agency. Moreover, it is arguable that African women's understanding of Christianity and religious praxis until today is deeply informed by previous religious knowledge and culture. As such, the discourse on religious impacts in the 20th century must be viewed as a multi-dimensional process of mutual assimilation than a one-way traffic or as an imposition. It has to be a story of continuity as well as rupture, of African as well as Euro-missionary agency.[52]

Again, this dissertation makes two chapter contributions on gender and the religious encounter between the Ufuma and protestant missionaries in the wake of colonial rule in Nigeria. The first chapter begins by examining the strategies the missionaries employed in converting women. It very well documents the roles of female European and indigenous missionaries in making a difference in Ufuma. This chapter also centers what the Ufuma remember as "Bible Women" in the mediation of the religious cultural landscape during the conversion era. A second

[51] J.D.Y Peel, Gender in Yoruba Religious Change, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 32.2 (2002), 137
[52] Ibid.

chapter in this unit examines the reframing of indigenous "daughters associations"[53] in the Anglican Women's Organization in Ufuma, noting that this umbrella organization is not only a rebranded Christian "umu ada"[54] association but served to create a vent through which colonized Christian women fraternized and carved niches within the church.[55] In other words, Ufuma women adapted old belief systems and organizations into their new faith. What is more, while dwelling on the intersection between leisure and Christianity in Igboland, this section looks at how Ufuma women indigenized missionary leisure styles within these associations in the 20th century. These associations within the church soon became a platform for excluding and including ordinary from titled women making women's associations an arena for contesting femininity in Ufuma.

Gender and the Rise of African Independent Churches
"A Story for the Marketplace"

By the mid-colonial period, which coincided with the emergence of Africanized churches all over the continent, Ufuma-Igbo women were pioneering their own independent Christian movements. This study shows that the motivations to create indigenous-run churches differed between men and women, as did the various structures that shaped and influenced independent

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[53] The Daughters Association, also known as "umu-ada," is an umbrella organization under which thedaughters of a particular community unite.

[54] Umuada simply translates "daughters."

[55] Phyllis Martin, *Catholic Women of Congo-Brazzaville: Mothers and Sisters in Troubled Rimes,* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009) 148

religious movements in Igboland. Using *Uka Ekpere Ufuma* and other similar churches planted by Igbo women in and around Ufuma as case studies, this study explores the intersections between religion and ethnic identity. In more ways than one, the Christian rituals of these female-pioneered churches, large and small, mirror indigenous religious practices in Igboland. Of course, there is much to be said about the unequal exposure African men and women had to Christianity. Since men were more favored than women in the colonial Christian structure, women religious pioneers drew more from inside, and as such, the churches they founded are quite different from the ones established by missionary-trained men.

This study is particularly critical of the vast literature categorizing various Christian denominations within African religion. In the early decades of the twentieth century, when Allen Lea (a Methodist minister) first spoke of the "Native Separatist Church Movement," and Shepherd created "Separatist Churches" as a new category outside the "mission-based" category in Africa, things were very different.[56] It was also understandable when Sundkler, in reflecting on the issue of "separatism" in his *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, distinguished between two types of "African Initiated churches," "Ethiopian" and "Zionist," as groups that developed independently of 'white'-controlled South African churches.[57] Sundkler argues that while "Ethiopians" perpetuated "chiefly" leadership styles geared towards "heathenism," "Zionist" church leaders played "prophetic" roles within "sound Christianity".[58]

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[56] See Loram, C.T "The Separatist Church Movement" *International Review of Missions,* 1926, Vol. 15, 476-82. Shepherd's "African Separatist Churches", *International Review of Missions*, 1937, 455 or Allen Lea's *The Native Separatist Church Movement in South Africa* 1926.

[57] Sundkler, *Zulu Zion: and some Swazi Zionists* (Oxford, 1976), 19.

[58] Bengt G.M. Sundkler. *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 2ed, 1961), 13-14, 38ff Sundkler's perspective was definitely conditioned by his missionary, theological, and Western educational background.

But ever since Sunkler, Christian denominational schemas have multiplied, not only producing conflicting categories but also ignoring categories based on gender. A third category within African-initiated churches offered by Oosthuizen even suggests a machismo reading of African Christianity. According to Oosthuizen, "Messianic" churches emerging during the early period of South African Christian history are churches which include The Zion Christian Church of Ignatius Lekganyane (South Africa), the Nazarite Church of Isaiah Shembe (South Africa), and the Kimbanguist Church of Simon Kimbangu (Democratic Republic of Congo). These male-pioneered churches are said to focus on the power and sanctity of their leaders, who are believed to possess "Christ-like" characteristics and have been criticized for being heretical, especially by South African theologians.[59] Another category created by scholars, which is quite different from the previous ones, embraces "millenarian movements" comprised of churches that emphasize an apocalyptic transformation of the world resulting from the intervention of supernatural forces.[60] The invention of these new denominational categories can be seen as an attempt by mission-based churches to stamp African initiated Christian movements as a social ill in Africa.[61] For instance, the Nazarite Church of Isaiah Shembe was accused of replicating ancestral beliefs and practices such as the reverence of Shaka the Zulu and Dingane within the Christian framework.[62] Turner draws our attention to similar innovations that occurred with the formation of the Aladura movement in Nigeria, which began under the leadership of the Yoruba prophet,

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[59] G. C Oosthuizen, Empirical Studies of African Independent/Indigenous Churches (Lewiston, N.Y: E. Mellen Press, c. 1992) 30ff

[60] Ibid. 38

[61] Norman Etherington, "The Historical Sociology of Independent Churches in South East Africa" *Journal of Religion in Africa,* Vol. 10, No. 2, 1979, 108-126.

[62] See G.C Oosthuizen, *The Story of Isaiah Shembe: history and traditions centered on Ekuphakameni and Mount Mhlangakazi.* (Lewiston: E. Mellen Press, 1996)

J.O Oshitelu.[63] The movement emerged between 1917 and 1918, so that historians and anthropologists have rationalized its appearance as the result of an epidemic that threatened the lives of many Africans and the consequent quest for supernatural healing.[64]

Prevalent among explanations for secession in African churches is the desire for spiritual and cultural "independence," not necessarily an indifference to Christian practice and doctrine.[65] Nothing is mentioned about gender motivations, even though the important position of African women in independent Christian movements has been highlighted in the scholarship. Where groundbreaking studies investigation gender and AICs have been conducted, such as Brigid Sackey's *The Changing Status of Women in African Independent Churches*,[66] the emphasis has not been on studying AICs instituted by women as a group, but on the role of women as a group within AICs. This being the case, this study is overdue and fills an important gap in the historiography.

Hence this study advocates for a historiographical shift in the terminology used to categorize African Christian denominations. This is because in recent times, emphasis on faith/divine healing or speaking in tongues (attributes formerly considered the preserve of independent Christian denominations), have ceased to be peculiar to AICs in Africa. In Igboland today, even the so-called mission/mainline (Protestant and Catholic) churches hold crusades and

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[63] Turner, *Religious Innovations in Africa: Collected Essays on New Religious Movements* (Boston, G.K Hall & Co., 1979)135

[64] J. D. Y. Peel. *Aladura: A Religious Movement Among the Yoruba* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 62-63; Turner 9-11.

[65] H.W. Turner, *History of an African Independent Church: The Church of the Lord* (Aladura). Vol 1. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 5.

[66] Brigid M. Sackey, *New Directions in Gender and Religion: The Changing Status of Women in African Independent Churches* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2006)

healing/deliverance services that rival the crusades of independent Christian movements. As discussed earlier, a typical example is the Charismatic movement within the Catholic Church found all over Nigeria. One of the most popular healing crusades in Igboland (Enugu State) is the "Holy Ghost Crusade" held by Rev. Fr. Mbaka, popularly known as *Oku n'erere* ("The Fire that Burns"). No doubt, revivalist priests like him are atypical, but given their large following especially in Igboland, one must question the assumption that faith healing is an exclusive characteristic of any distinct Christian category. Ludovic Lado's *Catholic Pentecostalism and the Paradoxes of Africanization* sheds more light on this phenomenon. Through an ethnographic reading of localizing processes in a Charismatic movement in Cameroon, Lado explores the dialectics between 'Pentecostalization' and 'Africanization' within contemporary African Catholicism.[67] It becomes apparent from his study that African Catholicism and its Charismatic sub-denomination share a similar worldview with Pentecostals and AICs, especially in their relationship with African indigenous religion: a relationship of attack and counter-attack and constant negotiation. Lado maintains that the missionary policy of dismantling local cultures and religious practices/discourses and the Charismatic ritual of dramatizing the defeat of local deities and spirits through Christianity are similar to activities of the so-called Pentecostals and AICs.[68]

Surely, historians and anthropologists would have to reconcile this argument with the looming evidence that African Christians switch allegiance at will, especially with changing

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[67] For more on African Pentecostalism see Joel Robbins, " The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 33 (2004),117-143; Birgit Meyer, "Christianity in Africa: From African Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 33 (2004), pp. 447-474

[68] Ludovic Lado, *Catholic Pentecostalism and the Paradoxes of Africanization: Processes of Localization in a Catholic Charismatic Movement in Cameroon* (Leiden: Brill, 2009) Abstract. Also see, Brigit Meyer's "Christianity in Africa: from African Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches", *Annual Reviews: Anthropology*, 33, 449 ff

circumstances. The important case engaged in this dissertation is the mobility of Ufuma-Igbo women who patronize orthodox Christianities but also have a host of independent affiliations.[69] This invites the question of whether African Christians can possibly be constrained to any one category. Or could we possibly differentiate between African Christian movements based on gender? In this section of this study, I explore the characteristics that make female religious leaders, in their capacities as prophetesses and healers in the new Africanized churches, unique and different from male figures who have pioneered AICs. In examining the life histories of female religious leaders such as Sophie Nwokolo and other female ministry pioneers, including Agnes Okoh of *Odozi Obodo* in Onitsha, this research maintains that while male-pioneered Africanized churches may have been born out of colonial struggles, the emergence of female churches was spurred by gender struggles. Although many more factors unite African churches than divide them, gender differences in the colonial, missionary and historical experience explain the demarcation between African churches initiated by African men from those pioneered by women. This is one significant distinction; in addition to gender, the attitudes or missionary approaches to African societies also varied according to locale, indigenous beliefs and doctrinal convictions. These criteria could further clarify an improved categorization. But this study focuses specifically on gender.

As no previous study has done, this dissertation introduces ad examines what Igbo citizens call *ulo ekpere* (prayer houses) as a Christian religious category/phenomenon in African history. These groups function as non-denominational Christian groups that meet on days and times that do not interfere with mission-based churches. This non-denominational strategy ensures their large following, as Catholics, Anglicans, and Presbyterians can attend their activities after

[69] Allan Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 21, 28; Sundkler 48.

fulfilling their commitments to other groups. The "prayer house" and its non-denominational character readily speaks to the breakdown of denominational categories in African history, as it appeals to former mainline as well as independent Christian groups.[70] An inquiry of this sort fills important gender gaps in the study of religion in Africa.

I have carefully chosen the period 1900-1970 because it allows me to explore continuities and changes in Igbo women's religious history over three generations: late pre-missionary (pre 1910), missionary (c. 1900-1940), and the independence period (c. 1940-1970). Drawing on inter-disciplinary (historical and anthropological) approaches, my project will examine the political, economic, and social structures that enabled women to achieve religious power and authority and determine some of the ways through which Igbo women reacted to and negotiated the challenges of European rule and a male-focused religion, Christianity. Meanwhile, the year 1900 is significant as the beginning of the end of the colonial era, which had far-reaching consequences on Igbo women's history. For its part, 1970 not only marks the early period of post-colonial Nigerian history, it also allows some consideration of the role of Ufuma church women during the Nigerian-Biafran Civil War. The Nigerian-Biafran War period also marked the beginning of several other female initiated churches encountered during research in Ufuma. This study of Igbo women's religious history has broad implications for the study of gender, religion, history, and anthropology in Africa.

[70] Nigerian history in the past four decades is rife with religious riots and antagonisms between Christians and Muslims in the North and South. By opening its doors to different and unfriendly denominations, "prayer houses" are helping envision the end of religious antagonism in Nigeria.

Socio-Historical Context

The Christian Church in Nigeria has come full circle in less than a century. As recently as the early 1900s, Christian missionaries deployed to the region, including the CMS (Christian Missionary Society), spoke of the region as "dark" and "pagan" and in need of thorough evangelization.[71] Yet today Nigeria boasts of thousands of independent Christian movements in addition to core orthodox churches, including the Anglican Communion of Nigeria, which has gained independence and quit its allegiance to the Church of England, snatching along with it other former core members of that Church, including the Anglican Communion of the United States.

Thus in more ways than one, Jenkins' argument that Christianity is now rooted in the Third World and the religion's future lie in the global South has been validated. What needs to be told now is the essential role that women play in ensuring the continuing vitality of Christianity in Africa. But in telling this story, it is important to engage the pre-colonial past in order to examine age-old dynamics precipitating women's dominating presence in the Church, which is particularly true in Igboland, where women have remained the vibrant actors on the religious scene since the pre-colonial times.

Of course, Igbo women of southeastern Nigeria were among the first group of African women to be recognized distinctively from their men in African history. This status came as a result of their role in influencing British tax reforms in Nigeria (and subsequently in British colonial Africa) following the "Women's War" of 1929. At the end of this war, which threatened the very foundation of British imperialism, Igbo women stood as models of revolutionary

[71] CMS G3 A3/0 12/87

African feminism, but they were charged with being radicals who threatened colonial peace, the vaunted *pax Britannica*. In the struggle that ensued between the colonized and the colonizer, Igbo women drew on traditional forms of resistance that combined religious and social strategies of making war, including the act of "sitting on a man."[72]

Igbo women's history is significant because, while it is often argued that western influences created an emancipatory ambiance for colonized women by weakening kinship bonds and by providing western education, "free choice" in Christian monogamous marriages, and female suffrage, the Igbo 'Women's War' speaks to an early and indigenous declaration of the rights of women and an assertion of female authority. The same level of agency holds true for Igbo women in the spiritual domain, where women (and not men) pioneered the earliest and the most enduring "homegrown Christianities."[73] Yet decades after the Women's War of 1929 and the emergence of female pioneered spiritual churches in the 1940s, Igbo women, like most African women, remain largely underrepresented and misrepresented in African church history.

My dissertation focuses on the Ufuma peoples of Igboland in southeastern Nigeria. Ufuma is a landlocked Igbo community tucked between Ndikelionwu and Ajali in the Orumba North Local Government Area in Anambra State of Eastern Nigeria. It is bounded on the Eastern side by the Agwu Division, on the West by Awka and towards the North by Okigwe. Ufuma is made up of seven core villages, specifically, Enugwu-abo, Umunebo-nato, Umu Onyiba, Umuogem, Umueji, Umuonyiuka and Umu-Aguosibe. These villages together occupy an area of

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[72] Judith Van Allen, "Sitting on a Man: Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 6:2 (1972) 170

[73] As used by the Comaroffs. J. Comaroff and J. Comaroff, *Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Fron*tier (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) xvi. More so, several independent Christian movements were forged from members of the All Christian Practical Praying Band. One of such is the Christian Pentecostal Mission of Nigeria.

about twenty square miles and all seem to claim a common descent from Nono or Lolo, a fore-father who married Ukaji. They had three children, Nkwerre, Ufuma and Inyi, in that order. Nkwerre, it is believed, committed a crime and ran away to a place in Agwu Division, where he settled and never returned. Ufuma got married and had children. Ehialata, a female, was the first child. A son named Okpuno followed and then a third child, Nebo, also a son. Oral tradition records that the children of Ehialata, Ufuma's daughter, form a major part of the population of several villages in Ufuma (Ogem, Ilem, Ejiabo, and Onyiuka). Together, the people of these villages who trace a common ancestral origin to Ehialata are called Umu-Ehi.[74] Likewise, Okpuno and Nebo's children form an integral part of villages within the Ufuma clan. According to the Nigerian 2006 census report, Orumba North to which Ufuma belongs measured about 172, 000.[75] Ufuma as a unit, is considered the second largest group in Awka Division after Umunze. Based on an intelligence report from the 1930s, we can conclude that its population has grown steadily over the years.[76] Oral tradition also indicates that Ufuma people migrated over time as different family units grew in number, creating room to expand extended family structures. This accounts for the seemingly scattered settlement of Ufuma peoples. While indigenous scholars like Asiegbunam suggest that this unique settlement structure may have been as a result of the absence of serious invasion by neighboring clans during the era of inter-ethnic wars, it is arguable that the settlement pattern of Ufuma peoples actually accounted for the decrease in

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[74] Umu-Ehi translates to 'the children of Ehi.' Interview with Ernest Asiegbunam (Enugwu-abo Ufuma, November 9 & 11, 2011); Interviews Chief J.C. Mogbo, Umuonyiuka-Ufuma (September 30 and November 8 2011)

[75] Report of the National Population Commission, Nigeria (accessed on January 12, 2013 at www.population.gov.ng/index.php/censuses)

[76] NAE CSO 26: 29827 Intelligence Report on the Enugu Group, Awka Division

neighboring attacks on villages that are seemingly miles and miles apart.[77] In other words, the settlement pattern of the Ufuma can be read as a survival strategy, an indigenous resistance method for checking the invasion of powerful neighboring clans.

Ufuma, like most communities in Igboland, is organized according to kinship groups that honor extended family-based units of law and authority above and beyond a central village authority. The kinship groups are well knit together by common interests and obligations, and the conduct of one member is the close concern of all. However, the pattern of life among kinship groups is similar and relatively the same even though the overall populations of members in each extended family group varies considerably. The Ufuma practice gerontocracy, a system of government in which kinship members looks to the oldest member of the family as its head. Whereas men would look to men for guidance, women likewise looked to the oldest women in the society for guidance and for the settlement of disputes and family issues. But above all there is another village head or chief who is traditionally chosen from the most senior family group in the village. Today each extended family group has a representative in the village council, although the number of representatives varies with the population of the extended family. The village council is called *Nzuko Obu*, which means a meeting held in the chief's compound. The village functions as a unit for everyday matters, but the family organization remains the cradle of politics, the basis of the social structure and the core of the whole village. The union of the families to form the village and the combination of the villages to form the clan promotes the principle of collective responsibility.[78]

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[77] Interview with Ernest Asiegbunam (Enugwu-abo Ufuma, November 9 & 11, 2011)

[78] E. O. Asiegbunam, "Western Education and Social Changes in Ufuma Clan in Eastern Nigeria" (Department of Education, Nigerian College of Technology Zaria) TT & S 1960/61 p. 3

Ufuma, like the rest of Igboland, is highly religious. Although Ufuma is seemingly sparse in population when compared to other neighboring Igbo communities such as Awka and Umunze, it boasts of hundreds of spiritual institutions scattered all over the sub-clans. Based on local estimates, about 95% of its people are Christians. As I have observed on my visits there, the village comes alive every Sunday with sounds of music coming from different churches, ranging from a 6-member church that meets in a small kiosk to a 500-member church meeting in an elaborate Victorian-style Anglican building. Oral history notes that about seven years ago, some of the key religious figures, including Madam Victoria Okonkwo of the Praying Beads Ministry, led a crusade that supposedly "cleansed" the village of ancestral worship. This crusade involved a mass burning of idolatrous objects and shrines at the community square in Enugwuabo-Ufuma.[79] Comments I heard in Ufuma about this crusade suggest the beginning of a new era in its history and consequently an end to an old era of indigenous religions. Yet oral interviews with *ndi dibia* tell a different story altogether, of women who are hoping for children negotiating the religious terrain of ancestors and saints, shrines and churches, in their quest for spiritual aid, and of men seeking traditional religious causes for their misfortunes in life.

I chose Ufuma for this study intentionally because I wanted to study *Uka Ekpere Ufuma* with its historical roots in Ufuma, and because the female founder of the ministry, Madam Nwokolo, was born in Igboland (though in a different locale). I also conducted research, albeit minimal, in Ovoko in Nsukka, Enugu State. I also broadened my research sample by studying similar churches founded and run by Igbo women in and around these areas and as far as Onitsha and Enugu.

[79] Interview with Ernest Asiegbunam (Enugwu-abo Ufuma, November 9 & 11, 2011)

Sources and Methodology

In many ways my research has affinities with that of many historians and anthropologists who are seeking "new ways to represent adequately the authority of informants" through "rapport . . . recast as alliance."[80] To this end, I utilize both written and oral sources in my research. However, the bulk of my material is drawn from the vast treasure of oral history and tradition still copious in Igbo communities. Thus, the place of oral history in this project cannot be overstated. As Paul Thompson has rightly argued, "The account of religion…depends heavily on oral evidence, and the combination of a painstaking local reconstruction."[81] Likewise, Metuh has rightfully noted that there are two broad categories of sources for writing the history of non-scriptural religions namely oral (myths, proverbs, names, songs, prayers, formulae for vows, paths, curses, or blessings) and non-oral sources (art forms, archaeological artifacts, cult objects, religious symbols, rites, and rituals). Tapping into these sources, especially after acquiring the local language of communication, is a successful way of interpreting indigenous religious culture, Metuh claims.

Metuh directs our attention to proverbs as a key component of Igbo oral history. He demonstrates how, as condensed forms of oral expression and commonly accepted truths, they are reliable sources of traditional beliefs and customs. Their sometimes-cynical character gives us some insight into the traditional interpretation of the beliefs they contain. Listing various categories of Igbo proverbs in relation to man and *Chukwu*, spirit forces, sacrifice, ancestors, and

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[80] James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988) 45 quoted in Robert Allen, "Review: Prayer Has Spoiled Everything; Possession and Identity in an Islamic Town of Niger," *Africa Today* 50:1 (2003) 137

[81] Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978) 88

dibia, Metuh argues very strongly that proverbs, as "the experience and wisdom of several ages gathered and summed up in one expression," should not only provide us with information but also give us clues to the understanding of the significance of such beliefs.[82] For instance, certain names like *Chinagolum*, meaning "God Vindicates Me," and proverbs such as *Ngu Chukwu gbunyeru onye ka ka oji ekote ife*, meaning "God always gives each person a hook to pluck things with," substantiate the religious consciousness of a personal and immanent God among the Igbo and further counter the argument about the "withdrawn" God in Igbo cosmology. Ranger and Kikambo's *The Historical Study of African Religion*[83] provides great lessons on the use of oral history in the study of African religion. From reading "Language Evidence and Religious History," there is evidence to prove that metaphors and allusions hidden in word derivations reflect conceptualizations of belief. In other words, while language changes in meaning over time, it can be used as a historical source.[84] With this in mind, I collected and paid attention to proverbs that relating to women. Although, they are not put into much use here, they revealed gendered beliefs and taboos including women's rights in the initiation of divorce and widowhood rites.

Since women are particularly silent in colonial records, I collected and analyzed about 60 oral interviews in and around Ufuma that capture women's life history, religious experiences and worldview, the realities of religious plurality and mobility, and the challenges of religion. These interviews were conducted in our shared languages, Igbo, West African pidgin, and/or English.Two primary functions of oral history in this project are to uncover women's voices and

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[82] Metuh, *African Religions in Western Conceptual Schemes: The Problem of Interpretation,* 35

[83] T.O Ranger and I.N Kikambo (eds.), *The Historical Study of African Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972)

[84] Ranger and Kikambo, *The Historical Study of African Religion,* 45ff

to crosscheck written evidence. By revealing women's voice through oral narratives, this study generates new insights about Igbo women's religious experiences. Moreover, oral history allows for a more nuanced reconstruction of the past that considers a multiplicity of voices and standpoints.

Questions I explored at oral interviews include: What privileges accrued to women in their capacity as healers, prophetesses, and priestesses? What relationship did these female religious functionaries have with their male counterparts? How did women contest, accommodate, and negotiate the new male religious hegemony imposed by mission churches and promoted by colonialism? What factors led to the rise of female pioneered Christian movements among the Igbo? These questions and others get at the heart of religious change in Africa and attempt to interpret the resurgence of atavistic female religious principles in modern Igbo Christianity.

To get at some of the nuances of female religious consciousness, I also employed innovative approaches including the interpretation of art and art forms in Ufuma. As Buggenhagen has rightfully observed, cultural remittances including objects as minor as fabrics/cloths have the potential to expose nuances in people's lives as certain signatures reflect social class and religious views/affiliations. Determining the meaning of specific colors among the Ufuma and the symbolic meanings of drawings and signs provides hints into the religious worldview of the community.[85]

Oral traditions, prayers, poetry, sayings, proverbs, hymns, songs, sermons, eyewitness accounts, reminiscences, rumors and gossip are some of the oral sources I explored in this

[85] Beth-Anne Buggenhagen, "Prophets and Profis: Gendered and Generational Visions of Wealth and Value in Senegalese Murid Households," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 31:4 (2001) 375

research.[86] I began most interviews with an open-ended question that basically placed a demand on participants to tell their life history, and I ended with more direct questions about specific details from their commentary. I kept a daily journal of my observations after each oral history session. This entire process was collaborative and for several interviews, I had to pay a return visit to follow up and ask more definite questions. I paid close attention and was sensitive to some silences, especially with regards to the question of religious mobility. Many of my informants ofen claimed that they were staunch Catholics or Anglicans and would never have anything to do with the emerging new ministries and "prayer houses" that dot their village. However, they stated offhandedly that they had visited a handful of these churches in their lifetime.

One of the limitations which can arise from the data collected in this fashion, as pinpointed by Edmund Ilogu, is the traditional etiquette of the Igbo to give kind answers considered pleasant and welcoming to a stranger who is inquiring.[87] Moreover, claims of superiority over other groups can taint oral information, as different and sometimes contradicting historiographies emerge as informants exaggerate their own histories. There can also be a general lack of coherence in religious concepts.[88] These challenges were tackled with repeat oral interviews and interactions. I established a rapport and friendship with several informants in this study, an approach that did not only promote cordiality but reduced the tendency to ingratiate and allowed research collaborators the opportunity to rethink their responses.

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[86] Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Luise White, *Speaking With Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000)

[87] Edmund Ilogu, *Christianity and Igbo Culture,* 5

[88] Edmund Ilogu, *Christianity and Igbo Culture,* 5-6

As already noted, early colonial writing on Africa is biased. This bias is evident in the deliberate choice of derogatory words such as heathen, pagan, or primitive in reference to Africa and its religion. Most of the early scholars writing on Igboland were anthropologists who doubled as colonial officials. They were more concerned with testing the evolutionary, uni-linear and materialist theories of change in indigenous African religion propounded by Frazer, Marx, Durkheim and Weber. These were the debates going on at the time. Kalu has rightly criticized them for applying the psychology and mechanics of Western political institutions to indigenous African religions, which more than problematic, it is "pure Walt Disney," in Gibb's phrase.[89] As Kalu sees it,[90] they "assumed that Christianity in Europe could be attacked by appeal to origins of elementary forms," and his criticisms are well founded.[91]

It is within this academic milieu that the contributions of G.T Basden,[92] C.K Meek[93] P.A Talbot[94] and Sylvia Leith-Ross',[95] to the study of religion in Igboland must be assessed. Basden

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[89] Hamilton Gibb, Area Studies Reconsidered (London: University of London Press, 1963) 13-14

[90] Prof. Ogbu Kalu was one of the most influential Nigerian scholars in recent times. He was respected especially for his contributions in the fields of Global Missions, African Christianity and Global Pentecostalism. He died unexpectedly on January 7, 2009.

[91] Ogbu Kalu, "The God's in Retreat: Models for Interpreting Religious Change in Africa", 3

[92] George Thomas Basden (1873 – 1944) joined the Church Missionary Society (CMS) Niger Mission as a clergy man in 1900. He became the Secretary of the Niger Mission in 1925 and was seen more in Onitsha than anywhere else in Igboland. In 1930, Basden was appointed the representative of the Igbo people in the Legislative Council by the colonial government following the 1929 Igbo Women's war against colonial authorities in Igboland.

[93] C.K Meek was an anthropological officer for the Northern Provinces and had no knowledge of the Igbo until after the women's war of 1929, when he was deliberately transferred to study the political system of the Igbo. On his arrival to Igboland, he spent two years investigating the socio-political organization of the Igbo and, having little knowledge of the language, he relied on interpreters in his writing.

arrived Igboland in 1900 under the auspices of the CMS. As a missionary and anthropologist, he started publishing articles in mission journals within a few years of his arrival. The topics he wrote on were typical of the period, centering around the history and the state of CMS mission work in eastern Nigeria. They included eulogies of exemplary missionaries[96] and reflections on the relationship between the Christian culture and that of the Igbo. One interesting piece was his "Notes on the Ibo Country and the Ibo People of Southern Nigeria,"[97] published in 1912. Like his contemporaries, Basden's writings were largely descriptive, providing useful evidence for the landscape, vegetation, and culture of the Igbo people. However, his observations of Igbo religion were skewed by his times. Although he makes "no claim . . . to having produced anything of great scientific value"[98] in this article, Basden nevertheless advances the ethnographic claim that the Igbo are related to the Jews.[99] This assertion, based on some similarities between Igbo and Jewish religious culture, appears again in Basden's first book,

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[94] P. A Talbot (1877-1945) was also a colonial administrator and an anthropologist especially among the Ibibio people. Some of his popular his works include *Life in Southern Nigeria: The Magic, Beliefs, and Customs of the Ibibio Tribe, The Peoples of Southern Nigeria and for most importantly Tribes of the Niger Delta: Their Religions and Customs in which* he makes substantial reference to Igbo religion. Moreover, the Ibibio and Igbo are close neighbors.

[95] Sylvia Leith-Ross (1884-1980), a contemporary of Mary Kingsley was one of the few early female writers on Igboland with a focus on women. She is also an anthropologist and her works include, *African Women*: *A Study of the Ibo of Nigeria, Beyond the Niger and Stepping-Stones: Memoirs of Colonial Nigeria, 1907- 1960.*

[96] One of Basden's works on exemplary missionaries was *Edith Warner of the Niger: The story of thirty-three years of zealous and courageous work amongst Ibo girls and women* (London: Seely, Service and Co. Ltd., 1927) in honor of a female missionary to Igboland.

[97] G.T Basden, "Notes on the Ibo Country and the Ibo People, Southern Nigeria" *Geographical Journal*, 39 (1912) 241-247

[98] Basden, "Notes on the Ibo Country and the Ibo People, Southern Nigeria" 242

[99] Basden, "Notes on the Ibo Country and the Ibo People, Southern Nigeria" 246-247

Among the Ibos of Nigeria, as well as in Leith-Ross's *Beyond the Niger*.[100] This confusion of Igbo culture with Jewish culture reflects the state of mind of these early scholars and their focus on making derogatory comparisons between "the West and the rest of us" (if I may borrow Chinweizu's terms). It also shows the limitations of relying on such written sources.[101]

Igbo culture definitely confounded these early writers, for even Basden, in his first major work *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*, confesses, "I feel, after nineteen years, more puzzled over many things than I did after the same number of weeks in the country." He still argues, nevertheless, that "the black man does not himself know his own mind. . . . He is not controlled by logic; he is the victim of circumstance, and his policy is very largely one of drift."[102] Overall Basden presents a mass of information in this volume, but some things are exaggerated or misrepresented, possibly to give the audience the impression that Igbo customs were all dead. For example, he says inaccurately that the guardian of the *Ofo* (a sacred ancestral staff in Igboland) is seldom a man of any prominence in Igboland, whereas a majority of the prominent men in Igboland were holders of *Ofo* title even till today.

Their shortcomings aside, Basden's writings provide important ethnographic data on Igboland, especially Asaba and Awka, where he spent most of his 35 years in Nigeria. In *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*, he details the main features of the lives of Igbo men and women, from birth

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[100] Sylvia Leith-Ross, *Beyond the Niger,* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1951)90

[101] On Basden's comparison of the Igbo and the Jews, Adiele Afigbo and other Africanists have credibly refuted this misrepresentation that the Igbo culture was influenced from elsewhere.[101] Today, such assumptions are labeled "diffusionist", founded on the "Hamitic Hypothesis", a theory that holds that whatever higher cultural form found in "sub-Saharan Africa", derived its origin from an external source.

[102] Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria: An account of the curious and Interesting habits, customs and beliefs of a little known African people by one who has for many years lived amongst them on close and intimate terms*. (Philadelphia: J.B Lippincott Company, 1921) *34*

to death. In a largely descriptive manner, he recounts Igbo customs regardin childbirth, marriage, and burial, as well as the people's socio-political organization. He especially notes Igbo dealings with religion, secret societies, witchcraft, ancestors, deities, and other beliefs and practices including reincarnation. Basden observes that the Igbo religion is founded on three pillars: the Supreme Being; the cult of ancestors; and divinities. This contradicts Horton's two-tier structure of basic African cosmology.[103] Conceivably, Basden's observation of the relationship between religion and economics is the most striking. He presents a vivid description of the Awka oracle and relates its connection with the guild of itinerant blacksmiths in Igboland and the religious cult built around this economic institution in pre-colonial times.[104] He also provides useful evidence of the early tensions between the church and Igbo religion, especially over the issue of polygamy. He also points out the complexity of Igbo religion and the difficulty of studying it, and he emphasizes the need to transcend a purely materialist outlook when issues of Igbo religion are involved. These insights provided the much needed launching pad for this study. All things considered, Basden's contribution to the field is commendable, yet it should be at all times weighed against other evidence, oral and written.

The study of Charles Kingsley Meek (1885-1965), on the other hand, focuses more on administrative questions, yet it is still drawn to religion, showing how religion was fused with every aspect of Igbo life, including politics. Meek served as a colonial anthropologist starting in the early 1900s in the northern parts of Nigeria, where indirect rule was most successful. He was transferred to Igboland in the wake of the famous Igbo Women's War of 1929 that, as noted

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[103] See Robin Horton "African Conversion" *Journal of the International African Institute,* Vol. 41, No. 2, (1971)

[104] Robin Horton "African Conversion" 124ff; Also see, G.T. Basden, *Niger Ibos: a Description of the Primitive Life, Customs, and Animistic Beliefs of the Ibo People of Nigeria,* (London: Seeley, Service & Co. Ltd., 1938) 234

above, challenged the *pax Britannica*. His assignment was to investigate why indirect rule did not function well in Igboland, unlike in the rest of the country, but his systematic study and findings are particularly useful for religious scholars in addition to political scientists. While largely descriptive like Basden's work, Meek's *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe* raises important theoretical questions about the effects of "native institutions," for example, about exogamy and bride price.[105] He begins with the Igbo socio-political structure, noting that the most important organization to the Igbo is the system of kinship. It is on this, Meek argues, that "native law and authority rests." Another important observation Meek makes in his study is the way in which the maintenance of social order depends at every turn on the indigenous beliefs about "gods and spirits," reaffirming the important place of religion in the lives of the Igbo. He also notes: "One of the most striking doctrines of the Ibo is that every human being has, associated with his personality, a genius or spiritual double known as *Chi*…A man's abilities, faults, and good and bad fortune are ascribed to his *chi.*"[106] To this, Meek adds the united belief in Ala, the female earth deity. The local shrine of Ala, Meek maintains, is the place where important seasonal rites take place. These are tantamount to religious rituals. The sacred *Ofo* staff, which the priest elder of a kinship group holds as a mark of authority, also symbolizes ancestral ritual power. Ala shrines and *Ofo* staffs can be multiplied indefinitely as subclans continue to be formed in Igboland, Meek observes. An important point Meek brings to our attention here is that religion and politics are fused in Igboland. Evidence for this includes the fact that the giving of tiles and coronation to political offices are conferred under the auspices of the cult of ancestors and spirits.

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[105] Meek, *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe,* 263,267

[106] Meek, *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe,* 55

The most interesting aspect of Meek's work is the later part, where he envisages a weakening of Igbo religion, which, as far as he is concerned, is plain "magic." In dealing with the changes in indigenous social and religious institutions that modern conditions were already producing in the 1930s, Meek observes, "The titled societies are losing their members," particularly due to the refusal of missions to allow their "converts" to become full members in the society. Like Basden, Meek also observes that Western education is creating more changes than missionary evangelization.[107] While this point reveals the tensions between indigenous religion and Christianity particular to Igboland as well as the changes occurring more generally during this early period, Meek also acquiesces to the fact that religious institutions form the basis for effective sanctions in many spheres of conduct among the Igbo. Perhaps Meek was one of the first scholars of Igbo history to use the term "syncretism," with all of its inherent baggage. In the concluding part of his work, he recommended that English law accommodate Igbo customs and he even favored the introduction into recognized native courts of the opening prayer to *Ala* and the ancestors to punish any judge whose decision was influenced by a bribe.[108] However, he neglected the degree to which religious beliefs and rituals functioned to secure conformity to rules and the way secret societies exercised strong influence in Igbo communities. While two of his chapters deal with the structure and practice of these societies and the "systems of magic and witchcraft," their bearing upon various social and economic activities in Igboland is not explored. Meek's study provides peculiar insight into this project especially the first two chapters where I engage pre-colonial beliefs and practices among the Ufuma.

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[107] Meek, *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe,* 201

[108] Meek, *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe,* 187

An important female writing of the early 20th century that was useful for this study was by Sylvia Leith Ross. Sylvia Leith-Ross arrived in Nigeria in 1907 as the bride of a British transportation officer who subsequently died in the country. Although her body of work is disappointing overall, there are some important aspects of it that are worth pointing out.[109] Amadiume disparages her volume *African Women* (a rather ambitious book title!) as inadequate and as "more like a diary, full of contradictory statements as a result of her racism."[110] Clouded by her Victorian and colonial background, Leith-Ross failed to recognize the predominance of women in the realm of Igbo religion, a phenomenon duly observed by Meek in his *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe.* Nevertheless, Leith-Ross, like other colonial writers, noted what is today one of the most important leisure choice of Igbo women, which I explore in my chapter four. Almost every missionary journal I read had a section dedicated to the purpose of *dance* among Igbo women. In *Beyond the Niger*, Leith-Ross describes one night when she was "awakened by some extra-ordinary sounds which came from the forest, a pounding of feet and a jangling of something like bells, and every now and then a few bars of deep toned song and then a loud cry and then stillness going on for an hour or more past midnight." Leith-Ross notes that African dances have often been declared wicked and obscene because they have been looked

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[109] Kristin Mann, "Review: Stepping Stones: Memoirs of Colonial Nigeria, 1907-1960 by leith Ross," *The International Journal of African Historical Studis* 19:1 (1986) 136

[110] Amadiume, Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society (London: Zed Books, 1987) 14. For instance, Leith-Ross describes the Igbo as an "untutored savage, not yet enough developed" and subsequently contradicts herself in the same chapter claiming that "so natural did it seem to find autocracy in some form or the other wherever one went in Africa that it was impossible even to imagine a democracy so absolute as that of the Igbo." See Sylvia Leith Ross, *African Women* (London, 1939) 44, 66-67

upon as being essentially sexual in tone and therefore morally corrupting.[111] She also notes that "ceremonies, dances, have a great deal more to them than what the average white man sees in them; silly, pointless, ugly, they may occasionally be yet they are in some dim way expressions of the spirit and it is that one should look for, not the outward show so that behind every religious manifestation, however trivial or possibly repulsive, there is a faint hovering flame of something which bears no apparent relation to the actual manifestation itself."[112] In this same anthology, Leith-Ross documents an incident in the Anambra region where a court messenger flogged a dancer and seized dancing equipment including girdle of bells and anklets of bean pods.[113]

In spite of her shortcomings as an ethnographer, I find myself checking Leith-Ross' writings with oral history and finding it to be true especially in the subject of dance. Writing on polygamy in Nneato for instance, she observes that a woman in a loving monogamous marriage will sometimes find a substitute to take her place during the long lactation period, but only on the condition that she herself can choose the substitute, "who must not be too rich, nor too strong headed" to usurp the wife's place or steal away the husband's affections. This substitute generally lives in the house and helps the wife, but she must promise to keep her relationship with the husband secret, otherwise she will be turned out. Should she conceive, the child belongs by right to the substitute's parents (as no dowry has been paid for her), but it is possible the wife may choose to keep the child and bring it up with her own children. Likewise, if a loving husband finds that he is impotent, he may give his wife permission to have relations with other

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[111] Leith-Ross, *African Women,* 311

[112] Leith-Ross, *African Women,* 306

[113] Sylvia Leith-Ross, *Beyond the Niger* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1951) 28

men in order to conceive children.[114] These are interesting and valuable observations that I was able to validate through oral interviews in Ufuma.

Margaret M. Green's contribution is also commendable. Although she did not adapt her dual-division discussion very well to the political structure of the Igbo, she is perhaps one of the first observers to offer an all-important analysis of Igbo social and gender structure. Green also speaks about the acephalous and loose nature of Igbo political organization.[115] She notes how every man maintains contacts not only with his own village but also with the birth place of his mother, with that of his wife, and with the various places into which his sisters have married, so that there are constant comings and goings, year in and year out, between these villages.[116] This system of exogamy made inter-village or inter-village-group trading and exchanges a practical possibility. And some Ufuma have in the past married wives to secure economic interests in a neighboring village. In addition to its economic effects, exogamy was also a factor in softening inter-village disputes, even though at times it may also have provoked them.[117] Another of the implications of exogamy is what Green calls the "matrilineal principle"[118] responsible for the privilege a mother's home town enjoys as a place of immunity. The matrilineal principle is also understood to ensure that a woman will be well guarded by her father's spirits in her new home. This is ritualized by the transplanting of a personal deity from the mother's village. Like Leith-

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[114] Sylvia Leith-Ross, *African Conversation Piece* (London: Hutchinson and Co, 1943) 70-71

[115] Green, *Igbo Village Affairs,* 231

[116] M.M Green, *Igbo Village Affairs* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964) 151

[117] Green, *Igbo Village Affairs,* 152

[118] Green, *Igbo Village Affairs,* 160-162

Ross, Green also points that bonds were reenacted between wives and daughters through dance.[119] These important observations are explored in this study.

The important point that has been made since these writings is that African studies as a broad academic discipline possesses an adequate stock of acceptable vocabulary (even in indigenous terms) from which one should draw appropriate terms and concepts for the study of African religion. The situation where one set of biased and discriminatory expressions are reserved for Africans, and a different set reserved for other religions, *must* be rectified. However, a useful contribution of these pioneer researchers that often tends to escape the attention of many contemporary scholars is that the references and observations they publicized helped to whet the appetite of scholars who came later on the African scene. It gave rise to a more determined study of African indigenous religious culture. The interest has since grown and matured, reaching a peak in the post-colonial period. Moreover, how else could historians recapture early developments in Igbo religion without their contributions? They definitely remain useful to our understanding of Igbo religion in many ways.

For this study, early colonial written documents were studied side by side with oral history and archival documents collected over the course of three years from the Nigerian National Archives in Enugu and Ibadan; the National Archives in Kew Garden, London, United Kingdom; and the Church Missionary Society collections held in Oxford and Birmingham in the United Kingdom. Parish magazines, newspapers, synod reports, missionary accounts and materials from archives were all explored. Perhaps the success of my archival research in these different locations best comes to light in my last three chapters, where I marry Ufuma-centered oral

[119] Green, *Igbo Village Affairs,* 206

history with archival findings on the efforts of female European and indigenous Christian missionaries to convert Ufuma-Igbo women.

West African societies overflow with local, culturally specific constructions of gender in literature and popular representations. Films, local literature, and newspapers regularly stage controversial gender and religious debates, creating narratives around issues such as men and women, church and people, marriage and divorce, love and prostitution. While it is quite unknown to researchers outside the country, a great deal of this material represents local discourses explicating some of the happenings in the region. I found in some "Onitsha market literature," popular writings of the 1950s and 1960s, interesting comments on the religious scheming of Igbo women. Onitsha male writers here are taken as commentators on the gender and religious scare associated with women. I also drew on some productions of the Nigerian "Nollywood" Film Industry. Film production is perhaps one of the fastest growing venues for religious reproduction of ideas in Nigeria, and in this field Igbo film producers predominate. With roughly over seven hundred movies produced every year, and with about half of them depicting tensions between Christianity and indigenous religion, there is a need to tap into this new genre of source material in Nigeria. I would recommend that future researchers investigate this field.

Every source is problematic in of itself. Hence I have tried at every point to collaborate oral sources with written and visual sources. The problem of sources and interpretation dealt with in Metuh's work is telling, especially with the recent call for inter-disciplinary approaches in the reconstruction of history, particularly in "pre-literate societies." No doubt, the combined

application of linguistic, historical, ethnographic, archaeological, and sociological techniques in the study of Igbo religion would push the field further.

Dissertation Outline

The first chapter of my dissertation provides background on gender and religion in Ufuma-Igbo history. It begins by introducing the religious landscape of the Ufuma-Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria, drawing our attention to the historical significance of gender complementarities both in the secular and in the religious realms. It goes on to highlight the conditions leading to the rise of women to dominant positions in the religious sphere.

The second chapter argues that Ufuma-Igbo women were harbingers of religious change on the eve of British colonial rule. It prioritizes internal factors engendering religious change over external factors in the pre-colonial period. Thus, it emphasizes the important roles of itinerant male and female religious practitioners in the Igbo region and the exogamous nature of Igbo marriage that allowed women to migrate with the deities of their paternal abode to the communities into which they were married, thereby enriching the religious pantheon of their marital abode. For instance, in one of the sections, entitled "inter-ethnic wars and religious relocations," I argue that religious ideas were sometimes appropriated from conquering nation-states in the period of inter-ethnic wars that marked the peak of the era of the slave trade in Igbo history.

The third chapter argues that the religious encounter between Ufuma and the missionaries (European and African) and the processes leading to "conversion" were shaped by individual choice and the activities of early indigenous Christian women remembered in Ufuma public

memory as “Bible Women.” I identify three periods of Church growth in Ufuma. In section one I argue that during its first seven years, the encounter between CMS missionaries and the Ufuma was more or less an Umunebo house affair shaped by pre-colonial politics between rival sub-clans. A systematic method for converting Ufuma-Igbo women was clearly needed, since the educational approach adopted for converting boys had failed. In section two, I show how Ufuma women’s patronage of Western medicine and maternity services highlighted the importance of medical missions as the most effective CMS approach to converting indigenous women. By the end of the second phase, the church in Ufuma had made substantial but limited advances, as Ufuma men and women swung back and forth like a pendulum between their new faith and traditional loyalties.

The third and perhaps most decisive period of Ufuma women’s conversion began in the 1930s. The massive conversion of men and women during this period was due to the role played by a group of early indigenous female Christians, remembered in Ufuma public memory as “Bible Women.” In section three of this study I discuss how these “Bible women” facilitated the conversion of Ufuma men and women by building cultural bridges between the missionaries and the people, thereby cushioning the reception of Christianity in Ufuma. I also show how “Bible women” resisted Victorian-style domesticity yet in the process became the embodiment of female European missionary achievement in Ufuma.

The fourth chapter argues that Ufuma-Igbo women were not marginalized within the new Christian church. It probes Ufuma women’s positions within pro-male orthodox churches and examines some of the ways in which women have carved niches for themselves within a patriarchal religious system. This section is particularly interested in how Ufuma-Igbo women created spaces of authority within these churches through associations and unions including the

Mother's Union, Women's Guild and similar organizations. This section attempts to discern the meaning of the social activities of women within the church. In it, I examine the ways in which the famous "August Meetings" organized by Igbo women both at home and abroad have evolved over time, bearing not just the earmarks of the types of leisure activities the missionaries encouraged Ufuma women to participate in, but also the age-old *Umuada* organization enjoyed by Igbo women from pre-colonial times.

The last chapter of this study contributes to our knowledge of female-based initiated Christian movements. Both history and biography, it traces the beginnings of the *Uka Ekpere Ufuma* or All Christian Practical Praying Band (ACPPB) and the life history of its founder, Madam Sophie Nwokolo. As anthropology, it assesses the rituals and symbols associated with indigenous gender and religious practices evident in the church. Finally, as theology, this study examines the dynamics of indigenous and western notions of the place of women within the church and womanist interpretation of the Bible by Madam Nwokolo. Beyond the often mentioned racial and colonial explanation given for the rise of African Independent Churches (AICs), this study proposes gender politics as the fundamental factor in the rise of womanist AICs, particularly the ACCPB and other African-initiated ministries founded by women, including Grace Tani's Church of the Twelve Apostles in Ghana and Alice Lakwena's Movement in Uganda. It is in light of this research that this study lays claim to a new category of AICs and argues that female pioneered AICs have some distinguishing attributes that may allow us refer to them as womanist AICs.

CHAPTER ONE

OMENANA: GENDER AND RELIGION IN PRE-COLONIAL UFUMA (Up to 1910)

Introduction

> Ezenwanyi Ufuma is not like other *dibias* here…she is wicked…and controls supernatural and evil powers. She went naked at night and along with her maidens, they travel to the waters at Umuagu. There they make sacrifices and command infliction and harm on behalf of their clients.[120]

The quote above was the response of Ebere Nwafor of Umu-agu Ufuma when I asked her about the eminence of Ezenwanyi Ufuma, the most senior and revered of traditional priestesses in Ufuma history. Her response was not just typical of many other research collaborators and informants; it also raises very crucial questions regarding the meaning of religious power and authority and of gendered frameworks operating in the Ufuma religious realm, where women are arguably the most venerated *dibias* when compared with their male counterparts.[121] In a community of over twenty *dibias*, the Ezenwanyi stands out not just as a female *dibia* but also as the most secretive, feared, and sought-after by men and women, and as someone who has a reputation shrouded in mystery.[122] The purpose of this chapter is not so much to dwell on the place of the Ezenwanyi in Ufuma religious history today as to (more importantly) deconstruct gender and male/female authority and reflect on some of the continuities in women's religious

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[120] Interviews, Ebere Nwafor (Umuagu-Ufuma: October 10, 2011)

[121] *Dibia* is the generic term referring to traditional healers and practitioners in Igboland.

[122] Although I was able to meet and interview several male *dibias* in the nine clans of Ufuma, the Eze Nwanyi on account of an oath to secrecy shared a rich but limited insight but not beyond the basics of her worship and calling.

positions in Ufuma from pre-colonial times. Ufuma contemporary viewpoints about Ezenwanyi Ufuma and her role in the community provide a launching pad into some of the questions that inspired this chapter including the following. What powers accrued to pre-colonial Ufuma women in the religious realm? What societal structures ensured female authority in spiritual matters? What sorts of controls minimized women's authority in religious matters? And how did Igbo women navigate these in pre-colonial times?

Of course, several important studies on African indigenous religion have already pointed that women were considered sacred and important in pre-colonial Africa.[123] A very common argument holds that by virtue of their positions as mothers, African women have occupied various roles as religious specialists across space and time.[124] Yet, very few studies have dug deeply into the structures that enabled pre-colonial women to have access to power and authority in the religious realm, beyond the motherhood thesis. On the premise that social structures shape the course of human history, I draw on oral sources (oral history and oral traditions passed down for generations in Ufuma), supplemented by written records, to explain some of the conditions in pre-colonial Ufuma leading to rise of powerful women and female figures in Ufuma religious history, including Anama Nwa Nzekwe, a priestess/prophetess repeated in Ufuma oral traditions. I argue that while motherhood was an important factor in the religious and secular achievements

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[123] Helen Henderson, "Ritual Roles of Women in Onitsha Ibo Society," PhD Disseration, University of California Berkeley, 1969; Misty L. Bastian, "Young Converts: Christian Missions, Gender and Youth in Onitsha Nigeria, 1880-1929," *Anthropological Quarterly* 73:3 (2000) 149

[124] See J.D.Y Peel, " The Pastor and the "Babalawo": The Interaction of Religions in Nineteenth-Century Yorubaland," *Journal of the International African Institute*, 60:3 (1990) 343; Also See Karin Barer, "Oriki Women and the Proliferation and Merging of Orisa," *Journal of the International African Institute,* 60:2 (1990); Edna Bay, *Wives of the Leopard:Gender, Politics and Culture in the Kingdom of Dahomey* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998) and Suzanne Blier, "The Path of the Leopard: Motherhood and Majesty in Early Dahome," *The Journal of African History* 36:3 (1995)

of Igbo women, this did not alone guarantee women's religious authority in pre-colonial times. What seemed to matter most in the legitimization of religious authority in pre-colonial times was whether a specific religious figure was the son or daughter of a particular *dibia*, or whether an individual was chosen and designated by the deities to perform specific religious duties.

This chapter is fundamentally an assessment of Ufuma women's religious place in pre-colonial times. It probes traditional structures that ensured and guaranteed women's religious freedoms and rights, among other things. The chapter contains two broad sections. In the first, I explore gender and religion, examining Ufuma understandings of principal deities among its people, illuminating how the dual sex system works in Ufuma religious traditions. I argue that although the deity (Ajana-Ufuma) is female, the continued appointment of a male priest speaks to the balance (natural and supernatural) Ufuma people deploy in their explanations of pre-colonial societal structure. The second section of this chapter explores the structures and avenues through which Ufuma women gained and expressed religious authority. In sum, this chapter argues that women in pre-colonial Ufuma society wielded religious positions of authority equal to that of men, based on indigenous non-discriminatory principles of personal achievement, family history, and individual calling.

Gender and Ufuma-Igbo Cosmology

Ideologically, because the Igbo generally hold strongly to the duality of existence in the universe, there is hardly any better analytical standpoint useful for retelling the pre-colonial

religious history of Ufuma peoples than the dual sex theory.[125] Fred Okoli of Umuonyiuka-Ufuma announced in one of my interviews that "God created everything in twos."[126] In other words, the entire universe hangs on the principle of balance between two different and complementary entities, such as day and night, light and darkness, male and female. In cosmological terms, the Ufuma understanding is that the world is divided into the physical and spiritual and in each world, a given entity depends on its opposite for its staying power.

It has already been noted in several studies on the Igbo that gender was largely socially constructed and that sex difference functioned only as a kind of division of labor.[127] The question of gender equality is a different topic altogether, as what seemed obtainable was relative equality, whereby Ufuma men and women were subordinate or superior depending on age differentiations and the individual ideologies and accomplishments of specific families. In other words, the status of women varied from superior to inferior based on the number of males within their immediate and extended families, the age of the women and the status of mothers and wives, so that women rose to equal and sometimes superior positions above men in families

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[125] This theory argues that Igbo societies emphasized gender complementarities that did not necessarily advocate equality but differences in female and gender roles. See Kamene Okonjo, "The Dual-Sex Political System in Operation: Igbo Women and Community Politics in Midwestern Nigeria," in N.J. Hafkin and E.G. Bay eds., *Women in Africa, Studies in Social and Economic Change* (California: Stanford University Press, 1976). Also see M.M Green, *Ibo Village Affairs* (New York: Frederick Praeger, 1964) 139ff. Green in describing the Igbo political system points to the emphasis on maintain balance rather than a concentration of authority within any one office. Also see Gloria Chuku, "Igbo Women in Politics: A Historical Analysis," *International Journal of African Studies* 6:2 (2007) 95ff

[126] Interviews, Nwafor Fred Okoli (Umuonyiuka-Ufuma: September 30, November 3, 2011)

[127] See Nwando Achebe, *Farmers, Traders, Warriors, and Kings: Female Power and Authority in Northern Igboland, 1900-1960* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005) and Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughter, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Books, 1987) Also see Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1997)

where the daughters were most senior or where women in the lineage were great achievers. For example, no important decision could be made in the Okoli family in the absence of Chinelo Nwogu, an *Nwa-ada* (first daughter), even though she had been married and had been living in Oji (Enugu State) since the end of the civil war.[128] Chinelo was the first daughter and first child in the family. She is also older than her brother by 6years.

To date, the dual sex theory has not been used to describe the religious realm of the Igbo. Rather, it has been expanded around discussions of Igbo political coordination, whereby men and women carry out their responsibilities without infringing on each other's territory or space.[129] The dual sex system ensured that Igbo women participated in the public sphere and that each sex managed its own affairs through distinct and gendered kinship institutions, age grades, and title societies.[130] For Ufuma women, it allowed them their own governing council, which addressed their specific concerns and needs as women. The councils, which were divided along the lines of citizenship by marriage and by birth right protected women's social and economic interests and guided the community's development. As Nzegwu has aptly observed, this dual-symmetrical structure accorded an immense political profile to women both in communities with

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[128] This argument is based on my personal observation of a few Ufuma families that I engaged with regularly and personally in the course of this research. Chinelo was not only the most senior in the family but is also a high achiever as a barrister and also comes from a lineage of powerful trades women.

[129] Kamene Okonjo, "The Dual-Sex Political System in Operation: Igbo Women and Community Politics in Midwestern Nigeria," in N.J. Hafkin and E.G. Bay eds., *Women in Africa, Studies in Social and Economic Change* (California: Stanford University Press, 1976) 45

[130] See A.E. Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in Southeastern Nigeria, 1891 -1929* (London: Longman, 1972)

constitutional monarchies like Onitsha and in the non-centralized democracies of the eastern hinterland in pre-colonial times.[131]

The dual sex theory or system of organization is applicable to the Ufuma-Igbo religious realm in that men and women held different positions and managed different spiritual responsibilities. This allowed for mutual representation and balance in religious authority in pre-colonial times. Meanwhile, to a large degree the religious and secular domains were fused in pre-colonial Ufuma. Ufuma oral sources point out that the women's council often dealt with affairs beyond the secular in the olden days, as they would talk about and agree upon the sacrifices to be made to Ajana-Ufuma and consult diviners and rain-makers, just as they met for dances and participated in the administration of justice as wives and/or daughters of Ufuma. What is more, unlike the women's associations of today, in pre-colonial times the lead woman was not chosen simply based on seniority or wealth, but rather on the superiority of her spiritual and oratory skills. The councils also had both spiritual and secular powers in that their duties were backed by the earth deity Ajana-Ufuma and could be enforced by "making war," the destruction of property or the infliction of corporal punishment (a means of shaming) by the women themselves.[132]

The dual sex theory provides a concrete explanation for the wholesome view Igbo people have of the human life, as opposed to the polarized and exclusive perception of the West. For the Ufuma, no one human component is stronger or more valuable than the other, neither is either of the sexes complete in itself. Rather each constitutes a vital half that, with the other, makes human life whole. Analogously, in spiritual matters, the interactions between humans and spirits are

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[131] Nkiru Nzegwu, "Recovering Igbo Traditions: A Case for Indigenous Women's Organizations in Development," *Women, Culture, and Development: A Study of Human Capabilities* by Martha Nussbaum and Jonathan Glover eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 445-446

[132] Leith-Ross makes a similar note on Nneato, another Igbo village group. Leith-Ross, *African Women,* 109

mutually beneficial, with each depending on the other for its sustenance. Likewise, the sexes (male and female) are interdependent and connected variables that together make humanity whole.[133]

Ufuma reflections on religious complementarities comes to life as interviewees recall female *dibias* as powerful medicine women in matters of fertility and male *dibias* as unrivalled in ailments involving sterility in pre-colonial times. Ufuma sources also suggest that Ufuma male and female *dibias* specialized in different religious know-how and operated in different locations or terrains. A religious mapping of pre-colonial Ufuma shows that while men dominated the religious sphere of the inner village and associated with deities that policed and ruled the immediate land, Ufuma women were more dominant and related more with deities that protected the surrounding environment and outlying borders of the community.[134]

Chinwe Nwoye's insider perspective on "Igbo Cultural and Religious Worldview" sheds much light on this arrangement. According to her, "In Igbo religious worldview, key areas, such as land, river, hills, forests, caves, is believed to be controlled by female deities."[135] In more detailed terms, Igbo deities are spatially arranged in four levels as follows. Sky: Male, Earth: Female; Water: Female, Ancestral: Male. Although these religious spaces are not entirely exclusive to one specific gender, the structure shows the predominance of male deities in the first and fourth extra-territorial levels (sky and ancestors) and the dominance of female deities in the

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[133] Interviews, Bedford Nwajagu (Umunebo Ufuma: November 12, 2011)

[134] I am able to map the religious landscape of the Ufuma through oral interviews as I questioned informants about the gender and activities of clan/familial deities within each (nine) sub-clan of Ufuma predating the colonial period. While it is possible that not every deity was remembered by my informants, I was able to categorize deities according to their gender and their sphere of influence to reach the above conclusion.

[135] Chinwe Nwoye, "Igbo Cultural and Religious Worldview: An Insider's Perspective," *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* 3:9 (2011) 307-308

physical environment: earth and water.[136] The deities occupying the sky including *Amadioha*, the god of thunder, and *Anyanwu*, the sun god, live in closest proximity with *Chukwu*, the Supreme Deity, while deities constructed as female, including Nwangene, the goddess of the stream, are described to be under the purview of Ajana-Ufuma, the earth goddess.[137] In the same way, Ufuma priestesses and prophetesses were largely in charge of deities and spiritual forces along rivers, other bodies of water, and forest boundaries, and they were connected with such female deities and spiritual specialists addressing issues of fertility, morality, blessings, and virtues.

Perhaps the prominence of female spiritualists and deities along water bodies and boundaries in pre-colonial times can be explained by the very nature of Igbo women's existence as social "outsiders" in the communities they were married into. Through the practice of exogamy Ufuma-Igbo women were constructed as "outsiders" married into the community yet remain "insiders" in their birth community. However, this allowed female spiritual specialists and their patron deities opportunities to provide religious services across several communities.[138]

One example Ufuma oral tradition provides is Anama Nwa Nzekwe, a priestess who was consulted to guarantee that Ufuma long-distance traders would safely cross the Mamu River. Although Ufuma oral tradition does not give us a specific date, the time period of this event was clearly during the period of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, as this period coincided with the period of rapid globalization in which Igbo communities engaged in long distance trade with not

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[136] Nwoye, "Igbo Cultural and Religious Worldview: An Insider's Perspective," 307

[137] Interviews, Ernest Asiegbunam (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: November 9 & 11, 2011)

[138] Interviews, Morrison Okonkwo (Umueji-Ufuma: November 16, 2011); Bedford Nwajagu (Umunebo Ufuma: November 12, 2011); Nwafor Fred Okoli (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: November 3, 15, 28, 2011)

just their immediate neighbors but also with merchants from afar off. Oral tradition also shows that this happened during the rainy season when the Mamu was overflowing its banks. This priestess of Ufuma commanded the traders to bring a baby chicken, a palm leaf (omu) and a white chalk (nzu) for a ritual. It is said that she took these three items to the middle of the river and sat down and the Mamu River divided into two, allowing the traders to cross safely.[139] Several other examples of female deities and priestesses occupying boundary spaces around water bodies and mountains can be identified in other parts of Igboland and in other African societies, including the river goddesses Idemili among the Nnobi-Igbo and Yemoja and Osun among the Yoruba.[140]

A religious cum gender mapping of Ufuma supernatural forces reflects this balance in another way as the cults of deities socially constructed as female, including Ajana-Ufuma, the principal deity of Ufuma, are presided over by a male priest. Of course, there are spirits and deities that are socially constructed as male yet have male priests guiding them, an example being *Mmau*, a predominantly male religious cult, as well as female deities who have female priests. Nevertheless, a closer look at some of the symbolisms evident in the artistic presentation of some Ufuma *Mmau* masquerades are clearly feminine, an observation that may suggest a drag queen or gay cross-dressing to an untrained eye, but which to the trained eye provide evidence of the principle of balance within the dual sex theory.

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[139] Interviews, Morrison Okonkwo (Umueji-Ufuma: November 16,' 2011); Bedford Nwajagu (Umunebo Ufuma: November 12, 2011); Nwafor Fred Okoli (Enugwu-abo Ufum:, November 3, 15, 28, 2011)

[140] See Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Books, 1987) 99ff; JDY Peel, "Gender in Yoruba Religious Change," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 32:2 (2002) 136-166

Of course, this organization of separate religious spheres of influence among Ufuma men and women did not mean that competition between male and female *dibias* did not exist. Far from it. Ufuma oral tradition speaks about two periods of strife in the community when the head chief (the Diji) of Ufuma rallied spiritualists from Ufuma and neighboring communities for solutions to evil incidences including poor harvests and mysterious deaths. Oral tradition has it that powerful medicine men and women were assembled during such occasions and that they all showcased their medicines in search of solutions through divination while soliciting the patronage of the head chief.[141] However, it is clear that all deities (male and female) were believed to work conjointly with Ajana-Ufuma in protecting the community at large from harm, including famines and epidemics.

In pre-colonial Ufuma, like the rest of Igboland, the world was conceived to be a trading station in which humans must negotiate. This bargaining space only guarantees "equality of opportunity" (substantiated by a belief in reincarnation) but not "equality of outcome."[142] This space also consists of a web in which all corporeal entities, living and dead, entwine and communicate through channels established by man and employed reciprocally by spiritual beings. In a worldview where status is insured by spiritual forces, the Ufuma villager strives to maintain a cosmological balance between the physical and spiritual even as he or she competes for status within the society in a world in which the sacred and the secular are fused. For traditional Ufuma, a fundamental balance can only be achieved by certain virtues including justice, truth, and transparency. Thus, although the traditional Ufuma villager would seek

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[141] Interviews, Bedford Nwajagu (Umunebo Ufuma: November 12, 2011)

[142] V.C. Uchendu, Ahajioku Lecture (Imo: 1995): Interviews, Bedford Nwajagu (Umunebo Ufuma: November 12, 2011); Nwafor Fred Okoli (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: November 3, 15, 28, 2011)

explanations for almost every societal occurrence, disaster or good news through divination, this person would understand from life experiences that *uwa* (the world) is what it is today not because of the hostility of spirits but because of the evils of humans in society. It is in light of this truth that individuals lacking in such virtues are dubbed evil.[143]

Ufuma cosmology consists of a three-tier universe, consisting of intimately related but distinct worlds, each of which is inhabited by forces natural and supernatural. The Sky above is the abode of *Chukwu,*[144] the Supreme Being, and of other major divinities including *Amadioha* (the god of lightning) and *Anyanwu* (the sun god). The ancestors and myriads of spirit forces (both good and evil) are believed to inhabit the under-world. People, along with other land based deities such as Ajana-Ufuma, inhabit the earth.[145] Hierarchically the Supreme Being is the highest reality in Ufuma cosmology, followed by the major divinities, and then the nature spirits and myriads of other spirit forces; humanity is the lowest. Nevertheless, humanity is essentially the focus; all forces above are conceived to direct their energies to their synergistic relationship with humanity. Hence, the activities of spiritual entities in the other realms (transcendent and immanent beings) are generally conceived in relation to man.[146]

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[143] Interviews, Chief J.C. Mogbo, (Umuonyiuka-Ufuma: September 30 and November 8, 2011) Also see V.C. Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria* (1965) 11-21

[144] Chukwu, which approximates Chi (God) and Ukwu (Big), literarily means the Big God while Chineke translates into the God the Creator.

[145] Take note, the concept of the underworld is not synonymous with the Christian concept of hell as both good and evil spirits are constructed to dwell together in the underworld.

[146] J. Obi Ogueiofor, *The Influence of Igbo Traditional Religion on the Socio-political Character of the Igbo* (Nsukka, Nigeria: Fulladu Publishing Co., 1996) 48. Note that the Igbo see their ancestors co-habiting with underworld spirits hence refuting the artificial creation of "Ekwensu" as evil. C. Ejizu, "Continuity and Discontinuity in Igbo Traditional Religion" in *Gods in Retreat: Continuity and Change in African Traditional Religion edited by Emefie Ikenga Metuh* (Enugu,

It must be re-affirmed that there was in pre-colonial Ufuma in particular, and in Igboland in general, a firm belief in the existence of a principal deity named *Chukwu*, to whom, unlike the male Christian God, no particular gender is ascribed. Ufuma men and women were very stern in their response that Chukwu could not be categorized in terms such as male or female or even something in between. Interestingly, the people of Ufuma understand the Christian Chukwu in the same gender terms as they regard the indigenous *Chukwu.* This is indeed different from the feminized view of the Supreme Deity among the matrilineal Niger Delta or the androgynous view of God among the Kuiye (Batammaliba) of Togo and in Zimbabwe,[147] or the Masculine view of the divine as observed among indigenous Dogon of Mali and Burkina Faso.[148]

What is more, Chukwu is not in any way confined to any particular shrine, space or place. Unlike other deities who have symbols and objects of identity, Chukwu is conceptually situated in the mind of Ufuma citizens and the Igbo generally. It is also believed that Chukwu created the heaven and earth and all human beings, animals and plants. Chukwu is supreme and is often approached through intermediating deities including Ajana-Ufuma.

The Supreme Being in Igbo cosmology has thus sometimes been misconstrued as subordinate. Basden's ethnography *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* was one of the first to make this suggestion when he argued that *Chukwu*, the Supreme Being in Igbo religion, was withdrawn while the main acts of religious devotion were being directed to the cult of ancestors and the

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Nigeria: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1985)114. This order is not often this clear in the mind of the indigenous worshipper.

[147] See Isabel Mukonyora, "Women and Ecology in Shona Religion," *Word and World* 19; 3 (1999) 283

[148] See Randy Conner, "Sexuality and the World's Religions," in *Sexuality and the World's Religions* edited by David Machacek and Melissa Wolcox (California, ABC Clio, 2003) 8

divinities who were directly involved in the affairs of the Igbo.[149] Likwise, C.K Meek in his *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe*, published in 1937, appropriated Basden's scholarly conception bu characterizing *Chukwu* as introverted. According to Meek, the most important deity in the public and private life of the Ibo "is not *Chuku* or *Anyanu* [sic] or *Amadi-oha* but *Ala*, the (female) earth deity."[150] Meek's argument credits Christianity with introducing the concept of a Supreme Being, even though the missionaries adopted the Igbo term *Chukwu* in their translations to represent the biblical God without raising any questions.

This view of a withdrawn Supreme Being is repeated in other ethnographic studies of indigenous religion in Africa. An example that quickly comes to mind is Evans-Pritchard's ethnography of *Nuer Religion* where the Supreme Being is viewed as both "a blessing and a curse, cause and effect" and as final arbiter of life, who must be consulted last.[151] Isichei takes this even further by arguing that the supreme God, known under different names in different parts of Iboland, whose goodness, wisdom and power are described in many Ibo personal names, is nevertheless remote. "More concerned with the daily affairs of men were a host of lesser divinities and spirits."[152] While Nwoga claims that there is no definite hierarchical arrangement of Igbo deities since beings assume positions of importance in Igbo estimation based on their performance at a given time,[153] he reflects on a popular Igbo myth that *Chukwu* withdrew from the earth because of a woman's late night cooking and pounding with a pestle that disturbed

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[149] Basden, *Among the Ibo of the Nigeria,* 215

[150] C.K Meek, *Law and Authority in a Nigeria Tribe* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937)24

[151] E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956) 18ff

[152] Elizabeth Isichei, *The Ibo People and the Europeans: A Genesis of a Relationship – to 1960.* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973) 80

[153] Donatus I Nwoga, The Focus of the Igbo World View (Ahiajoku Lecture 1984) (Published by Culture Division, Owerri, Nigeria, 1984)20

Chukwu after everyone had gone to bed. Horton's contribution to this debate on the withdrawn God in Igbo religion is disturbing. According to him, the Igbo Supreme Being was only evolving during the period of the Aro when *Ibinukpabi* was prominent all over Igboland, a development that was crushed prematurely with the onslaught of Christianity. Horton's argument here seems to give precedence to structure over belief and it is similar to saying that there was no belief in Christ until the Romans built a church.[154] Such an interpretation is racist and deliberately formulated to deny the presence of any form of monotheism in Igbo religion. In questioning this western stereotype, Ikenga-Metuh and Ejizu show evidence of public altars and rituals held in honor of *Chukwu* in a number of Igbo communities like Okija, Ihiala and Nsukka and most especially the *Chukwu* shrine at Arochukwu in Igboland prior to missionary invasion.[155] Moreover, the prevalence of naming family members and institutions after *Chukwu* is telling. Perhaps one reason why these scholars make these observations about Igbo religious praxis is that man (and thus the earth) is at the center of the interaction between the three cosmic worlds, therefore it is only natural that man's interactions with cosmic forces on the earth (including the earth deity) will be more pronounced than with deities of the sky or the underworld.

This controversy over a supposedly remote or subordinate Supreme Being in African religion is typical of the provocative debate that was going on in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries about religious evolution, rationalism and the analytical categorization of beliefs as mono- or polytheism. Establishing that the Supreme Being was withdrawn in African religious consciousness would have cemented European arguments that African religion is polytheistic.

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[154] C.N Ubah, "Religious Change among the Igbo during the Colonial Period" *Journal of Religion in Africa,* Vol. 18, Fasc. 1 (Feb., 1988) 71

[155] C. Ejizu, "Continuity and Discontinuity in Igbo Traditional Religion" in *Gods in Retreat* edited by Ikenga-Metuh, 115

However, if monotheism is "the belief that there is but one Supreme God,"[156] then there is no basis for misinterpreting the Igbo belief in one Supreme God, *Chukwu*, and the understanding of ancestors and deities as intermediaries. When asked to comment on this subject, Ufuma research collaborators argued that if pre-colonial beliefs were to be categorized as polytheism, then Catholics who prayed through saints as intermediaries, not to mention Christians in general who prayed in Jesus' name, should be similarly categorized.[157] This is an important point. If reverence for ancestors, spirits and priests is equated with polytheism, then should we also assume that the Supreme Being is withdrawn in Christian belief simply because a majority of Christians pray in the name of Jesus and request the assistance of several saints on a daily basis? In other words, should we then call the worship through intermediaries that is observed in most of the world's religious systems polytheism?

In response to these questions, Bolaji Idowu,[158] drawing on his research among the Yoruba, maintains that gods are mere attributes of the Yoruba Supreme Being *Olodumare*. In light of this research, Idowu speaks of the existence of a "diffused monotheism" or "implicit monotheism" in African religion.[159] Idowu justifies the adoption of these adjectives because Africa has "a monotheism in which there exist other powers which derive from Deity such being and authority that they can be treated, for practical purposes, almost as ends in themselves."[160]

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[156] Merriam Webster Dictionary.

[157] Interviews, Bedford Nwajagu (Umunebo Ufuma: November 12, 2011); Nwafor Fred Okoli (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: November 3, 15, 28, 2011); Chinua Achebe fiction *Things Fall Apart* (London: Macmillan 1958) also provide glimpses into this indigenous interpretation of Christianity.

[158] Bolaji Idowu, African Traditional Religion: A Definition, 165-166

[159] Idowu, African Traditional Religion, 136

[160] Idowu, African Traditional Religion, 135

When read against the tenacious and enduring belief in *Chukwu*, the Ufuma tendency to sometimes forget ancestors, sack priests, and abandon shrines and deities over time speaks for itself. In other words, *Chukwu* is perhaps the only constant spiritual being among the people of Ufuma, who have notably first appropriated and then relinquished deities when a pressing need was met in the past.[161] This was the case with Oyimoyi, a deity invented first in the era of the slave trade to preserve the community, who was later dropped only to be revived to help Ufuma women conceive and bear sons in a time of crisis in the 1940s.[162] Idowu's idea of a "diffused monotheism" does not apply entirely or accurately to the Igbo cosmological standpoint because "diffused" or "implicit" monotheism suggests a fluid, loose and confused conception of a Supreme Being, which the Igbo worldview does not reflect. In other words, for the Ufuma-Igbo, there is no confusion or controversy in the sacred position occupied by *Chukwu*. This Being is considered God intrinsically and absolutely. The prevalence of names such as *Chukwuka*, *Chibueze* and *Chukwuma* in Ufuma, which accord all power and supremacy to this God who has no rival, speaks for itself. Perhaps an important lesson to be learned from studying Ufuma responses on this matter is the need for historians and anthropologists to adjust their analytical categories, since indigenous Ufuma beliefs do not fit particularly well into Western classifications. They are misrepresented alike as monotheism or polytheism. This is the Ufuma standpoint.

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[161] As was the case with the appropriation of Oyimoyi, a deity that was invented in Oyimoyi Abo where the want for male children led to the appropriation of a deity who after answering the cries of the people was abandoned some years later. Interview with Mrs. Christiana Okoro (Umuogem Ufuma, November 12, 2011) A similar case was the invention of Adoro in Alor Uno during a period of uncertainties necessitated by the turmoil that characterized the peak of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in northern Igboland. See Nwando Achebe, *Farmers, Traders, Warriors, and Kings: Female Power and Authority in Northen Igboland, 1900-1960* (Heinemann: Portsmouth, 2005) 56ff

[162] Interviews, Morrison Okonkwo (Umueji-Ufuma: November 16, 2011)

What is more, the Ufuma hold that man and woman were created equal by *Chukwu*, the creator God (*Chineke*). This great spirit *Chukwu* gives to each person at the time of birth a part of his divine nature called *Chi*, which becomes the spiritual double of the person throughout life, so that whatever qualities possessed by the child are considered attributes from this *Chi*. It is through the *Chi* that everyone is endowed with some essence of the Creator. Depending on the proportions of their gifting, prophets and prophetesses have emerged in the history of Ufuma. Because individual *Chi* differs, every person is expected to demonstrate what kind s/he possesses through various economic and social activities. This, according to Edmund Ilogu, is the source of the strong achievement motivation said to be possessed by Igbo people.[163] In addition to the inheritance bestowed by one's personal *Chi*, the Ufuma also extol human gifting deposited by ancestors so that when a child is born, the parents will usually visit a diviner to ascertain what ancestor is resident in that child.[164]

The belief that at birth *Chukwu* grants each newborn a personal guardian spirit or *Chi* means that every citizen is personally accountable to *Chukwu* and able to represent the Supreme Being. However, although *Chi*, like *Chukwu*, is conceived as a genderless being in Ufuma cosmology, the Ufuma differentiate between a *Chi* who is tough and one who is gentle, one who gives good luck and one who brings bad fortune, to mention a couple of important distinctions. Whereas a *Chi's* influence could be modified for the good by consulting with a powerful *dibia*, Ufuma oral history construes certain *Chi* attributes as characteristically and unalterably male or female. Such

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[163] Edmund Ilogu, *Christian Ethics in an African Background: A Study of the Interaction of Christianity and Ibo Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 1974) 37; For more on Chi see Christopher Ejizu, "Chi Symbolism as a Potent Mirror of Igbo Indigenous Worldview," *Anthropods* 87-4:6 (1992); I Chukwukere, "Chi in Igbo Religion and Thought: The God in Every Man," *Anthropods* 78-3:4 (1983)

[164] Interviews, Okeke Amobi (Enugwuabo-Ufuma: November 17 and December 3, 2011)

is the case when a tough *Chi* is presumed to be resident in a female; such a woman is often praised with names usually accorded to strong men in the society. She is referred to as *Agu*, the lion. Likewise, some men have been explained to have a very weak *Chi*. Such men are often ridiculed for being women.[165]

Whereas *Chukwu* is not conceptualized as male or female in Ufuma (and in Igboland generally) cosmology, the most senior deity in Ufuma, *Ajana Ufuma*, the earth deity, is conceptualized as female. *Ajana Ufuma* is ascribed female qualities mainly because of the role she plays in the day to day affairs of the society. Viewed as feminine, *Ajana Ufuma* is associated with fertility and reproduction in women, animals, and crops. She is imagined as the owner of all the living and the dead and also the guardian of morality. Abominations such as homicides and stealing are considered offences against *Ajana* and so the judicial function of ancestors and elders in Igbo society is considered to be performed under the auspices of *Ajana*.[166]

Although *Ajana-Ufuma* is feminine, the office of her chief priest is reserved for males and this, as my research collaborators explained, was necessary to establish balance and reinstate the superiority of heterosexual relations among the Ufuma. *Ajana-Ufuma* is believed to be the most influential of the spirits and is regarded as the earth goddess, the great mother spirit, the queen of the underworld, the owner of mankind, and most importantly, the arbiter, custodian and enforcer of morality and laws of the land. The people of Ufuma conceive of her as second in command and an all-important agent of the Supreme Being *Chukwu*. The earth goddess was

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[165] Interviews, Okeke Amobi (Enugwuabo-Ufuma: November 17 and December 3, 2011)

[166] J. Obi Ogueiofor, *The Influence of Igbo Traditional Religion on the Socio-political Character of the Igbo.* (Nsukka, Nigeria: Fulladu Publishing Co., 1996) 48. Note that the Igbo see their ancestors co-habiting with underworld spirits hence refuting the artificial creation of "Ekwensu" phenomenon which I discuss further later. 68-69: Interviews, Bedford Nwajagu (Umunebo Ufuma: November 12, 2011); Nwafor Fred Okoli (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: November 3, 15, 28, 2011)

frequently referred to as mother. Unlike all the other deities, while she is believed to dwell on the physical earth as a supernatural force, she is able to operate across all three worlds: the earth, the underworld and the heavens.[167]

Ajana-Ufuma is believed to favor women, as they are presumed to obtain quicker hearing from her. Leith-Ross notes that after partaking in the festivities and blessings of *Ajala*[168] in Nneato, women went home as "happy as if they had been to Communion."[169] *Ajana-Ufuma*'s prominence is best explained when the importance of child-bearing and reproduction is kept in mind. Scholars generally agree that Africans (south of the Sahara) abound with indigenous beliefs rooted in lineage and descent systems and that they have a high regard for fertility in both plants and animals. Because lineage assures ancestors of a means of communicating with this earth, giving birth to children is thus revered as a sacred act that culminates not only in preserving and propagating human life but also in ensuring that the ancestral line is perpetuated as a living entity. The implication is that high fertility and a large number of surviving children, along with agricultural produce yielding, is associated with joy, the right life, divine approval and the approbation of good.[170] Conversely, low fertility is only too easily interpreted as evidence of sin and disapproval. Women are thus seen as producers of life and so motherhood allowed Ufuma women to gain status within the society. Hence *Ajana-Ufuma* becomes the key

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[167] Interviews Bedford Nwajagu (Umunebo Ufuma: November 12, 2011); Nwafor Fred Okoli (Enugwu-abo Ufuma, November 3, 15, 28, 2011)

[168] Another dialectical variation of the female deity known to the Ufuma as Ajana-Ufuma

[169] Leith-Ross, *African Women,* 118

[170] John C. Caldwell and Pat Caldwell, "The Cultural Context of High Fertility in Sub-Saharan," *Africa Population and Development Review* 13(3) 1987, 416; Also See Adongo, Philip B., James F. Phillips, and Fred N. Binka, 1998, "The Influence of Traditional Religion on Fertility Regulation among the Kassena-Nankana of Northern Ghana," Studies in Family Planning 29(1)

deity when solutions for infertility, finding a spouse, becoming pregnant, and bearing healthy offspring are sought. The importance of reproduction cannot be overstated. Women wishing to bear children also prayed to divinities and spirits of the waters such as *Nwangene*.[171]

Still, the femininity of *Ajana-Ufuma* is balanced by certain masculine roles that include the safeguarding of the community. In this respect, *Ajana-Ufuma* takes on a male character as a warrior and the preserver of social justice and morality in the land. She is noted to have killed individuals who desecrated the land and her masculinity is exemplified in her Chief Priest. *Ajana-Ufuma* mediates constructively between the sexes: as an ultimate female, she has the potential to unleash devastating male energies of destruction. She completes the cycle of life as both ancestor and mother, reaffirming Ufuma belief in dual existence, expressed in this case through the interrelatedness of birth and death.

Next to *Ajana-Ufuma*, the cult of ancestors/ancestresses ranks as one of the most benign spiritual forces in Ufuma-Igbo cosmology. The spirits of the "good men" and "good women" who died at an old age are thought to form one community with their physically living descendants on earth. In their dual role as members of the supernatural and physical domains, the ancestors serve as active mediators between the two realms in which they abide, manifesting themselves in masquerades and reincarnation to ensure the physical continuity of their lineages. Oral interviews from Ufuma show that the prominence of any one ancestor/ancestress depends on who is doing the worshipping and his/her relationship with the ancestor/ancestress. Ufuma women were generally prone to pray to and seek the blessings of female ancestors, whom they

[171] Interviews, Bedford Nwajagu (Umunebo Ufuma: November 12, 2011); Nwafor Fred Okoli (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: November 3, 15, 28, 2011)

believed understood their plights as women, while men tended to pray to male ancestors.[172] In this cult, ancestors and ancestresses were believed to influence the doings of the living. They were also believed to guide the morality of their descendants. Still, they were considered subordinate to *Ajana-Ufuma*. It was believed that the ancestors/ancestresses protected Ufuma from injury and invasion, and prevented the evil god or the devil *Ajo mmo* from inflicting pain, disease and suffering on the villages. They also intervened with the gods in the spiritual world on behalf of the living by negotiation.

Closely linked with this cult is the belief in reincarnation, whereby ancestors/ancestresess return in the form of a child, often with the purpose of righting certain wrongs in the society. This system is known as *Ino Uwa*[173]or (reincarnation), as it is often said that the birth of a baby commemorates the return of an ancestor. A diviner is usually invited, who, after consulting the ancestors, will then name the former member of the family who has been reincarnated. Perhaps an interesting point about reincarnation in Ufuma-Igbo history is that female ancestors are believed to have been reincarnated at times as males, while male ancestors are believed to have been reincarnated as females. Ufuma sources name a few such children who are claimed to be ancestors who have been reincarnated across gender lines. Mrs. Orji explained that the great female yam farmer and hunter of Umuagu-Ufuma was a reincarnation of her grand-father, who was one of the greatest farmers in the region. Reincarnation is also a local way of explaining the fact that certain qualities inherent in a family are handed down from one generation to another, irrespective of gender.

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[172] Interviews, Bedford Nwajagu (Umunebo Ufuma: November 12, 2011)

[173] Literarily means to remain in this world.

Countless other deities and spiritual forces existed in pre-colonial Ufuma which cannot be explored in the space of this chapter. Nevertheless, the all-important point that must be made is that these spiritual entities, whether male, female or genderless, interact in a common space characterized by mutual respect. Overall, the body of beliefs emanating from Ufuma-Igbo religious doctrine explains why, for the Igbo, nothing is purely physical or merely spiritual or abstract. Things exist as combinations of elements in dualistic terms. When somebody is sick, the Igbo do not fail to recognize that there are physical causes to the illness, which is why they use herbs, but beyond the physical causes, they also see aspects of the illness as caused by the actions and wishes of people or spirits. This attention to the forces set up by people, ancestors, or deities makes it impossible for the Igbo to accept that anybody could die by the single cause of even a publicly recognized motor accident. Hence, mankind's existence and destiny are caught up with the general behavior of the forces above and around it, so that human energies must be expended on sustaining the delicate balance between the various worlds.[174] Thus, as a farmer, the Igbo must know the signs in the sky and on the earth, must use the right seeds, and most importantly ensure that an individual's *Chi* and ancestral spirits are supportive before planting.[175] Perhaps Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* gives us a vivid picture of this Igbo worldview when the priestess yells at lazy Unoka, "When a man is at peace with his gods and his ancestors, his harvest will be good or bad according to the strength of his arms."[176] This compact yet holistic concept of reality that the Igbo hold contradicts the Weberian generic dismissal of

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[174] C. Ejizu, "Continuity and Discontinuity", 117-119

[175] Donatus I Nwoga, The Focus of the Igbo World View (Ahiajoku Lecture 1984) (Published by Culture Division, Owerri, Nigeria, 1984)41

[176] Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Random Books, 1959) 50th Anniversary Edition. 17

African religion as "anthropolatrous" and mundane (worldly-based). In fact, the Igbo world view is very much comparable to the "Protestant ethic" of hard work and moral rectitude as prerequisites for success.

Female Religious Authority in Pre-Colonial Ufuma

Now that I have established and explained the core Ufuma cosmology, its gender framework and its emphasis on complementarities, the business of this section will be to explain why the Ufuma-Igbo are unique in their religious roles and to explore some of the dynamics precipitating the rise of religiously powerful females in pre-colonial Ufuma. Three factors are identified that enabled Ufuma-Igbo women rise to positions of authority in the religious sphere in pre-colonial times: the decentralized nature of Igbo society; the process of socialization of young girls into womanhood, as distinct from the process that led boys into manhood; and the exploitation of traditional laws that were originally intended to subordinate Ufuma women within a supposedly patriarchal system. It is important to state at this point that the traditional Igbo institution of marriage played a pivotal role in shaping Ufuma women's positions in the religious domain in pre-colonial times. Since very few achievements without marriage wee socially recognized by the Igbo society, Ufuma women gained and maintained high profile in the religious realm mostly as married women and even more so as mothers.[177]

[177] For further readings on motherhood and power in African history see Oyeronke Oyewumi, "Ties that (Un)bind: Feminism, Sisterhood and Other Foreign Relations," *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies*, 1 (2001) 1; C.Walker, "Conceptualising motherhood in 20th century South Africa,"*Journal of Southern African Studies*, 21:3 (1995), 417-437; N. Sudarkasa, "Conceptions of motherhood in Nuclear and Extended Families, with special reference to comparative studies involving African societies,"*Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women*

In pre-colonial societies such as Igboland in southeastern Nigeria and in other parts of Africa including Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Congo, political power was diffused. In the absence of a centralized system, these societies have had to execute the functions of government through religious mechanisms that revolve around not just male and female elders but also, very importantly, around spiritual specialists. Although centralized societies exhibit a measurable understanding of divine authority, centralized systems tend to set a few figures on a religious pedestal above all other spiritual figures, whom they hush in their history. The Oba of Benin, for instance, is recorded to have surrounded his court with select spiritual specialists, mostly men, so that even if other female spiritual specialists thrived at the same time, they seem inconsequential.[178] Women remembered in the history of the Benin Kingdom are mostly royal women. In the absence of a royal class in Igboland, female spiritual specialists became prominent figures in Ufuma pre-colonial history. In fact, pre-colonial Ufuma boasts of a conglomerate of male and female religious specialists who oversaw various aspects of communal life. In such an atmosphere of diffused political authority, religious offices become channels of not just religious power but also of secular authority.

In decentralized Ufuma, religious authority began first at the local level, within the family, the lineage, and the kinship group, the microcosmic unit of the society and from there worked its way up as the priest/priestess built a clientele. Except for a few Igbo groups like the Aro and Nri,

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Studies, 5 (2004); Phoenix, A. Wollett and E. Lloyd (Eds.). *Motherhood: Meanings, Practices and Ideologies*. (London: Sage.1991); L. Kruger "Narrating Motherhood: The transformative potential of individual stories," *South African Journal of Psychology*, 33:4(2003)198-204.

[178] In the court of the Oba of Benin, the Queen Mother and Oba's wives could recruit female religious specialists but the majority of religious specialists were men. Daniel Oronsaye, *The History of Ancient Benin Kingdom and Empire* (Abudu, Benin, Oronsaye, 1995) 38ff

whose religious reputations went ahead of them and whose authority spanned several Igbo communities in their capacity as freelance religious agents of the prevailing Long Juju *Ibini-Ukpabi*, religious authority in Igboland was often legitimated within the community that a religious figure resided in, or among immediate neighboring communities who were witnesses to the religious power of the medium. In other words, the fame of a religious specialist depended on his/her ability to market his/her spiritual gifting as well as the interest/needs of the people. This is quite different from a centralized system in which the center typically grants and sustains the legitimacy of spiritual figures (often male) it patronizes, at the expense of other actively practicing spiritualists (including females).

The decentralized system in Ufuma guaranteed that anyone could rise to a position of authority by sheer spiritual gifting. Together with the Igbo flexible understanding of gender as complementary, this gave women many opportunities in the religious realm, opportunities equal to men, since there was hardly any rigid gender control/stereotype limiting women's religious expressions. Of course, the status of Ufuma women varied between kinship groups, lineages and families and depended on local factors such as the ratio of male to female within a particular family, the age and authority of the most senior female, and family history, to mention a few. However, a flexible and open minded conception of gender prevailed.[179]

Decentralization was an essential part of the democratization process that constituted a marked difference between Igbo society and more centralized societies in Nigeria (such as the Benin Kingdom and the Oyo Empire) and beyond. When replicated in the religious realm, decentralization ensured that there was no concept of clergy whatsoever, so that every individual

[179] My general observation of Ufuma suggests that these factors all come to play in the status of women in individual families so that while women wielded more authority in families were women were mostly the seniors, the status of women measured less in a family of for instance, six sons and one young daughter.

in the society was deemed spiritually equal, therefore allowing individual assertions by virtue of religious character and gifting while enabling Ufuma women to rise to leadership roles in the absence of an overarching patriarchal order. What is more, the loose socio-political structure of the Igbo played an important role in broadening the participation of religious figures in political, economic and social activities within Igbo communities, since it cut unnecessary bureaucratic procedures as women enjoyed religious freedom. Decentralization also sustained the dual asymmetrical system of Ufuma organization discussed earlier, as it allowed Ufuma men and women to operate within different spheres of influence which often complemented each other. Meanwhile, the concept of a personal *Chi* (demi-god or guardian spirit), who occupied an important position in the Igbo cosmological worldview as an individual guardian angel and spiritual force, pushed the idea of religious freedom to its most radical limit. In such atmosphere of religious self-authorization, Igbo women easily tapped into power and became the hub of religious authority in pre-historic Igboland. This *Chi* factor is the possession of every man or woman irrespective of status in society. *Chi*, the most powerful invisible force that the traditional Igbo believe to be acting on each individual human being, is among the Ufuma a demi-/mini-god in everyone, or what Ejizu calls a "spiritual-double" and personal spirit that bestowed upon men and women alike different spiritual skills without partiality whatsoever.[180] It is this concept of *Chi* that guarantees an Igbo outlook beyond the physical, a belief that the container (gender) matters less than the content (spiritual gifting).

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[180] Christopher Ejizu, "*Chi* Symbolism as a Potent Mirror of Igbo Indigenous Worldview," *Anthropos* 87 (1992) 379
Also see Northcote Thomas, *Anthropological Report on the Ibo-Speaking Peoples of Nigeria* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1913); Emefie Metuh, "The Supreme God in Igbo Life and Worship," *Journal of Religion in Africa,* 5 (1973)

In sum, Ufuma women and indeed Igbo women in general, operated in a unique socio-political system that was not rigid but flexible enough to encourage individual achievement above group achievements even in the religious realm. The same ideological principle is extolled in the Igbo saying "The Igbo have no kings…every man is king in his own house." In the absence of any rigid political structure and in the light of a flexible gender ideology, women and men rose to positions of authority in the religious domain based on other variables including personality, gifting and spiritual calling.

Whereas decentralization and its religious accompaniments such as the belief in *Chi* provided a platform for gender equality among Ufuma indigenes, enabling women to rise to positions of religious authority comparable with any male spiritual specialist in centralized societies further south of Nigeria, the unique process of socializing Ufuma maidens into womanhood in pre-colonial Ufuma provided additional opportunities for Ufuma women to achieve such positions.

As girls were socialized into womanhood and educated about their important roles as future mothers and wives in traditional Ufuma, they were trained in specific gender roles that were very different from the ones boys were taught in the process of their socialization to manhood.[181] In other words, young boys and girls were socialized and trained into different socio-religious roles. For both males and females, initiation processes frequently commenced with rituals, including circumcision, and training in various fields. They often culminated with wedding ceremonies for females. Male and female initiation or socialization was more religious than social and involved periods of seclusion with members of the same sex and age group overseen by elders of the same

[181] In pre-colonial Ufuma the ritual ceremony that transforms girls to women is usually performed around the ages of 14 and 18 years. Interviews Mrs. Maggie Okoli, October 11, 2011 (Umuagu-Ufuma)

sex. Ufuma male and female elders guided the young initiates throughout the process. Whereas young boys were socialized and trained in practical arts including the art of hunting, farming, building, combat and the male mysteries of the masquerades, Ufuma oral testimonies suggest that maidens received more training in medicinal and religious knowledge.[182] In addition to being trained in the domestic sciences, women gained knowledge of traditional medicines and mystical recitations. Ufuma oral traditions speak about female initiations that involved long arduous ritual dances while in seclusion, concluding in some sort of spirit possession. Spiritual learning was often balanced with practical and erotic learning as well. Some Ufuma indigenes who participated in these rituals recall vividly the massage with oils, the adornment with the finest leg and waist jewelries by their parents, and the tattoo arts explained by Ufuma older women as having spiritual meanings.[183]

Ufuma sources also suggest that maidens in pre-colonial times were trained in female mysteries, traditional medicine, and the religious significance of womanhood and female power regardless of their mother or father's ranking or religious status. Of course, the children of *ndi dibia* (traditional medicine men and women) were usually more knowledgeable in these matters. Ufuma young women were thus trained because, as Obianuju Aguwa explains, "It was believed and expected that as future mothers, basic training in the making and use of herbal medicines and treatments was an essential learning for the preservation of the lineage."[184] Although Ufuma young women also learned household tasks such as matting and farming, it was expected that Ufuma women would be able to make medicines that cured basic illnesses like fever and colic in

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[182] Interviews, Obianuju Aguwa (Umunebo-Ufuma: December 4, 2011)

[183] Interviews, Mrs. Maggie Okoli (Umuagu-Ufuma: October 11, 2011)

[184] Interviews, Obianuju Aguwa (Umunebo-Ufuma: December 4, 2011)

children and injuries sustained in war or local disputes. Even beyond the process of socialization, such learning was also informally passed from a mother to her daughters. Young men were usually privy to this knowledge system circumstantially, or if their fathers were skilled medicine men.

In their conversations with me, Ufuma women emphasized that every one of them was expected to know how to cure common fever with herbs. Older women lamented the changes in the post-colonial era that led women to depend on chemists and pharmacists for medicine to cure malaria and other sicknesses. Women whose dreams, visions, and knowledge of plants and health guided them to heal the sick were held in higher esteem. According to the oral testimony of Nwatu Okoli, "We were taught that we are in the best position to heal our children and learned that our dreams are usually filled with meaningful ideas for healing . . . when my child was sick I will just pray and then in the night God will reveal to me what herbs to get to cure my child . . . a woman only consulted with *dibias* after she expended her own skills."[185] Healing therefore was an extension of primary health care within the family in Ufuma, so that despite the availability of numerous *dibias* and traditional health practitioners in pre-colonial times, Ufuma women treated most family complaints themselves, employing a complex system of herbal, therapeutic, and spiritual practices in the treatment of a wide range of illnesses including boils, rashes, skins diseases, chicken pox, and so forth. It is important to note that in the pre-colonial era, there was no marked differentiation between the secular and the religious. In fact, religious abilities were deployable to everyday matters including trading, farming, and family issues.

Other studies from the developing world including India and South America allude to this same phenomenon and identify women as primary health givers while also pointing to the close

[185] Interviews Mrs. Maggie Okoli (Umuagu-Ufuma: October 11, 2011)

relationship between women and the environment.[186] The predominant view is that, all things being equal, women will apply their knowledge and skills to using natural resources sustainably and seek avenues to maximize the environmental potential of plants to maintain the health of their families.[187] Among Saraguro women, for instance, a gendered division of labor assigned women responsibility for cures in the home. However, where Saraguro women assumed the role of family curer only after their first successful pregnancy, Ufuma women could perform trado-medical practices as unmarried maidens through their aforementioned role as caregivers to elderly women among their kindred. Young Ufuma women gained experience through treating members of their immediate family until their knowledge grew through broader experiences over time.[188]

The significance of women's home healing practices can be appreciated within the broader Ufuma culture, in which illness is generally attributed to outside negative influences and the home is constructed as a refuge from the world's ills. Of course, the home in the Ufuma-Igbo understanding had a wider meaning fully expressed in the term *ezi n'ulo,* the extended family structure. Because of this broad general knowledge of herbal medicines among Ufuma women, and the belief that the enemies outside the home are the chief causes of illness, Ufuma-Igbo

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[186] See Shanyisa Khasiani, *Groundwork: African Women as Environmental Managers* (Nairobi: ACTS Press, 1992); Toyin Falola and Emily Brownell eds. *Landscape, Environment, and Technology in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Wiliam Beinart and JoAnn McGregoreds. *Social History and African Environments* (Oxford: James Currey, 2003) Carol McClain ed., *Women as Healers: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989) 25

[187] Cecile Jackson, Jennifer MacCracken, Charity Kabutha and Winnie Ogana, *Women, Conservation and Agriculture: A Manual for Trainers* (London: Women and Development Programme, 1992)

[188] Interviews, Mrs. Lovelyn Okolie (Umu-Onyiuka-Ufuma: October 22, 2011). Also see McClain ed., *Women as Healers: Cross-Cultural Perspectives,* 33

women rarely asked midwives and traditional healers for help until they were desperate. Rather, in pre-colonial times Ufuma-Igbo women would usually give birth assisted by their mothers, mother-in-laws, aunts, etc. Older women in particular performed more complicated procedures including circumcision of younger women and they also assisted during male circumcisions.[189] In a community where religion was fused with every facet of life, health, trade, economy, agriculture, when an Ufuma woman's natural role to cure illnesses matched her spirituality, she rose in status in the religious sphere.

Finally, in pre-colonial times Ufuma women were able to rise to positions of authority in the religious sphere through their ability to exploit the very laws that seem to have been intended to subordinate women to the back row in religious matters. In other words, through sheer individual agency Ufuma women were able to achieve high spiritual status by negotiation.

While it is easy to read the enforced seclusion of Igbo women during menstruation (which was often construed as ritual "dirtiness") as a religio-political constraint, in an interview with me Ebere Nwafor noted that the laws that had limited the activities of a menstruating woman since pre-colonial times also accorded them significant power. Ebere noted that these laws actually gave women the wherewithal to sabotage male medicals if need be. The abomination over menstruating women also privileged them to nullify the religious workings of their counterparts. Male *dibias* are not given similar religious authority over female medicines, Ebere noted.

Ebere also argued that although women were denied the right to wield an *Ofo*, a powerful symbol of authority and philosophical legitimacy in Ufuma in particular and in Igboland

[189] Interviews, Franca Nnodim (Umuagu-Ufuma: October 19, 2011); For Further readings see Carol S. McClain, *Women as Healers: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989)

generally, this actually gave Ufuma women limitless powers to do and undo, since wielding an *Ofo* imposed limitations and consequences on its holders. According to Ufuma tradition, the *Ofo* is a sacred symbol made of a short piece of wood cut from the branch of a tree. It is smeared with the blood of cows, goats, and chickens that have been used in its dedication. It is recognized as a symbol of authority in the family hierarchy.[190] The right to hold an *Ofo* falls to the eldest male in each extended family unit who is also a freeborn. The *Ofo* is the source of justice and holding it is therefore considered a sign that a person is someone of righteousness and uprightness, qualities without which elders cannot act as intermediaries between Ufuma citizens and their ancestors.

Since the *Ofo* is understood to confer spiritual powers, it also makes its own demands on its holders. It is generally believed that an *Ofo* holder who sees an abomination or injustice without confessing it will be killed by the *Ofo*. As a result, no *Ofo* holder will agree to be an accomplice in a crime. Once every year, the *Ofo* holder is expected to perform an annual sacred rite. In this a ritual all the *Ofo* elders affirm their solidarity with the *Ofo* and renew their vows. The *Ofo* is believed to strike with absolute power and authority, so that when an apparent victim of the *Ofo* is identifiably in need of the assistance of a *dibia*, he will not be allowed the ministration, since none may interfere with the workings of the *Ofo*.[191] Talbot notes that the *Ofo* is found among the Awka and is looked upon as a "male spirit and is used in the trial of cases to ensure the prevalence of right judgment."[192] The Ufuma also regard the *Ofo* as a form of oath. *Ikpo Ofo*, as my informants pointed out, is the most solemn form of oath-taking by elders and

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[190] Interviews, Ernest Asiegbunam (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: November 9 & 11, 2011)

[191] Mary Uwalaka, *Ofo: Its Juridical and Linguistic Potency* (Abia, Nigeria, 1996)

[192] P.A. Talbot, *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria* (London: Frank Cass, 1969) 141

men. In other words, the *Ofo* serves as a check on the powers of the men who wield it. The *Ofo* had a twin sister, the *Ogu*, which women could wield and whose business it was to accuse any holder of the *Ofo* who was falling short of expectations. The queen mother in western Igboland (also known as the *Omu*) could wield five *Ofo* at a time. (Nevertheless, the *Ofo*, which is associated with potent forces, commands absolute respect of Ufuma men, more than the *Ogu* among women.)[193]

And this is how Ufuma women came to exercise some control over the *Ofo* and its holders. According to Ebere Nwafor, Ufuma women and the *Eze-Nwanyi* in particular capitalized on the fact that they did not swear upon or wield an *Ofo* to pursue their religious activities in darker areas. It is within this context that Ebere explains the fear ignited in an individual when he/she is summoned to stand before *Ezenwanyi-Ufuma* for a hearing and the predominance of witchcraft among Ufuma women, but not men, since pre-colonial times.

In other words, it is because of such limiting yet empowering factors that remedial operations undertaken by men are regarded as less harmful, and women spiritual practitioners are often misconstrued as witches.[194] Although I argue in the next chapter that the incidence and belief in witchcraft in Ufuma is foremost a part of the religious transformations necessitated by the

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[193] NAE CSO26/4 30927

[194] In recent years, however some practitioners and scholars have suggested that the conception of women's witchcraft as evil may have arisen from the fear of women's spiritual power and from a more generalized awe of elder women. See Randy P. Conner, "Sexuality and Gender in African Spiritual Traditions," in *Sexuality and the World's Religions* edited by David Machecek and Melissa Wilcox (California: ABC Clio, 2003) 24. Ritual experts who happen to be women, such as diviners, native doctors, and the category of married women known as Umu Ada/Umu Okpu in the northwestern sub-cultural zone etc. possess small-sized twigs which they use for few events, such as in meetings and in settling disputed among their ranks. See Christopher Ejizu, *Ofo: Igbo Ritual Symbol* (Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1986) 52

Transatlantic slave trade in the pre-colonial period, what Ebere's interview demonstrates is that revered spiritual specialists in Ufuma were especially feared because the standards and boundaries set for men and women were different.

Another explanation for the rise of powerful and revered prophetesses in Ufuma pre-colonial history is the belief that Ajana-Ufuma played favorites and as a female deity, she gave women tremendous powers and considered motherhood and the procreative abilities of women to be spiritual virtues.[195] What is more, the Ufuma-Igbo believed that women could be betrothed and even married to spirits and deities, thus giving them access to the limitless powers operative in the forces to which they were married.[196] Elechi Amadi's novel *The Concubine* captures the incidence of women betrothed and married to spiritual forces and deities and the implications it has on the religious identity of the Igbo woman in pre-colonial times.[197] Ideologies of this sort enhanced the reputation of women in the religious domain in the pre-colonial era.

Conclusion

Edmund Ilogu has described Igbo religious life as having three core characteristics: variety, communality, and utility.[198] To these, one must add accessibility. So long as there existed a

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[195] Interviews, Franca Nnodim (Umuagu-Ufuma: October 19, 2011); Interviews, Ebere Nwafor (Umuagu-Ufuma: October 10, 2011)

[196] Ibid.

[197] Elechi Amadi, *The Concubine* (London: Heinemann, 1966)

[198] Edmund Ilogu, *Christian Ethics in an African Background: A Study of the Interaction of Christianity and Igbo Culture* (Leiden: Brill 1974) 17

variety of choices and specializations and a communal sense of ownership/belonging and purpose in Ufuma religious rites and practices, there was an understanding that traditional deities and priests must be accessible to indigenes. A female *dibia* was first and foremost a medicine woman, a medical doctor equivalent, in Ufuma. She was also a diviner and soothsayer. She often inherited these gifts from her father, who would also have been a *dibia*. A female *dibia* was consulted just as much as a male *dibia* and preference, according to my informants, was based on the skill of the *dibia*, although several women pointed that female *dibias* were often gifted in the areas of fertility (as male *dibias* were on questions of sterility), hence they were patronized more by Ufuma women.

Although the Ufuma-Igbo express the viewpoint that every whole is made up of complementary halves (inside/outside, right/left, royal/commoner, male/female), understandings of the ideology of complementarities were not only complex but at times unequal. I noted that a woman's authority depended largely on her seniority and the history of female achievers in her lineage, so that the question of gender equality in Ufuma is relative. Division of labor between the sexes does not seem clear-cut among the Ufuma, as certain roles socially constructed as masculine were performed by females in the absence of sons. Likewise, in agriculture women grew yams as well as cassava in the absence of husbands and sons. There was no reference to "women's yams" or "men's cassava," since both sexes could perform any agricultural task. Likewise, men participated with their wives not only in the picking of palm-nuts but also in preparing them.[199] When a woman is a widow or her husband is absent, her roles expand to include traditionally male activities. What is more, divorce in Ufuma could be initiated by either

[199] According to Sylvia Leith-Ross in *African Women* "women's yams" are those that are planted first and in consequence ripen first, They are smaller than the men's yams and do not keep so well. Sylvia Leith-Ross, *African Women* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1939) 90

of the couple. In fact, certain taboos respected the decisions of women during divorces. According to Ufuma custom, if a woman deserted her marital home on an Nkwor market day, she was not questioned about her decision or even advised to return to her husband, as it was considered taboo to do so. Unless she willingly changed her mind, she was considered free of the marriage simply because she chose to leave her marital home on an Nkwo market day.[200] Likewise, certain cleansing rites and rituals must be performed if a woman in anger was made to show her nakedness or "drag her buttocks on the ground."[201]

This chapter doubled as a history of gender in Igbo religion and a critique of some of western categorizations of Igbo religion, including the question of mono/polytheism, a theme often adopted in describing indigenous religions south of the equator. I argued that whereas Chukwu was constructed as neither male nor female, other deities and spiritual forces in Ufuma history were constructed as male or female. Today, Ufuma traditional gendered understandings of religion are deployed into Christian beliefs, as informants maintained to me that the Christian God is neither male nor female, even though they read the Bible in English and have come across the masculine term "he" as a pronoun for Chukwu.

Unlike the Christian culture, which tried to relegate women to the background,[202] Igbo women wielded a lot of religious power and featured as goddesses, priestesses, medicines, and diviners, often over-shadowing male priests and prophets in pre-colonial times. Where the Christian cosmology, built around the symbol of a male God and his son Jesus, tried to repress

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[200] Interviews, Nwafor Fred Okoli (Enugwuabo-Ufuma: November 3, 2011)

[201] Interviews, Nwafor Fred Okoli (Enugwuabo-Ufuma: November 3, 2011): Kajetan Okoli, (Umuonyiuka-Ufuma: November 7, 2011)

[202] Christian women have been relegated to the background since the early church. See 1 Corinthians Chapter 14: 34-36, 1 Timothy Chapter 2 (KJV Bible)

women, the Igbo religious philosophy associated God, the Supreme Being (*Chukwu*), with both male and female principles, creating in the process a religious belief system in which both maleness and femaleness were celebrated.[203] Where scholars like Crumbley argue that the indigenous Yoruba had an ambiguous and sometimes negative attitude towards women as rulers and spiritual leaders, the opposite was the case in Igboland, where women, associated with the symbol of motherhood, were naturally respected as wielders of spiritual power.[204]

I have argued that in various ways and on several levels that the religious realm of the Ufuma-Igbo bears the marks of the "acephalous," "state-less" character of pre-colonial Igbo political organization.[205] The Igbo proverb, "Every man is King in his/her own fathers house," a saying that implies that everyone is democratically entitled and responsible to pursue his/her destiny however he/she pleases, captures this. Because of this core worldview, political power was very much diffused, so that real power was rooted in Igbo cosmology rather than in politics. In other words, in the Igbo pre-colonial religious realm, just like in the arena of politics, authority was freely given; hence anyone who possessed spiritual powers, for instance, in healing and prophecy, took the natural chairmanship on religious matters regardless of gender, status, or age. Truly, some of the most powerful leaders in Ufuma history were men and women who harnessed and controlled spiritual assets, since religious authority counted for more in the

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[203] John N. Orji, "Sacred Authority in Igbo Society" *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 34e Année, No. 68.1 (Jul. - Sep., 1989), pp. 115 - 116

[204] Deidre Helen Crumbley, *Spirit, Structure, and Flesh: Gendered Experiences in African Instituted Churches among the Yoruba of Nigeria* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2008)12

[205] The Igbo have been described as "acephalous"/ "stateless"/ "segmentary"/ "decentralized" in several readings. See Robin Horton, 'Stateless societies in the history of West Africa', in J. F. A. Ajayi and M. Crowder (eds.), History of West Africa (2 vols.) (London, 1971), I: 78-119. Others include Onwuejeogwu (1981), C. J. Korieh (2006), G.U. Nwokeji (2010)

scheme of things in pre-colonial Ufuma than political power. Having no gender or age restrictions, women (and anyone else) who successfully tapped into this power source (or filled this power vacuum) held not just religious but also socio-political authority, regardless of their status in the society.[206] Thus, the autonomous character of Igbo societies like Ufuma allowed the ascription of religious authority to whoever proved worthy. Ufuma women easily proved worthy of authority through their healing and prophetic abilities, so that women naturally rose to positions of authority in Ufuma through religion.[207]

This also essay adopted the dual sex theory in explaining how the Ufuma-Igbo participated in the religious sphere. It has argued that a balance of power operated not only in the political domain but also in the religious realm, so that masculinity or femininity in and of itself cannot account for all divine expressions of gender. The very essence of life for the Ufuma is balance, so that the deities celebrated in Ufuma religious history are depicted as either genderless, surpassing male and female boundaries, or else as representing the balance between male or female. This is explained in the somewhat unconscious balancing of a female deity with a male priest, and vice versa, in matters of Ufuma spirituality. In the next chapter, the study engages more with changes and tries to debunk the view that Igbo religion was static until the coming of missionaries by exploring some transformations that were already taking place in the pre-colonial period, before the coming of the Europeans.

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[206] A similar argument can be found in Oyeronke Oyewumi, (2005) 24

[207] Interviews, Chief Basil Nwankwo Ndokwamufu (Umueji-Ufuma: November 8 & 12 2011); Chief Ndokwamufu is also the chief priest in charge of Ifejiroku, the New Yam festivities in Ufuma.

CHAPTER TWO

IGBO WO/MEN AND RELIGIOUS TRANSFORMATIONS ON THE EVE OF BRITISH COLONIAL RULE (Up to 1910)

Introduction

The first day I set foot in Ufuma in the summer of 2009 it was market day. As I had experienced before in several Igbo communities in the north and the west, women dominated the scene—selling, negotiating and even butchering. On one of my early return visits to the market (which was, by the way, my favorite destination for recruiting interviewees and scheduling future appointments with Ufuma women), I took pains to inquire where sellers and especially buyers had travelled from. To my amazement, some had come from as far away as Onitsha, Awka, and Okigwe to buy *achi* and *ogbono*, which were considered cheaper in Ufuma. Several others had come from neighboring Umunze, Oko, and Ndikelionwu. Nwunye Pastor, as one of these women was called, had come all the way from Okigwe to sell mustard seeds, which she described to me as having sufficient potency to keep witches at bay. If sprinkled on the rooftop or at the entrances or gates of a house, she insisted, they would keep witches from attacking one's home and family.

The insights I gained from observing the activities in the Ufuma market have contributed to the conceptualization of this essay, in which I locate Ufuma/Igbo men and women as active players in the religious transformations that were taking place in the region before the coming of Christianity. The overarching argument of this study is that the commercial transition to slave trading prior to the 1900s involved major transformations in the religious landscape of Ufuma

and the Igbo generally. However, the external influence of the transatlantic slave trade was not the only factor driving religious change in pre-colonial Igbo history. The timeless institution of marriage and the migrations of freelance religious specialists across Igboland provided ample opportunities for cross-ethnic religious borrowings among communities over time.

This chapter will make an original contribution because nothing substantial has yet been documented about the religious transformations that were going on in Igboland on the eve of colonial rule, except that some studies have explored the role of the so-called itinerant Aro, who are often considered a religious hegemony in Igbo history. Although a number of studies have documented different aspects of the way the slave trade influenced settlement patterns, political organization and economic structures in Igboland, just as in other parts of Africa, very little is known of how it altered the religious landscape of the Igbo.[208] Yet significant transformations were already occurring on the eve of the slave trade. Ufuma sources point to the disintegration or localizing of more deities during this time, unlike elsewhere in West Africa, where the trans-Atlantic slave trade era led to the conversion of local shrines into regionally revered oracles like Tongnaab in present day Ghana in the latter half of the eighteenth century. In other words, although central deities like Ibinukpabi (controlled by the Aro and Ajana-Ufuma, who oversaw the entirety of Ufuma) stood the test of the time, a number of deities became personalized to families and households during this period in history. Ufuma oral histories that recount strategies of resistance to the slave trade describe several charms of resistance that were invented during the period of the slave trade, particularly charms that could make their possessors invisible to

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[208] See Toyin Falola ed., *Christianity and Social Change in Africa: Essays in Honor of J.D.Y Peel* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2005); Max Assimeng, *Religion and Social Change in West Africa: An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion* (Accra: Woeli Publishing Services, 2010); Hugo Hinfelaar, *Bemba-Speaking Women of Zambia in a Century of Religious Change* (Leiden: Brill, 1994)

attacking enemies. What is more, Ufuma oral testimonies confirm that the current demonization of *amosu*s—'witchcraft'—began during the era of the slave trade. Meanwhile, some Ufuma deities were discarded while others gained new meaning during this time in history. Of course, this was not tantamount to atheism in Ufuma (for *Chukwu* continued to exist in all supremacy), but it was a sure sign of religious transformations in pre-colonial times. Even G.T Basden observed in the early period of his career in Igboland that "pure heathens" abandoned, "challenged…and defied" their gods "to do their worst" when they [the deities] ceased to meet their responsibilities.[209] This phenomenon of adding and dropping religious loyalties provides a valid explanation for the success of Christianity in Igboland during the colonial period.

The socio-political landscape in Ufuma just as in other Igbo communities was characterized by widespread warfare during the transition to a slave-based Atlantic trade. The wars produced captives who were sold into the trans-Atlantic trade, and the presence of eager buyers in neighboring Ndikelionwu and on the Biafra coast meant that the majority of captives of war were sold rather than killed or enslaved locally. Ufuma traditions say that long-distance travel was minimized in this period as families feared they would lose their loved ones to the slave trade if any of them went alone to the stream to fetch water or to the market to do business. Still visible today is the huge ditch dug on the far left corner of the Ufuma market as trap for slave raiders and as an easy escape for indigenous Ufuma in the pre-colonial period. Ufuma sources also suggest that the practice of human sacrifice at burials was one of the cultural luxuries emanating from the era of the slave trade, as the traditional sacrifice of slaves to honor dead wealthy chiefs in Ufuma became more widely practiced.[210] Even McCall agrees that the greater availability of

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[209] Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria,* 218.

[210] Interviews, Ernest Asiegbunam (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: November 9 & 11, 2011)

inexpensive slaves allowed human sacrifice to become a common occurrence among secret societies and at the burials of nominal chiefs.[211]

It also becomes clear that the settlement patterns, and specifically the scattering, of Ufuma sub-clans served as a stratagem to deter easy conquering from warring neighbors, since the consequences of such conquests would be the enslavement of Ufuma's citizens. Such a scattered settlement structure created a similar obstacle to the British efforts to colonize Igboland when, after the Aro Expedition, the Europeans still had to conquer Igbo communities one after another.[212] Like the resistance evidenced in Ufuma settlement patterns, it is also arguable that fear of the slave trade era influenced the localizing of religious deities in Ufuma, as it was necessary to minimize outdoor religious activities for fear of being raided. Oral sources also suggest that the trans-Atlantic slave trade influenced the spread and institutionalization of the Osu cast system in Ufuma, as Ufuma men and women voluntarily betrothed themselves to deities.[213]

Studies have noted that that among the Igbo, unlike in other West African societies, the slave trade and its upheavals did not lead to the creation of a centralized state, so that although indigenes got irons, guns, and ammunition in exchange for their cooperation, power was still very much dispersed. Scholars have also accounted for the demographic, agricultural, and economic impact of the trans-Atlantic trade as it altered settlement patterns and changed the

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[211] John C. McCall, "The Atlantic Slave Trade and the Ohafia Warrior Tradition: Global Forces and Local Histories" in *Repercussions of the Atlantic Slave Trade* edited by Carolyn Brown and Paul Lovejoy (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2011) 75

[212] Paul Obi-Ani, "The Stigmatization of Descendants of Slaves in Igboland" in *Repercussions of the Atlantic Slave Trade* edited by Carolyn Brown and Paul Lovejoy (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2011) 321

[213] These are my observations based on spatial evidence of Ufuma settlement and living arrangement as well oral history of two deities.

means of economic exchange.[214] Yet while the historiography on the slave trade as it affected Igboland continues to grow, little is known about the religious dimensions of the slave trade.

This study endeavors to complement the existing literature, which documents externally influenced religious changes, by examining those that were internally generated. It is important to bear in mind that slavery itself was an indigenous practice, and so was the habit of adapting religion to accommodate social and political developments. As I have said before, the external influence of the transatlantic slave trade was not the only factor driving religious change in pre-colonial Igbo history. It is important to understand Africa's past as not merely determined by currents emanating from some Western core, but as equally driven by Africans as historical actors, operating with culturally specific motivations to shape their own history.

Divided into two broad sections, this chapter explores the religious transformations that occurred (1) in Ufuma in particular and (2) in Igboland in general before colonial rule. The study is pursued through oral history, primary source documents and written records. Although my oral sources may seem farfetched, considering that 21st century informants are reflecting on the distant past, it must be recalled that the oral history of the slave trade era is almost as recent as the oral history of the colonial period in the Igbo hinterland. Afigbo has rightfully argued in his recent study that while the Atlantic segment of the traffic was abolished in the nineteenth century, and the effort to abolish the slave trade and slavery in the Bight of Biafra was carried out in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for the hinterland of the Bight, the abolition

[214] See Ugo Nwokeji, *The Slave Trade and Culture in the Bight of Biafra: an African Society in the Atlantic World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Caroline Brown and Paul Lovejoy eds., *Repercussions of the Atlantic Slave Trade: The Interior of the Bight of Biafra and the African Diaspora* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2011); G.I. Jones, *From Slaves to Palm Oil: Slave Trade and Palm Oil Trade in the Bight of Biafra* (Cambridge: African Studies Centre, 1989); Chima Korieh and Femi Kolapo eds., *The Aftermath of Slavery: Transitions and Transformations in Southeastern Nigeria* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007)

movement was from beginning to end a twentieth–century phenomenon.[215] The Aro shrine continued to be operational until the military expedition on Christmas Day of 1901.[216] Ufuma oral history speaks of these times as if they were yesterday. For example, some recall parents threatening naughty siblings with being sold to the slave traders in Ndikelionwu. Of course, some of the oral data seems exaggerated, as when Madam Oluchi Okolie claims that Ufuma strategies of survival during the era of the slave trade included hiding entire families on a treetop.[217] Still, most oral accounts provide useful glimpses into pre-historical events in Ufuma and beyond.

My contention in this chapter is that Igbo religion was never static. In the section that probes the nature of marriage in Igboland, for instance, I argue that the required migration of Ufuma-Igbo women from one village to another for marriage enabled the exchange of religious ideas and the appropriation of religious deities between Igbo and non-Igbo communities in pre-colonial Igboland over time. This is because Igbo women often travelled with their personal deities to the communities where they were married. In another section, which considers inter-ethnic wars and religious relocations, I argue that religious ideas were sometimes appropriated from conquering nation-states at the peak of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in Ufuma history.

It is important to re-establish that the Igbo were composed in pre-colonial times of independent political units generally made up of patrilineal clans/lineages. Igboland operated on a loose democratic system in which age grades, secret societies, title societies, and other associational organizations played important but uneven roles. In the absence of any political

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[215] A. E. Afigbo, *The Abolition of the Slave Trade in Southeastern Nigeria, 1885-1950* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2006) 6

[216] Proclamation of 1901, *Southern Nigerian Government Gazette,* (12 December 1901)

[217] Interviews, Oluchi Okolie (Umu-ogem, Ufuma: September 31, 2011)

superstructure such as a federation or a confederacy, each unit had its own shrines and religious offices, its own methods of achieving status, and so forth. In other words, the Igbo remained a group of independent political entities that never developed into a large formal organization, even though some units absorbed or conquered others, and some were fragmented or tainted their characteristics through emigration and immigration.[218]

Internally and Externally Generated Religious Transformations On the Eve of Colonial Rule

> Just about the time gifts have been fully exchanged between the in-laws, the new wife is given a maid that will escort her to her new family and along with the maid a spiritual gift is often presented by the mother of the bride. This was a young plant which represented the shrine of the newly married's paternal home. This plant was often the 'Ogirisi' or 'Omu' kind and was planted in the front yard of her new home and ceremoniously initiated as guardian and protector of the new bride in her new foreign land.[219]

The traditional Igbo institution of marriage played a pivotal role in shaping Ufuma women's positions in the religious domain in pre-colonial times. The Igbo are a patrilineal society and marriage is an indispensable factor for the continuation of the family line of descent. Writing on the Awka in early 1900s, Basden recorded that marriage "has a foremost place in Igbo social [economy…looming] upon the horizon of every maid…as an indispensable function

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[218] Simon Ottenberg, "Ibo [sic] Oracles and Intergroup Relations," in *Igbo Religion, Social Life, and other essays by Simon Ottenberg* edited by Toyin Falola (New Jersey; Africa World Press, 2006) 54-55

[219] Interviews, Mrs. Asiegbunam (Enugwuabo-Ufuma: November 13, 2011)

to be fulfilled…after puberty."[220] Marriage also holds center stage in the religious economy of the people, dictating the legitimacy of men and women as authentic healers and spiritualists par excellence. In effect, little or no achievement without marriage is socially recognized by the Igbo, and so Ufuma women gained and maintained a high profile in the religious realm first and foremost as wives and secondly as mothers. As in most other African communities, marriages in pre-colonial Ufuma were very serious and elaborate affairs involving *ezi n'ulo,* the entire extended family group of the couple.

Significantly, marriage was exogamous in pre-colonial times, meaning that Ufuma women were married outside their clans. This enabled Ufuma communities build ties between neighboring communities and even rival communities in pre-colonial times. Exogamy allowed every man to maintain contact not only with his own village but also with the birth place of his mother, with that of his wife, and with the various places into which his sisters have married, so that there are constant comings and goings, year in and year out, between these villages.[221] Exogamy creates what Green calls a complementary "matrilineal principle"[222] in this ostensibly patrilineal society. A mother's home town plays a vital role in Igbo society. If necessary it can be a place of sanctuary and refuge, and continuing ties to it are believed to ensure that a woman is well guarded by her father's spirits. In Ufuma these ties afford every man contacts not only with his own village but also with the birth place of his mother, with that of his wife, and with the various places into which his sisters have married, so that there are constant comings and goings,

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[220] G.T. Basden, *Niger Ibos* (London: Francass, 1966) 213

[221] M.M. Green, *Igbo Village Affairs* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1947) 151

[222] Green, *Igbo Village Affairs,* 160-162

year in and year, out between these villages.[223] This system of exogamy made inter-village and inter-ethnic group trading and exchanges a practical possibility. In the past some Ufuma have even married wives to secure economic interests in a neighboring village.

In addition to its economic effects, exogamy was also a factor in softening inter-village disputes, even though it may at times have provoked them.[224] Where strife and tensions existed, discouraging inter-ethnic relations, women created useful ties between groups through marriage and became formidable forces in times of distress and tension between sub-ethnic groups. Thus marriage created important links between independent units in Ufuma, tying independent political units to each other and binding families, lineages, and other groupings with reciprocal duties and obligation.

Marriage residence was generally patrilocal, but the wife would return home for various ceremonies and sometimes her husband worked or took part in activities in her home unit. Such marriages made it possible for a husband to travel to the units into which he had married and trade safely there, as he was generally welcome and protected in the domicile of his wife's close relations, at least during times when these units were not at war or at odds with his own.[225] The practice of exogamy also ensured that Ufuma-Igbo women often had two sets of lineages and extended families, natal and marital that would fill a responsibility for their support for survival. In turn, women were expected to meet their obligations to their natal homes in the same way men were expected to, offering material assistance and returning occasionally for funerals and certain religious rites.

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[223] Green, *Igbo Village Affairs,* 151

[224] Green, *Igbo Village Affairs,* 152

[225] Interviews, Nwafor Fred Okoli (Umuonyiuka-Ufuma: September 30, November 3, 15, 28, 2011); Simon Ottenberg, "Ibo [sic] Oracles and Intergroup Relations," 56

Thus marriage created a marked gender difference between itinerant migrating women and relatively stationary Ufuma men in pre-colonial times. It perhaps forms the basis for gender relations in the Ufuma community and in Igboland in general. Within this system though, relations between husband and wife were regulated more by seniority and age than by gender. Since wives were generally younger than their husbands, they were often more recent additions to the lineage, women often deferred to their husbands as seniors and more permanent members of the corporate lineage. However, this seemingly subordinate position was not just in relation to their husbands, but also to their sisters-in-law (*umu-okpu*). Ufuma sources agree that women born within a clan (*umuada*) were more powerful than those who married into the clan (*inyomdi*). In fact, in certain circumstances a sister-in-law's decision was considered more binding on a woman than her husband's, especially if he was a younger brother.[226] A similar principle of authority based on seniority applied to wives, as those married into the lineage later deferred to wives who married in earlier. The same principle applied in woman-to-woman marriages in Ufuma. But the question here is how did marriage place women as key actors in religious changes occurring on the eve of colonial rule in Ufuma?

The exogamous nature of marriage in Ufuma society and Igboland in general made women important agents of religious and social change in pre-colonial times. Upon marriage, Ufuma women often migrated with the deities of their own clan and ancestors to the clan into which they married. Such family deities, often described by Ufuma sources as shrines, were mostly indistinguishable from other small shrines in the area and took important positions at the entrance of the *ilo*, the family compound. Although the shrine represented a woman's paternal roots, it symbolically guaranteed her membership in her husband's family. In other words, while

[226] Interviews, Caroline Okoro, Umuogem-Ufuma; Modesta Ilechukwu, Umuogem-Ufuma; Emelia Okeke, Umuogem-Ufuma, Mrs. Christiana Okoro, Umuogem-Ufuma (October 12, 2011)

such shrines were usually erected for an individual woman, who employed them primarily for the welfare of her immediate family, they also represented something of an umbilical cord that connected the woman to her extended paternal family. Such shrines were associated with specific spirits from the migrating region and brought with them specific sets of beliefs that resembled those of the wife's home clan.

Ufuma oral sources noted that pre-colonial women called such shrines *Chi* or *Chiokike.* Although Ufuma sources recall very little about the activities in *Chi* shrines, a few managed to show me some existing ones. They pointed out that these shrines were set up after a series of ceremonies and animal blood sacrifices that were usually performed by a woman's mother or most senior aunt during their first visit. The ceremony concluded with feasting, especially among the *umu-ada*[227] of her husband's kin group who come to welcome her into the family. Mrs. Asiegbunam noted that her mother sacrificed in the *Chi* altar "almost every week" as she called on her paternal ancestors to give her peace and joy in her new home, bless the work of her husband, and give her healthy children. The *Chi* shrine was said to bring to its owner good health, good crops, fertility, and happy domestic relations with both husband and in-laws.[228]

In pre-colonial times Ufuma women sometimes also migrated with matrilineal shrines upon marriage. In other words, Ufuma women also migrated with shrines belonging to their mother's matrilineage from yet a different community thereby broadening the field of religious exchange. This usually occurred when the bride's mother had died and she wanted to retain some of her late mother's presence in her new abode. Although my sources could not give this shrine a

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[227] Literary meaning: *umu*=children and *ada*=first daughters.

[228] Interviews, Mrs. Asiegbunam (Enugwuabo-Ufuma: November 13, 2011) Also see Simon Ottenberg, "Personal Shrines at Afikpo," *Ethnology* 9:1 (1970); C.K. Meek, *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe* (London: Oford University Press, 1937) 55-61

name, they identified the *Omu* plant as the core feature of the shrine. A similar study among the Afikpo provides some useful insights. According to Ottenberg, when a woman died a similar shrine (called *Akudo* in Afikpo) was erected, typically by the eldest daughter. But if a woman had no daughter, this was done instead by a sister or by the senior female of the dead woman's matrilineage, who had the ultimate responsibility. In Ottenberg's words, "This ritual is necessary in order that the ancestor can reincarnate, and is equivalent to the sacrifice made by an eldest son when he places his dead father's spirit in the ancestral house."[229] Although Ottenberg argues that in the absence of a priest and collective rituals, such a shrine should be considered "a personal shrine," my informants considered their mothers to be priestesses as much as the *dibia* of *Ajana-Ufuma*, and rituals seem to have been practiced collectively: Mrs. Asiegbunam noted that she would usually join her mother and her friends during ceremonies at her mother's *Chi* shrine in her village in Enugwuabo. Women could sacrifice on behalf of their sons and husbands at this shrine, just like any *dibia* will do for his or her clients.[230]

Information gathered from Ufuma suggests that individual women patronized the shrines of their peers if such shrines and the women who oversaw them had been noted to have great powers in medicines or wisdom with herbs. There was much sharing of knowledge: Nene Nwogo noted that her mother, who had been married from Nnewi, was sought after because she specialized in healing sores and poisons in pre-colonial times. Sacrifices were made at her shrine on behalf of those in need of healing. Such healing rituals involved incantations or the exchange of symbolic representations in the form of an image. In this respect Nwogo's mother's shrine transcended even her matrilineage, as Ufuma indigenes rallied around it for healing and

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[229] Simon Ottenberg, "Personal Shrines in Afikpo," *Ethnology* 9:1 (1970) 46-47

[230] Interviews, Mrs. Asiegbunam (Enugwuabo-Ufuma: November 13, 2011)

consequently adopted healing rituals formerly original to the Nnewi.[231] Likewise, another woman married into the clan from Nnobi is reported to have arrived with all the religious paraphernalia for the worship of Idemili, Nnobi's famous water goddess during the early colonial period.[232] In the future it will be interesting to discover how far and wide religious ideas traveled through inter-clan and inter-ethnic marriages in pre-colonial Igboland.

Just as traditional Igbo market days rotated between neighboring village groups, a similar coordination of religious activities fostered much religious borrowing and transformation in pre-colonial Ufuma-Igbo history. Writing in the colonial period, Green alludes to this among the Owerri in her report that "in some instances there is a recognized order in which the ceremonies of different spirits must be performed. The new yam ceremonies which are initiated in Agbaja, by the village of Abuse, must be done before those of the village group of Umu ezeala can start."[233] In this case, a kinship bond is recognized between both villages and thus comes into play in their ritual organization. The same holds true in Ufuma, where neighboring Inyi and Ajalli are socially constructed as younger siblings of Ufuma. They must therefore wait until Ufuma has completed certain religious rites, including the new yam ceremony (marked by the harvesting of yams, symbolizing the New Year in Igbo cosmology), before they can do the

[231] Interviews, Nene Nwogo (Umueji-Ufuma: September 30, 2011)

[232] Interviews, Bedford Nwajagu (Umunebo Ufuma: November 12, 2011)

[233] M.M. Green, *Igbo Village Affairs* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1947) 52

same.[234] The need to coordinate would have encouraged one group to observe another's ceremonies, and this would naturally have led to borrowing.

In addition, Igbo villages were tied together in pre-colonial times in a type of religious relationship through shared contacts with expert religious specialists—such as diviners, medical men and women, and priests and priestesses—who travelled considerable distances on regular tours outside their own independent units, and who also welcomed religious guests from distant lands. Some of these professionals carried out trading activities on the side, while others travelled mainly as traders and carried on little or no religious activities. These professional men were free to travel long distances and to follow their occupations, not because of the power or authority of their own independent units or the social groupings within them, but because the goods that they traded were much desired and because of their associations with the supernatural world.[235]

These specialists were freelance religious agents operating sometimes as part of a network, as observed in the case of the Nri and Aro, and sometimes independently, like Ufuma religious specialists. According to the oral testimony of Chief Ndokwamufu, the chief priest of *Ifejiroku* and other religious specialists in Ufuma including the Priest of *Ajana-Ufuma*, have played an important role since pre-colonial times in ritual cleansing and in the ceremony of the new yam in Inyi and Ajalli villages. In fact, it is understood that if the chief priest of Ajana-Ufuma and Ifejiroku is not present to perform certain rituals, the ceremony will not take place. At other

[234] Interviews, Chief Basil Nwankwo Ndokwamufu (Umueji-Ufuma, November 8 & 12 2011)
[235] Simon Ottenberg, "Ibo [sic] Oracles and Intergroup Relations," 57

times, this religious diffusion has been expressed when Ajalli has requested the *Ofo* of the chief priest of Ajana-Ufuma to swear an oath over a traditional court case.[236]

Oral history suggests that a few Ufuma women were itinerant religious specialists. However, it is clear that they were older, past menopause and usually freelancing between their birth communities and the communities into which they were married.[237] Anama Nwa Nzekwe, a priestess of Ufuma, is remembered as a healer and prophetess who was called upon several times to rid villages of witchcraft as far away as Umunze and Enugwu.[238] The exact extent to which religious ideas were exchanged and perhaps fused during this period is difficult to determine, but such evidence suggests that there were subtle and internally influenced religious transformations in Igbo history.

In various pre-colonial times Ufuma women were the target of freelance religious inquisitions. In the late nineteenth century, for instance, a radical call to sweep Ufuma of witchcraft led to the invitation of the Nri to administer an extensive oath-taking ritual in Umuagu-Ufuma. Husbands asked their wives if they were guilty and children questioned their mothers indoors as they tried to avoid public shame. Chief Obi-okolo pointed that at a similar

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[236] Interviews, Chief Basil Nwankwo Ndokwamufu (Umueji-Ufuma, November 8 & 12 2011); Morrison Okonkwo (Umueji-Ufuma: November 16,' 2011); Bedford Nwajagu (Umunebo Ufuma, November 12, 2011)

[237] Interviews, Chief Basil Nwankwo Ndokwamufu (Umueji-Ufuma, November 8 & 12 2011)

[238] Interviews, Morrison Okonkwo (Umueji-Ufuma: November 16,' 2011); Bedford Nwajagu (Umunebo Ufuma: November 12, 2011); Nwafor Fred Okoli (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: November 3, 15, 28, 2011)

ritual in 1940, the Nri priest administered a concoction that provoked either a negative or a neutral reaction in recipients, determining who was a witch.[239]

Oyiliora Oracle and its priestess Mgbafor Ezira revered in Ufuma and throughout Igboland also come to mind. As the power of Oyiliora's priestess went far and wide, it is said that the benefits that could be obtained from Oyiliora's counsel widened so that different communities in the Igbo region were united under laws and justices of Oyiliora. Igbo communities all sought the aid of Oyiliora when a person or town received less than ordinary visitation of thieves; when farms were being over-run by wild animals; when a town considered that another had molested it beyond pardon; when witchcraft menaced a town; and perhaps the most common was when people decided to find out the cause of the death of their relative. It was believed that the Oracle and its priestess Mgbafor were particularly gifted in calling the dead to speak.[240] Mgbafor, the priestess of Oyiliora is remembered in Ufuma public memory to have visited on more than one occasion to rid the community of thieves devouring yams in their farms.[241]

The Nri and Aro provide further examples of the transformations that occurred through the migrations of religious specialists around Igboland on the eve of colonial rule. There is ample evidence on Nri and Aro religious activities in Igboland and it suggests that before the coming of European missionaries to southeastern Nigeria, the Igbo were striving towards some unified religious organization centered around the Nri priest and the oracle *Ibinukpabi* (the chief altar

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[239] Perhaps the bean ordeal recalled in several parts of Igboland used during the witch-hunts of the trans-Atlantic slave trade era. Interviews, Chief A. Obi-okolo, Umuagu-Ufuma (December 11, 2011)

[240] Interviews, Chief Basil Nwankwo Ndokwamufu (Umueji-Ufuma: November 8 & 12 2011); Edward O.C. Okolo, "Mgbafor Ezira: The Priestess of Oyiliora Oracle," *Department of Religion, University of Nigeria, Nsukka M.A Thesis* (June 1973) 16

[241] Interviews, Chief Basil Nwankwo Ndokwamufu (Umueji-Ufuma: November 8 & 12 2011)

erected for *Chukwu*, the Supreme Being in the whole of Igboland). The Nri Priest was solicited in different parts of Igboland to administer sacrifices whenever a taboo was broken, whenever the earth deity *Ala* was defied, or when a title was to be conferred. This meant that there was usually a representative of Nri religious cult in various communities of Igboland. These representatives administered religious rites and played intermediary roles between Nri and various Igbo localities in religious, social, and political matters.[242] This unfolding process of religious unification was likely interrupted and corrupted by the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

According to Njoku and Anozie[243], the legacies of the Nri 'civilization' were the "uniform spread of certain cultural symbolisms all over Igboland namely, the Ozo, Ofo, Ifejioku and Ikenga" religious titles and festivals. Onwuejeogwu adds that the tradition of Nri also includes the development of "the poetic language of mythology, the invention of agriculture and iron working, adoption of the four-day week and the evolution of kingship."[244] The so-called Nri civilization also had some influence beyond the borders of Igboland, as among the Igala, where the Nri similarly administered the Ofo, a ritual symbol of authority. This was also true of the Kingdom of Benin.[245] For a nation considered to be highly "egalitarian" and

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[242] K.O Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta: An Introduction to the Economics and Political History of Nigeria* (London: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1956) 44 Also see D. Forde and G.I. Jones, *The Igbo and Ibibio-Speaking Peoples of Southeastern Nigeria* (London: International African Institute, 1950) 7

[243] Onwuka Njoku is Professor Emeritus of History while Late. F.N Anozie was a Professor of Cultural Archaeology both at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

[244] M. A Onwuejeogwu, *Nri, Igbo Communities seen from within: Oral Histories on Nri, the Holy City in Elizabeth Isichei Igbo Worlds: An Anthology of Oral Histories* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1978)21

[245] O.N Njoku and F.N Anozie, "High Points of Igbo Civilization: The Nri Period, in *Groundwork of Igbo History* edited by A.E Afigbo. (Lagos, Vista Books Ltd., 1992) 188ff. Equiano also makes

"individualistic,"[246] these were signs of major religious transformations before the advent of colonial and missionary interruptions.

By 1650 the so-called Aro 'civilization' replaced the Nri 'civilization.' The Aro people formed an almost exclusive tribe of traders scattered throughout Igboland. Possessing a genius for organization, they drew not just the Igbo but also the Ibibio and Ekoi into their sphere of influence. Each region was under the management of an Aro community. The Eze-Aro, always the eldest living freeborn male who could trace descent from Okenachi, founder of the royal line, was considered the senior Otusi, no matter his age, and was the permanent president of the Council. The basis of the council's power was largely religious. Within two generations after the formation of this confederacy, Aro expansion reached its height. Colonies then included Aro-Ndizuogu near the Awka-okigwe and Ndikelionwu and Ajalli, both next to Ufuma.[247] Like the Nri, the Aro wielded commercial and cultural hegemony and control over most of Igboland and their influence transpired in the religious realm.

By this time, the Igbo as a language group had appropriated a mystic/religious system of writing, *nsibiri*,[248] and evolved a military organization manned by the famous Abam warriors,

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reference to the Nri culture in Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* edited by Paul Edwards (London: Heinemann, 1967)

[246] See B.I Chukwukere "Individualism: an Aspect of Igbo Religion" and D.I Nwoga "The Chi: Individualism and Igbo Religion" in *Igbo Traditional Life, Culture and Literature* edited by M.J.C Echeruo and E.N Obiechina (The Conch: Vol 3, No. 2, 1971) 109-120.

[247] "inside Aro," *Nigeria, A Quarterly Magazine of General Interest* 53 (1957)111 ff

[248] "Nsibiri was used by members of the Ekpe secret society and could not be read by a non-member. If somebody was being initiated into the secret club, certain characters would be drawn on his left and right feet which only members could read and interpret. See Madueke Anyanku's oral history in Isichei's *Igbo World.* 135ff

who were deployed to different parts of Igboland as needed.[249] At the height of Aro supremacy, the oracle *Chukwu* was the supreme court of appeal in the region. It was the primary means by which the Aro people maintained ascendancy over surrounding tribes. It was a magnet that drew riches to them and the chief means by which they extracted money from clients and obtained slaves. While the influence of the oracle and its owners was strongest in the heart of Iboland, its fame went as far as the Gambia and as far south as the Congo. P.A. Talbot, writing in 1932, notes that the Igbo, especially chiefs, made frequent "pilgrimages to Aro Chukwu to consult the oracle" (*Ibinukpabi*).[250] Their level of religious influence and legitimacy was such that the missionary and British colonial conquest of Igboland was tied to the conquest of the Aro.[251]

What is more, inter-ethnic wars also fostered religious borrowing in the precolonial period. A colonial intelligence report written in the 1920s noted that the early history of several towns around Awka, including Ufuma, was overladen with stories of "innumerable wars that took place between each town and its neighbors. The greatest animosity appears to have been directed against the Aros, against whom nearly every town in the [Awka] group fought at one time or

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[249] Okoro Ijoma, O.N Njoku and Felicia Ekejiuba, "High Point of Igbo Civilization: The Arochukwu Period" in *Groundwork of Igbo History* edited by A.E Afigbo. (Lagos, Vista Books Ltd., 1992)198 ff

[250] P.A Talbot, *Tribes of the Niger Delta: Their Religions and Custom* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1932) 22, 108ff

[251] The Aro also had a system of acquiring slaves through their bogus judicial court system where 'criminals' were brought in from parts of Igboland were convicted. It was said a tunnel ran through the shrine through convicts were transported to the shore of Old Calabar to be sold as slaves until the British-Aro Expedition of 1901-2. Today the site of the "Long juju" is a tourist attraction in Igboland.

another, with results that were usually unfortunate to the Ibos."[252] However, all wars were not directed at the common enemy, the Aro. Ufuma oral sources points at numerous other rifts between sub-clans and also between Ufuma and its immediate neighbors in the pre-colonial period.[253]

Ufuma oral tradition confirms this, with accounts of wars, for example, with the Inyinese in Awgu division. The cause of one particular war was that

> "an Ufuma chief—late Chief Mba Nvume—borrowed some money from the chief of Inyinese and paid him back later, leaving some amount worth about ten shillings unpaid. Anyanebe aku the creditor then went to one of the juju priests and obtained some charms, which he craftily put into Chief Mba Nvume's barn full of yams just harvested. The creditor then sent a message to chief Mba telling him that all his yams are now owned by the gods and that he must neither touch them nor allow anybody from his house to enter into the barn. The belief in those days was that once something had been handed over to the gods, whoever touches or eats them will be killed by the gods. On hearing this, the Chief called all the heads of the family groups and related the story to them. They all felt that the chief and the whole clan had been badly insulted and that war must be declared on the people of Inyinese. The other villages in Ufuma were informed at once because chief Mba was at that time the ruler of the whole clan. The war went on for seven years although it went on intermittently. It must be remembered that wars were not fought on Eke days as it was regarded as a day of truce. And also it must be remembered that Inyinese and Ufuma were brothers, although Inyinese decided to move to Agwu division to settle. The Manu River separates Ufuma clan from Awgu division."[254]

Although both parties sustained considerable losses, the war ended in favor of Ufuma. The intermittent war brought much hardship and misery to both parties because farm crops were

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[252] NAE CSO26/2 29827

[253] Interviews, Bedford Nwajagu (Umunebo Ufuma: November 12, 2011); Nwafor Fred Okoli (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: November 3, 15, 28, 2011)

[254] Interviews, Ernest Asiegbunam (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: November 9 & 11, 2011)

destroyed, many houses were burned, many people were either killed or taken into captivity, and the trade which had existed between the clans came practically to a standstill.[255]

Inter-village and inter-ethnic wars like this had a religious dimension. In preparation for such wars, oral tradition opines that sacrifices were usually offered to the clan deities including the goddess Ajana-Ufuma, and that many rituals were performed on the warriors before they went out to fight. Weapons of war included machetes, sharp edged sticks, and specials clubs called *Nkpo Ogwu* with thorns on their ends; all of these were ritually commissioned. Oral tradition also provides evidence of religious cross-borrowings among Igbo communities on the occasion of these wars, for the conquerors of a clan or village would usually incorporate its ritual symbols into their own. What specific religious ideas were exchanged through this process is an open question, but it is clear that such incidents provided opportunities for spiritual cross-referencing in pre-colonial times, where the power and authority of a clan was often considered a measure of the stamina of its sustaining spiritual forces.[256]

The general atmosphere of warfare in the pre-colonial period, often inflamed by the trans-Atlantic slave trade, created ample opportunities for significant social change. This allowed African men and women to challenge the religious status quo in Igboland. In Ufuma, like the rest of Igboland, a new priestly class emerged whose members were known as Osus.

In pre-colonial times Ufuma men and women transformed their religion to suit new conditions in several ways. The violence that accompanied the growth of the trans-Atlantic slave

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[255] E. O. Asiegbunam, "Western Education and Social Changes in Ufuma Clan in Eastern Nigeria" Department of Education, Nigerian College of Technology Zaria. TT & S 1960/61 p. 17

[256] Interviews, Ernest Asiegbunam (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: November 9 & 11, 2011)

trade presented a number of security concerns for the Igbo population as a whole and for Ufuma in particular.[257] It called for a new set of safety rules that included religious defenses. Ufuma sources note that violent acts were witnessed quite often in this period, as raiders and kidnappers stripped people of their freedom, warriors fought lengthy and bloody battles in "disputes over nothing," and independent bandits operating under the influence of the Aro attacked and robbed Ufuma traders on the long distance route to the Onitsha waterside.[258] The enormous demands for human heads during this era meant that every person had a monetary value and was always under threat. As elsewhere in Igboland, the Aro introduced new systems of punishment during the eighteenth century that culminated in enslavement and sale to traders. This major transformation in traditional legal systems meant that previous practices of ritual cleansing and atonement through sacrifices for crimes became replaced with enslavement in Ufuma, and slaves became the chief currency for exchanges.[259]

In Igboland this period of unrest led to the rise of a priestly class who were also referred to as outcasts and to the rise of new and modified deities. Nowhere has this phenomenon remained in the public memory of its people more than in Ufuma, where informants recall the prevalence of *umu arusi*, "children of the deity," in the community. Although several of my informants

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[257] For accounts of this in various parts of West Africa, see Greene, *Gender, Ethnicity, and Social Change on the Upper Slave Coast: A Hisoty of the Anlo-Ewe; Law, The Slave Coast of West Africa, 1550-1750: The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on an African Society;* Miller*, Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade 1730-1830;* James F. Searing, West African Slavery and Atlantic Commerce: The Senegal River Valley, 1700-1860 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993).

[258] Interviews: Bedford Nwajagu (Umunebo Ufuma: November 12, 2011); Nwafor Fred Okoli (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: November 3, 15, 28, 2011); Interviews, Ernest Asiegbunam (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: November 9 & 11, 2011)

[259] See Walter-Hawthorne, "The Production of Slaves Where There Was No State: The Guinea-Bissau Region, 1450-1815," *Slavery and Abolition* 20:2 (1999)

preferred not to talk about the Osus, who were known in the past as religious outcasts, they noted very clearly that one of the key strategies for resisting the slave trade and the increasing assaults of Aro agents stationed in Ndikelionwu and Ajalli was to become an Osu.

Three social classes emerged in Ufuma in the precolonial period. The citizens of the first class were known as *Nwadiana* or *Nwa mmadu*, free born residents. Those of the second class were known as *Umu amuda* or slaves; it consisted of those who were captured during inter-tribal and inter-clan wars during the heyday of the slave trade. A third class, which increased in number during this time, was made up of those known as *Umu-Ajana* or *Umu arusi*, sons or children of the earth deity (Ajana being the name of the principal deity to which Ufuma citizens ran for safety during this difficult time).[260] The people of this third category are sometimes referred to as "Osus," descendants of one who was dedicated to a god or goddess.

The custom of dedicating oneself or people to the gods precedes the period of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. It originated in the idea of a sacrifice intended to abate the anger of a god, or to strike a bargain with one, or to pay one tribute. For instance, if an influential man wanted children but had none, a prophet or prophetess might predict that if he dedicated a person under his control to a certain god, he would have many children. The overpowering desire for children would not allow the man to hesitate to choose from among his slaves one to be dedicated to the god. Some war captains also made such dedications to guarantee victory in war,but the people who were dedicated could not be free born.

Soon after the dedication, the person became an Osu and from then on he and his descendants were excluded from taking a leading part in the government and from participating

[260] Interviews, Ernest Asiegbunam (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: November 9 & 11, 2011); Also see E. O. Asiegbunam, "Western Education and Social Changes in Ufuma Clan in Eastern Nigeria" Department of Education, Nigerian College of Technology Zaria. TT & S 1960/61 p. 13

in certain communal activities such as dances and sports. The Osus and their descendants were also barred from intermarrying with any other class. The association between the Osus and other people was strictly limited. Nobody dared quarrel or fight with an Osu, so that if an Osu got irritated to the point of fighting, a free citizen must run away. There was an Ufuma tradition that if a free citizen caused a drop of blood to run out of the body of an Osu by mistake, either in playing or in fighting, that free citizen was bound to dedicate another person to the god to whom the Osu belonged. It was mainly to avoid this expensive penalty that every free citizen refrained from any association with the Osu class. The Osus had no fear of loss of property. Where they happened to have property, it was very safe, for no free person dared touch anything belonging to an Osu, since everything they had belonged indirectly to their deity. The general fear of the deities to which an Osu was "betrothed" made Osus social outcasts in the pre-colonial period, so that they married from within their own circle or from the Osus in another clan, since a free born person dreaded the jealousy of the deity.[261]

During the period of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, this pre-existing tradition, which had been used to redeem religious vows or present religious collateral to court a god's blessings earlier in Ufuma history, became the chief means for resisting slave traders and raiders. Ufuma oral history suggests that as an increasing number of citizens ran to the deity Ajana-Ufuma during this period to escape the invasions and attacks of slave raiding parties in the villages, this earth deity became more and more powerful, displacing some other deities but enhancing the prestige of others

[261] Interviews, Ernest Asiegbunam (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: November 9 & 11, 2011); Also see E. O. Asiegbunam, "Western Education and Social Changes in Ufuma Clan in Eastern Nigeria" Department of Education, Nigerian College of Technology Zaria. TT & S 1960/61 p. 15

during the era of the slave trade.[262] Ajana-Ufuma soon rose to the ranks as religious commander in chief among other deities in Ufuma, shifting its role from a fertility deity to a protective deity, with new rules of conducts for its betrothed and also procedures for courting its services.

While the Igbo had an indigenous system of slavery that dates back to prehistoric times, it is difficult to tell whether 'witchcraft' beliefs pre-existed the slave trade period or whether they evolved as a belief system to create a viable market for indigenous slavery and the trans-Saharan slave trade in the period before the 18th century. There is ample evidence to suggest that 'witchcraft' beliefs and practices impacted the course of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the late 18th century and in the 19th century. In fact, Thornton mentions the transfer of West/Central African 'witchcraft' beliefs to the New World in the early period of the slave trade.[263] In this section I argue that witchcraft beliefs and practices (*amosu*, as they are known in the Igbo language) were accepted within society until the period of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, when the market for humans created the occasion for the demonization of witchcraft beliefs as justification for enslavement. For what it's worth, as a rule my informants, Christians and traditionalists alike, admired the abilities generally attributed to an an *amosu* or a *dibia* (spiritual diviner and healer), such as knowing what is going on hundreds of miles away, or being able to impose one's will upon humans afar off.

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[262] Interviews, Bedford Nwajagu (Umunebo Ufuma: November 12, 2011); Nwafor Fred Okoli (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: November 3, 15, 28, 2011); Ernest Asiegbunam (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: November 9 & 11, 2011)

[263] John Thornton, "Cannibals, Witches, and Slave Traders in the Atlantic World" *The William and Mary Quarterly,* Vol. 60, Issue 2, 1994 (accessed Nov. 29, 2009) p. 16ff

A simple parsing of the term *amosu* yields the two words "ama" and "osu," coined for the purpose of characterizing individuals whose supernatural powers are efficacious and know no boundaries. Taken together, "ama-osu" means one who does not have any regard for, or who defies the powers of, an Osu.[264] The early Igbo considered the Osu priestly caste so sacred that the audacity of certain individuals who plied their supernatural trade against everybody, including Osus, baffled them.[265] This trade involved the exploitation of spiritual powers through occult means to change things for good or for ill, at near or far distances.[266] While it is difficult (at this point) to investigate further the accuracy of the above deconstruction of the term *amosu*, there is no denying the fact that Western cultural imperialism, especially Christianity, influenced indigenous Igbo understanding of what an *amosu* was. Nowadays, the tendency in Igboland (as in the West) is to regard witches as the early European missionaries did, as members of the cult of Satan (the ideology of a single evil force similar to the Christian construction of Satan did not exist in indigenous Igbo cosmology), and to engage in gender stereotypes by believing that *amosu* are all women and by accusing women of witchcraft. This is very problematic, because the term *amosu* evidently does not imply any gender specification. It is neither feminine nor masculine, but neutral.

While *amosus*, it was believed, could harness spiritual powers to harm others, their attacks were considered a form of spiritual illness that could be cured by powerful *dibias* who

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[264] In the realm of the religious, the Osu were descendants of a priestly class dedicated to deities in Igboland to administer between the community and the deity. Today, this class of Igbo citizens is considered slaves because of their association with the deities.

[265] Sylvester's Online Blog, http://www.capitolhillblue.com/node/11607 "The Osu Caste System in Igboland" Oct. 17, 2008 (accessed Dec. 11, 2012).

[266] Phillip Jenkins, "Notes from the Global Church" *Christian Century*. Vol. 125 No. 24, December 2, 2008. p. 45

countered 'witchcraft' effects in Igbo communities. The existence of "*ndi dibia amosu*"[267] in Ufuma validates this point and suggests that witches were accommodated in most Igbo societies until the slave trade created a venue for their exploitation.[268] A *dibia amosu* was said to cure witchcraft effects by administering ointments and herbs, especially to children who were suspected of being possessed. Children were most often the ones suspected of bewitchment and subjected to exorcism because they were thought to be gullible and lacking the capacity to tame or control supernatural powers or giftings.[269] This changed during the period of the slave trade, when more adult men and women began to be accused of witchcraft.

Meanwhile, a careful look at the regions where *amosu* prevailed might be revealing. For instance, Forde and Jones point to the prevalence of 'witchcraft' beliefs among the Western Igbo and along the southern and eastern borders.[270] While this might just be a coincidence, it seems plausible that witchcraft beliefs occurred mostly in riverine areas that had the most contact with the slave traders because the wars between the Igbo of western Igboland and their Benin neighbors during the period of the slave trade engendered 'witchcraft' beliefs or intensified them in western Igboland. In fact, Meek's report on Igbo 'witchcraft' argues against the universal diffusion of 'witchcraft' belief and practice in Igboland. Interestingly, Green discovered no

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[267] Phrase meaning: *dibia*= traditional religious specialist and *amosu*=witchcraft. Taken together *ndi dibia amosu* refers to traditional religious specialists invested in exorcising witchcraft

[268] Patrick Iroegbu "Healing Insanity: Skills and Expert Knowledge of Igbo Healers" *CODESRIA; Africa Development,* Vol. XXX, No.3, 2005. p. 83

[269] Interviews, Ebere Nwafor (Umuagu-Ufuma: October 10, 2011)

[270] Daryell, Forde and G.I Jones, *The Ibo and Ibibio-Speaking Peoples of Southeastern Nigeria* (London, Oxford University Press, 1950) p. 26

traces of it in Agbaja, and Leith-Ross found none in Nneato, near Okigwe.[271] Such evidence is not conclusive, but it supports my thesis that 'witchcraft' belief among the Igbo emerged quite recently or took on a demonized form in the period of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

It is important to bear in mind that this period witnessed the commercialization of Igbo religion, and specifically the economic exploitation of witchcraft accusations to feed the need for slaves. Under the influence of the Aro (who, as we have seen, monopolized one of the most powerful deities among the Igbo, *Chukwu* and its oracle *Ibinukpabi* in Arochukwu), 'witchcraft' became less tolerated in several Igbo societies. As a priestly group, the Aro lorded it over their neighbors. They presided over religious affairs in Igboland and through the Aro oracle *Ibinukpabi*, Arochukwu served as the court of appeal for many people of Southeastern Nigeria.[272]

Interestingly, some of the cases brought before the oracle were to ascertain the truth or falsity of witchcraft accusations in the region ranging from Igboland to the Niger Delta region. Talbot mentions that the Ikwo and Ohafia used to send those accused of witchcraft to the Aro Chuku oracle, as indeed many did throughout the whole region under Aro influence.[273] While in the past the oracle would demand a certain rite to cure an accused *amosu* of witchcraft, as recalled in Umuagu-Ufuma oral history,[274] the slave trade era created a market for the sale of such individuals and hence a demonization of witchcraft practices. K.O. Dike points that the

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[271] Elizabeth Isichei, "Ibo and Christian Beliefs; Some Aspects of a Theological Encounter", *African Affairs,* Vol. 68, No. 271 (April 1961) p. 129

[272] Don C. Ohadike, "The Decline of Slavery among the Igbo People" in *The End of Slavery in Africa* edited by Suzanne Miers and Richard Roberts (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988) p. 447

[273] Talbot, *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria* Vol. II, 215

[274] Interviews, Chief A. Obi-okolo (Umuagu-Ufuma: December 11, 2011)

slaves sold at Bonny were acquired mainly through the system of trade and the oracle based at Arochukwu.[275] At Arochukwu, the accused was either killed by the deity or sold as a slave to slave-buyers on the coast of Calabar, unless he happened to be very rich and could buy his freedom.[276]

There is no evidence in Igbo historical discourse to suggest that such brutal punishment for dealing with witchcraft existed before the slave trade era. It is plausible to argue that before then, a person "bitten by 'witchcraft" (*Ita amosu*), as the Igbo people explained the process of possession, could be cured by a *dibia* or through oath taking[277] to denounce such diabolic

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[275] Onwuka Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, An Introduction to the Economic and Political History of Nigeria, 1830-1885* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956) p. 40

[276] P. Amaury Talbot, *Tribes of the Niger Delta: Their Religions and Custom,* (London: Frank Cass and Co. Ltd, 1932) p. 108. Talbot writing much later in the colonial period notes that the oracle declared a man innocent. This might have not been so during the period of the slave trade when the European ships and slave traders on the coast of Calabar pressured the Aro to supply slaves.

[277] Kingsley makes mention of the Mbiam oath ordeal that was prominent in the late nineteenth century. In Kingsley's words the Mbiam is not poisonous, nor is its use confined, as the use of beans is, entirely to witch palaver; but it is the most respected and dreaded of all oaths, and from its decision there is but one appeal, the appeal open to all condemned persons, but rarely made – the appeal to Long Juju. This Long Juju means almost certain death, and before it a severe frightening that is worse to a "negro mind" than mere physical torture. The Mbiam oath formula Kingsley was able to secure in the upper districts of the Calabar and Igboland. One form if it runs thus, and it is recited before swallowing the drink made of filth and blood:-
"If I have been guilty of this crime,
"If I have gone and sought the sick one's hurt,
"If I have sent another to seek the sick one's hurt,
"If I have employed any one to make charms or to cook bush,
"Or to put anything in the road,
"Or to touch his cloth,
"Or to touch his yams,
"Or to touch his goats,
"Or to touch his fowl,
"Or to touch his children,

association. One of the *amosu* ordeals mentioned by Talbot that may have vanished during the period of the trans-Atlantic trade involved the land deity Ani. Talbot notes,

> "When any bad sickness falls upon a town, Ani orders her priest, who is usually the head chief, to call the people together and find out the cause of the trouble."[278] Then kola nuts are laid upon the place for offerings. Each man kneels down and picks up one with his lips, then chops it and goes away. This is done until the guilty man's turn comes. When a wizard bends down to take Ale's [Ani's] kola, the Earth Spirit catches him and he is forced to confess how he spread the pestilence. Before all the people, he must speak out saying: "I killed this man, I killed that man. That woman also I slew" until all his crimes are known. When everything has been told, his body swells up and he dies. No man touches him. It is by Ale's [Ani's] power that he is slain."[279]

Such a system could not have benefitted the Aro slave traders and might have been deliberately suppressed. Evidence shows that new forms of 'witch-hunt' ordeals relying less on the supernatural and more on the decisions and plotting of priests emerged during the slave trade period. It was during this period that *amosu* intolerance heightened and witch hunts became highly commercialized. This dubious means of hunting down *amosus* became diffused in Igboland during the slave trade era and continued into the colonial period.

An *amosu* was discovered in two different ways in Igboland during this time. One was through confession and the other was through the accusation of 'victims.' Self-accusation or witchcraft confession generally took place in the most open of all Igbo spaces, the marketplace

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"If I have prayed for his hurt,
"If I have thought to hurt him in my heart,
"If I have any intention to hurt him,
"If I ever, at any time, do any of these things,
"Or employ others to do these things,
"Then, Mbiam! Thou deal with me."
Mary Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa,* 465

[278] Talbot, *Tribes of the Niger Delta,* p. 144

[279] Talbot, *Tribes of the Niger Delta,* p. 144

'*afia*,' or else on a deathbed.[280] Bastian points out that the activity of 'naming names' was an important part of the confession ritual, after which an *amosu* may be stoned to death in the village square.[281] However, sometimes the self-accused amosu was dying when making a confession and even boasting of his or her conquests, rather than trying to expiate guilt.[282]

The trial of one accused of witchcraft involved a special ordeal of drinking poison. Once a single source, or a group of potential sources, had been located through the spiritual mediumship of a *dibia*, the relatives of the afflicted person would take the case to the elders of the town. The Obi would then decree that the accused must take the sasswood[283] poison ordeal or the esere bean ordeal. The accused had to drink a cup of sasswood mixture at the break of day, just as a nocturnal *amosu*'s power was ebbing away, and survive for four market weeks or twenty-eight days in order to be found innocent. In Meek's account, he notes that the accused "would be told that he had been accused of being an *amosu* and must be prepared therefore by daybreak to stand his trial by the sasswood[284] ordeal. The masker would then depart, leaving a deputy to see that the woman did not drink any oil," as oil was believed to reverse the effects of sasswood.[285] If the accused person survived, she would be allowed to dance in the marketplace,

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[280] Interviews, Ebere Nwafor (Umuagu-Ufuma: October 10, 2011)

[281] Misty Bastian, *The World as Marketplace,* 239-240

[282] Misty Bastian, *The World as Marketplace,* 241-242

[283] Bastian points that Orachi is the name of the sasswood or bitterwood tree (Erythrophleum Guineense) from which the poison bark used in this oracular decoction is taken. Orachi translates into public spirit.

[284] Sass=bad; sass water=rough water; sass surf=bad surf. See Mary Kinsley, 464

[285] C. K Meek, *Law and Authority in a Nigeria Tribe* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937) p. 227

wearing white chalk and all her finery, telling her story of false accusation to everyone she encountered.[286]

Undergoing the *esere* bean ordeal was very much like drinking the sasswood concoction. The beans of the *esere* plant were ground up and boiled in water until the mixture became concentrated. When administered in large doses, these drinks (sasswood and *esere* bean) could cause serious harm to health, and often times led to death.[287] However, Kingsley notes that there was always a way out of the sasswood or *esere* bean drink ordeals. This involved "squaring the witch-doctor, so that in the case of the sass-wood drink it is allowed to settle before administration and in the bean that you get a very light dose."[288] If accused persons denied their guilt, and refused the ordeal, they were tortured until they not only acknowledged their guilt but named their accomplices in the "murder," for among the Igbo 'witchcraft' was a form of diabolic murder. The differences identified with witchcraft accusations and punishments between the period of the slave trade and before evidences religious and social change in pre-colonial Ufuma and Igboland.

Religious Transformations during Early Colonial Rule

Religious change became more drastic on the immediate eve of colonial rule. For one, the period between 1850 and 1910 witnessed the winding down of the slave trade and the dwindling

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[286] Misty Bastian, *The World as Marketplace,* 243-245

[287] Talbot, *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria* Vol. II, 215

[288] Mary Kinsley, *Travels in West Africa,* 464

of its accompanying anxieties, anxieties which fueled religious panic in the Igbo country in the pre-colonial period. Secondly, the arrival of European missionaries to the region brought about change that was more directed at the religious worldview of the Igbo. Although this new change was mostly engineered by external factors, the tradition of constant religious change and centuries of indigenous conversations and dealings on spiritual matters (discussed in this chaper) shaped Ufuma-Igbo receptivity to Christianity. Robin Horton gives a hint at this when he explains indigenous religion as an explanatory system wired to adjust to particular set of circumstances and adapts to change over time.[289] Thirdly, the broadening communication and transportation network arising in the immediate colonial era intensified Igbo religio-cultural change as more and more ethnic groups interacted on a broader playing field.

The practice of exogamy ensured that women continued to play important roles in the transportation of deities across the region into the early colonial period. This explains the amplified patronage of Ogwugwu, a deity that came to rival the Earth Goddess in Igbo cosmology in the immediate eve and early period of colonial rule. In Ufuma, the deity Ogwugwu was introduced to the clan by an unnamed woman married from Onitsha just before the coming of the white man.[290] She had set up a shrine for Ogwugwu beside the family compound and made sacrifices occasionally. Although Ogwugwu did not gain popularity in all of Ufuma at this time, being mostly remembered in the Umueji-Ufuma sub-clan, the early period of colonial rule witnessed continued changes that will ultimately reconstitute indigenous rituals and religious practices not only in Ufuma but across Igboland. For instance, while Ogwugwu was formerly constructed as the female daughter of the Earth Goddess among the Delta Igbo groups, it is

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[289] Robin Horton, "African Conversion," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 41:2 (1971) 102

[290] Interviews, Chief Basil Nwankwo Ndokwamufu (Umueji-Ufuma: November 8 & 12 2011)

transformed into a male deity in other parts of Igboland like Mbaise in Imo State.[291] It was also in this period that the ideology of Mami Wata (a water goddess of beauty) emerges in Ufuma religious history. Mami Wata is constructed as a foreign female deity (believed to have travelled from the Niger Delta area) with extra-ordinary powers to charm and beauty. It was generally believed that she dwelt in the stream by Umuonyiuka-Ufuma appearing only at intervals to give a message. This goddess was courted by Ufuma men and women in search of wealth in the early colonial period.[292] What is more, like in the pre-colonial period, Ufuma men and women will continue to invent new deities and restructure old ones to meet pertinent religious needs of their community. This was the case with Oyimoyi, a deity invented first in the era of the slave trade to preserve the community from invaders and again reinvented to help Ufuma women conceive and bare sons at a time when an estimated sixty percent of the children born in Umueji-Ufuma were girls in the 1940s.[293]

Religious transformations with regard to witch-finding mechanisms had come full circle by the late pre-colonial period. Isichei draws our attention to the moral dilemmas of British presence in the 1890s over this issue in Onitsha when a girl died and her family "consulted a *dibia*, who in turn accused a slave girl of being a witch. She laid the blame on another, who then admitted the charge, and claimed she was one of a band of witches." This led to a witchcraft panic in Onitsha. The Royal Niger Company officials intervened, and took the witches for trial at

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[291] Ogbu U. Kalu, "Gender Ideology in Igbo Religion: The Changing Religious Role of Women in Igboland," *Africa: Revista trimestrale di studi e documentazione dell'Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente* 46:2 (1991) 188; Also see Edmund Ilogu, "Worship in Ibo Traditional Religion," *Numen* 20:3 (1973) 232ff

[292] Interviews, Chief J.C. Mogbo (Umuonyiuka-Ufuma: September 30 and November 8, 2011); Bedford Nwajagu (Umunebo Ufuma: November 12, 2011)

[293] Interviews, Morrison Okonkwo (Umueji-Ufuma: November 16,' 2011)

the Supreme Court in Asaba, Delta State. The judge was faced with a dilemma: to admit the charges, and so acknowledge a belief in witchcraft, or to reject them and cause an uproar. He took the first course, and the witches were expelled from Onitsha.[294]

By the colonial period, when the trade in slaves was no longer lucrative, these patterns of witch hunting had become less demonized and more commercialized, so that an accused was made to pay a fine instead of being sold to slave ships, or cured by a *dibia* versed in such medicines. Although the outlet for selling slaves had been reduced exponentially, 'witchcraft' accusations became a means for extorting funds from members of the society. In a detailed archival record of the proceedings of the Agaba juju in Onitsha District, it was reported that some chiefs made 50 pounds per day through the process of witchcraft accusation and ordeal involving sasswood in 1949.[295]

In 1918, the outbreak of influenza provided an opportunity for 'witchcraft' trials by esere bean ordeal on a grand scale. Although there are no quantitative records for Igboland, Talbot points that it led to the execution of many *amosus*. In the Eket district alone, about 500 deaths took place. It seems probable that the sickness was first ascribed to witchcraft, and then advantage was taken of the numerous deaths due to the epidemic to hold ordeals in large numbers. At this point, "witches" were pointed out by the *dibia* during juju dances.[296]

Some Catholic priests ran witcheries for witches who had been turned out of their villages in Aguleri. Leith-Ross notes that many were old women whom no one wanted to be bothered with, so they were promptly dubbed witches and driven out of their homes. She also

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[294] Elizabeth Isichei, "Ibo and Christian Beliefs; Some Aspects of a Theological Encounter", *African Affairs,* Vol. 68, No. 271 (April 1961) p. 129

[295] NAE ONDIST 12/1/2130

[296] Talbot, *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria* Vol. II, 216

notes that they seemed to live amicably together in this special village under a head-witch, having their own gardens and small sums contributed by the mission for their needs.[297] Omoyajowo documents the itinerations of a "witch hunt group" following the Second World War. The Atinga "witch-hunt" group originated from Northern Ghana and toured Togoland, Dahomey and Nigeria from the mid 1940s until they were banned by the British government in 1951. Before their ban, they operated in open places, where they built an altar and danced wildly to drums beaten rhythmically, eventually falling into trances to discover witches. They prepared mixtures of blood, water, and kolanuts, which the accused were made to drink, very similar to the ordeals practiced in the slave trade period.[298]

In more contemporary times, witches are simply left alone by government and society, as Ebere notes in her interview.[299] But even before the Atinga and similar activities were banned from Nigeria by the British colonial government, the Christian church was already seriously debating the issue of 'witchcraft.' African spiritual churches like *Uka Ekpere Ufuma* play important role in exorcising 'witchcraft' among the Igbo as we will see in chapter 5. In fact, the practice of, and belief in, witchcraft became the business of church politics as early as the colonial period, with the emergence of Africanized churches.[300] At one important conference, African Christian leaders questioned the silence of main-line churches over the issue of 'witchcraft' and challenged the church declaration that included witchcraft beliefs among

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[297] Sylvia Leith-Ross, *African Conversation Piece* (London: Hutchinson and Co, 1943) 119

[298] Omoyajowo, *Witches,* 23-24

[299] Interviews, Ebere Nwafor (Umuagu-Ufuma: October 10, 2011)

[300] Leny Lagerwerf, *Witchcraft, Sorcery, and Spirit Possession; Pastoral Responses in Africa* (Zimbabwe; Mambo Press, 1987)

African heresies.[301] While this was happening, Africanized/indigenous churches and the charismatic wing of the Catholic Church emerged to address the question of witchcraft in Igboland. In an attempt to forestall "witches and wizards" from preying on "Christians," most of these churches unashamedly resort to spiritual warfare, deploying different weapons from the church's historic arsenal of prayer, exorcism and anointing.

Conclusion

This study has argued that the changes that occurred during the period of the trans-Atlantic slave trade were not the only factor engendering religious transformations in Igboland on the eve of colonial rule. Rather, the age-long institution of marriage and the migrations of freelance religious specialists across Igboland provided ample opportunities for cross-ethnic religious borrowings among communities over time. In the future, it will be interesting to investigate how this was particularly so in Igbo communities that shared borders with more centralized states, including the western and northern Igbo peoples who had common boundaries with the Benin and Igala Kingdoms. Within these Igbo communities a natural system of exchanges and cultural borrowings allowed for a rich mix of religious and cultural ideas, evidenced in the complex title-taking system and a variety of religious rituals in the region.[302] This study has also argued that

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[301] Lagerwerf, *Witchcraft, Sorcery, and Spirit Possesion,* p.14ff

[302] NAE CSO 26/4; For further readings see Don. C. Ohadike, *Anioma: A Social History of the Western Igbo People* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994); Austin J. Shelton, *The Igbo-Igala Borderland: Religion and Social Control in Indigenous African Colonialism* (Albany: State

inter-ethnic wars between Igbo communities contributed to the religious transformation going on before colonial rule. More so, Ufuma perceptions of witchcraft were reshaped during the period of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, during which the Igbo were undergoing an epoch of heightened witchcraft intolerance leading to the execution and enslaving of men, women, and children. Likewise, the localizing of shrines owes a lot to the period of the slave trade, when each household had its own shrine to minimize outdoor religious activities for the sake of safety.

University of New York Press, 1971); J.S. Boston, *The Igala Kingdom* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1968).

CHAPTER THREE

GENDER AND THE RELIGIOUS ENCOUNTER BETWEEN UFUMA AND CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES

> *The catechist asked my husband during this exam, "If you had the chance to save only one person from a major fire, who will you save, your wife or your mother?"*[303]

Introduction

This chapter retells the history of Christianity in Igboland from the perspective of women, paying attention to the way indigenous women were missionized and the gender dynamics of conversion among the Ufuma-Igbo. The chapter argues that the CMS missionaries deployed to Ufuma made it a point of duty not only to challenge indigenous belief systems but also overturn traditional gender roles. Drawing on archival and oral sources, it shows that missionaries tried to redefine what it meant to be a man and also the standards for Ufuma/Igbo femininity through evangelization.

The recollection quoted above was the most memorable one my 92-year-old interviewee shared when asked to narrate her conversion history. She noted that the missionaries did not baptize men who did not correctly answer this question in support of their wives. The message being inculcated was that Ufuma men and women must prioritize the preservation of the nuclear family structure above the extended family structure, even though in the traditional culture the latter was understood as supreme.

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[303] Interviews, Mrs. Victoria Uka (Umueji-Ufuma: November 16, 2011)

Drawing on archival reports of the CMS, personal diaries, missionary photographs and oral sources, this essay argues that Ufuma men and women played active roles in shaping CMS missionary strategies in the clan and participated actively in the Christianization of Ufuma between 1920 and 1940. Gender is a vital part of this discussion. Records show that as men and women arrived in churches all over Igboland, "they quickly sat next to each other based on their gender."[304] In tracing gender and indigenous politicking at the heart of the encounter between the Christian missionaries and the people of Ufuma, this chapter is divided into three broad sections that explore changing missionary conversion strategies in Ufuma. It also highlights factors shaping the adoption of one strategy over the other.

In section one, I argue that during the first phase of the encounter between CMS missionaries and Ufuma (1911-1918), it was more or less an Umunebo house affair shaped by pre-colonial political rivalries between sub-clans.

In section two, I show how Ufuma women's patronage of Western medicine and maternity services highlighted the importance of medical missions as the most effective CMS approach to converting indigenous women. A systematic method for converting Ufuma-Igbo women was clearly needed, since the educational approach adopted for converting boys failed in their case. It was after the medical mission had taken root that more and more women began to take missionary education seriously. Still, missionary education, with its emphasis on Victorian style domestic virtue, was not a very successful strategy for women's conversion. Ufuma women selected the aspects of the educational missionary strategy that they were most interested in. They protested against the Victorian model educational system by prioritizing only those projects they deemed important to their existence as vital members of the society. By the end of the

[304] CMS ACC/908 Dorothy Jewitt Papers 1934, 1953

second phase of the encounter between Ufuma and the CMS in the late 1920s, the church had made substantial but limited advances, as Ufuma men and women swung back and forth like a pendulum in their new faith.

The third and perhaps the most decisive period of Ufuma women's conversion began in the 1930s. The mass conversion of men and women during this period was due to the role played by a group of early indigenous female Christians, remembered in Ufuma public memory as "Bible Women."[305] In section three of this study I discuss how these "Bible women" facilitated the conversion of Ufuma men and women by building cultural bridges between the missionaries and the people, thereby cushioning the reception of Christianity in Ufuma. I also show how "Bible women" resisted Victorian-style domesticity yet in the process became the embodiment of female European missionary achievement in Ufuma.

Although often neglected in missionary records as well as in African mission historiography, these women known as"Bible Women" were crucial mediators between indigenous culture and missionary aims in Ufuma and Igboland in general. They played a decisive role in the church's reception as they modified and grounded missionary learning within the Ufuma context, making the new culture digestible by indigenes. A close exploration of these unsung heroines of the church in Ufuma and Igboland not only reveals a gradual metamorphosis of Christianity in the region from a church of men to a church of women, it also demonstrates indigenous women's resistance against Christian missions, as these "Bible women" sifted out what they considered relevant in the new religion and negotiated those things they considered irrelevant to their group. By the end of this chapter, understanding is gained on Ufuma gendered

[305] Interviews, Bedford Nwajagu (Umunebo Ufuma: November 12, 2011); Venerable C.O.C. Ikpa, Archdeacon Holy Trinity Church (Umunebo-Ufuma: November 14, 2011)

responses to European missionary intrusion, the essence of missionary rivalry between the Roman Catholics and the Anglicans in Ufuma, and the meaning of conversion to the Ufuma in the early 1920s and 1930s.

Building on a long historiography on African conversion, this chapter makes an original contribution by highlighting aspects of indigenous female "conversion" through oral narratives. In this chapter, the term conversion will be applied to orthopraxis, that is, regular practices that appear outwardly, or, in other words, taken-for-granted features of daily life that were understood to have constituted religious change in an individual's life.[306] For both the missionaries and most of the informants interviewed for this study, conversion was defined in this way. Conversion or changes in one's religious way of life were manifested in practices such as receiving baptism, partaking in Holy Communion, and leading prayers and other church activities. The historian is often tempted to conclude that, from the perspective of the missionaries, conversion meant replacing a traditional indigenous altar with an alternative one adorned with a crucifix. That is, it meant the liquidation of prized idolatrous possessions, the acceptance to the call of baptism, and other outward acts. From observation, these "everyday symbols," [307] if I may borrow Humphrey Fisher's phrase, and their associations with Christianity build up over time within the culture. The outcome of this process is that it

[306] As studies have shown, there are two sides to what conversion to Christianity meant and how conversion as a spiritual process could be interpreted. On the one hand, Christian conversion can be understood based on the outwardly presentation of religious change in the convertee. One gets at this by examining the social and economic practices of the Christian, by probing those normal quotidian activities that structure how an indigenous Christian continue to reproduce their daily activities. On the second level, Christian conversion could be understood as the inwardly change in beliefs requires an analysis of the religious and value systems in which the local beliefs come into contact with world religions and their respective dogmas.

[307] Fisher, "The Juggernaut's Apologia: Conversion to Islam in Black Africa," 157-159

eventually began to effect the wide array of choices left to the individual (i.e. not specifically promoted by missionaries), including dress and other elements of outward appearance, and this actually made belief in Christianity stronger among the Ufuma.

Whereas Robin Horton's "African Conversion" describes conversion as a *cognitive process* involving personal religious transformation in response to outward changes that promote a re-evaluation or reassessment of the coherence of one's beliefs against another set of beliefs, very few Ufuma women described their early conversions in these terms. As I argued in my second chapter on nascent religious transformations of Igbo religion on the eve of colonial rule, indigenous Igbo religion was not necessarily inward looking nor static. In fact, religious chance is integral to Ufuma existence. What is clear in this study is that from the 1910s onward, Ufuma women's conversion was dictated by choice, and secondly, it was not simply the replacement of local deities by the Supreme Being as understood by Christians. Rather, there was a simultaneous reconfiguration of both indigenous religious ideas and Christian principles as Ufuma negotiated the missionary overtures.[308] Religious ideas and principles were migratory, producing changes in religious beliefs and the patterning of rituals in the region over time.

Phase One (1910-1920): Early Christian Growth in Ufuma

Ufuma-Igbo religious history present a unique case as it pushes us to differentiate between two remarkable varieties of encounters between Christian missionaries and indigenous

[308] Robin Horton, "African Conversion," *Journal of the International African Institute,* 41, 2 (April 1971) 85-108

Igbo peoples in the 19th and 20th centuries. On one hand, for the Western Igbo peoples and those living in Onitsha, Christianity was more or less a cultural imposition. These groups encountered European and African missionaries as early as the second half of the nineteenth century and the high-profile resistance of the indigenes to Christianity mirrored the aggressive approach of the missionaries deployed to this region. Though all resistance to the Christian mission (often equated with the colonial state) failed, the series of British expeditions against the Aro (the Igbo south of the river Niger, that is, the Ekumeku groups); the Owa War of 1904-06; the Ahiara Expedition of 1905; and the Ogwashi-Uku campaign from 1903-1910 were all examples of imperial military responses to the indigenous struggle against not just colonialism broadly but also specifically against new cultural phenomena initiated by the Christian presence in Igboland.[309] For instance, the famous Aro Expedition of 1901-1902 was not only a colonial war of conquest but a religious war against the *Aro Oracle Ibinukpabi*, popularly called the *Long Juju* in colonial records. In other words, the British military conquest of the Niger was fundamentally a war against Igbo religion. So it is understandable that although it was located in the interior, the Ufuma had already heard about the havoc wrought by the Christian missions in different parts of Igboland decades before the first European missionary actually stepped foot on their land. In an oral interview, eighty-year-old Chief Mogbo reported, "Our people never liked the white people

[309] Don C. Ohadike, *The Ekumeku Movement: Western Igbo Resistance to the British Conquest of Nigeria, 1883-1914* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1991). See J.F. Ade Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Niegeria, 1841-1891: The Making of a New Elite* (London: Longmans, 1965) 4. Also see Felix Ekechi, "Igbo Response to British Imperialism: The Episode of Dr. Stewart and the Ahiara Expedition, 1905-1916," *Journal of African Studies,* 1:2 (1974) 146. The Ahiara Resistance was partly a protest against the destruction and arrest of elders following the Aro Expedition against the so-called Long Juju. See pages 149

to come. And so our fathers brought soothsayers and made sacrifices purposed to delay the coming of the white people."[310]

On another hand, there were some Igbo regions that willingly invited European missionaries to come and in fact encouraged the Christianization of their community. Ufuma falls within this second category, bearing in mind that at the point of the first encounter between Ufuma and missionaries in 1910, the colonial state was in full force, so that the idea of "willingly" must be qualified somewhat. For this second group of communities who invited missionaries into their lands, there was a marked conscious differentiation between missionaries and colonial officials.[311] Although the Ufuma had earlier heard about the exploits of the Christian missionaries and for an initial period hesitated and resisted having Christian missionaries in their midst, they had a change of heart, perhaps convinced that missionaries were better than chiefs in dealing with the new colonial regime. They may have also heard about the schools and employment opportunities that the presence of the Christian missionaries created in other neighboring communities towards Awka. It is therefore understandable that the Ufuma of Umunebo village made a conscious decision to participate in the missionary project. Still, although CMS missionaries had reached Umunebo-Ufuma by 1910, Ufuma choices on whether to embrace or reject Christianity as a group were embedded in a century-old debate between the clans over ethnic seniority and legitimacy.[312]

For the Ufuma, the shunning of the new religion in the initial period of colonial rule and the eventual adoption of the new faith were all decisions made as part of a resistance struggle

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[310] Interviews, Chief Mogbo (Umuonyiuka-Ufuma: September 30 and November 8, 2011)

[311] This statement is particularly important because several African scholars claim that indigenous people did not necessarily see missionaries any different from colonial officials.

[312] Interviews, Mr. and Mrs. Ferdinand Orji (Umuagu-Ufuma: November 18, 2011)

against the hegemony of other clans. That is, they reflect the external and internal politics of the time as much as they do religious impulses. Precipitated by the internal politics and discord between the Umunebo and Umuago clans and further aggravated by the colonial agents deployed to Ufuma, the people of Umunebo decided to ally themselves with the CMS missionaries. In retaliation, the people of Umuagu allied themselves with the Roman Catholics, to counter or check Umunebo supremacy, in 1918.[313] In other words, the pre-existing missionary rivalry between the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) became an outlet or avenue to pursue the rivalry between the clans. At the same time, the Ufuma interpreted the new religious order as a means of deliverance from socio-economic oppression within the new colonial system.

The history of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in Igboland as a whole is muddled. After a failed 1841 attempt, the Niger Mission was more durably established in 1857. It was successful largely because of the activities of resettled Igbo slaves from Freetown, Sierra Leone. Under the leadership of J.C. Taylor, Samuel Crowther, and a host of other ex-Igbo slaves, the Niger Mission set up a base in Onitsha and from there spread to the Igbo hinterlands.[314] By 1902, there were three CMS districts in Igboland, the central, eastern and western. To ensure the steady flow of needed workers for the area, the mission decided in 1903 to establish a new educational center that would be removed from dependence on Lagos. After a search for a

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[313] Interviews, Mr. and Mrs. Ferdinand Orji (Umuagu-Ufuma: November 18, 2011)

[314] The Story of the Niger Mission printed by the Diocesan Printing Press, Owerri Nigeria (October 3, 1997)2; G.O. Tasie, "John Christopher Taylor: A Biographical Note" in Rev. Canon Shed Adiele (ed), *The Niger Mission: Origin, Growth and Impact 1857-1995*(Uyo, Nigeria: 1996) 53ff

suitable site, Awka College was established in January 14, 1904 about eighteen kilometers from Ufuma.[315]

According to Ufuma oral history, colonial administrators actually reached Ufuma before the missionaries, even though Christianity had taken root in nearby Awka[316] by the second half of the 19th century.[317] The Ufuma had learned through hearsay about the white missionaries in neighboring town and oral tradition actually holds that the clan made spiritual investments in animal sacrifices to deter European missionary incursion into its land. Although it is easy for the western historian to dismiss claims to supernatural manipulation through the *dibia*[318] and other traditional practitioners, non-military responses to aggression were common during this time in Igbo history. Ufuma oral history, like the oral histories of other Igbo communities, is replete with narratives of traditional exploits by "native doctors" who through diabolic means forestalled the progress of Europeans and missionaries in Igboland.[319]

The colonial system, like the early Christian mission to Africa, was a male affair. It was structured around male governors who presided over male colonial residents, who in turn managed male district officers. Women were generally relegated to the background. Likewise, missionaries deployed to the region in the early period were males who clearly maintained male prerogatives in proselytizing Igboland. District officers maintained both administrative and

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[315] Thirty miles from Ufuma, Awka began to serve as education power-house to ensure the steady supply of school teachers and church agent.

[316] Awka is approximately 18 kilometers from Ufuma by foot.

[317] CMS G3 A3/0 1882

[318] Dibia is a general term for traditional healers and practitioners, male and female in Igboland.

[319] Interviews, Chief Mogbo (Umuonyiuka-Ufuma: September 30 and November 8, 2011)

judicial powers through male proxies. Since they usually resided in the city center, their powers were mostly delegated to puppet agents who carried out their orders in the interior.[320] Ufuma oral sources claim that the colonial agents assigned to Ufuma were abusive, so the clan soon began to view Christian missionaries (whom heard of from their neighbors) as the lesser of two evils.

Beginning in 1907, the local administrative authority appointed some nominal Sanitary Inspectors to ensure that the indigenes lived in and maintained western-style hygiene and a clean environment. Such Sanitary Inspectors, whose jurisdiction encompassed Ufuma, were mostly indigenes of Awka and Nibo.[321] These men carried out their functions so ruthlessly that Ufuma indigenes were panicked whenever they visited the village. Ufuma informants pointed that anyone found in the bush was fined, whether he was defecating or simply plugging fruits from a tree.[322] These Sanitary Inspectors clearly enjoyed the authority and power they wielded even in their capacity as subordinate colonial agents. They would raid the community without notice and haul people into court, where fines were easily and frequently issued. Because the people of Umunebo-Ufuma were the target of so many molestations during this period, the clan soon began to look to Christian missionaries for deliverance.

The acephalous nature of Igbo societies deterred the nine villages of Ufuma from uniting under a common authority. While eight of the sub-clans seemed to have chiefs or at least a group of elders recognized by the Native Administration in the British indirect rule system, the Umunebo sub-clan in particular, which later became the first to invite the missionaries, had no

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[320] NAE CSO 26: 29827

[321] NAE CSO 26: 29648

[322] Interviews, Chief Bedford Nwajagu (Umunebo Ufuma: November 12, 2011); Ernest Mogbo (Umuonyiuka-Ufuma: September 30, 2011)

senior chief to check the high-handedness of abusive Sanitary Inspectors in the new colonial system.[323] The situation was probably worsened by the settlement pattern and geographical setting of Ufuma, where clans were separated by impenetrable lands and sacred or diabolized forests. Thus the Sanitary Inspectors and other colonial oppressors had a field day in dealing with Umunebo indigenes.[324] Several further factors, including the superiority of European weaponry, discouraged overt Ufuma resistance against their oppressors.

Ufuma sources suggest that as the harassments became unbearable, a group of young men who feared they were next in line for victimization decided to run away from the village to escape the arbitrary powers of the Sanitary Inspectors. This group of young men fled to nearby Awka and Onitsha. It was at these places that the refugees told pathetic stories of molestations to their kind hosts. The refugees also lamented that they were being singled out for such harsh treatment because they had no chief or leader of their own to protect them. Oral tradition holds that their hosts then asked them if the gospel has reached their town and also whether they had a church. Their hosts clearly suggested that the church was something stronger and more influential than having a chief. The refugees were very delighted at the expectation that they would soon have something greater than a chief. Their hosts took the refugees to Archdeacon Smith and Mr. Cheetham, the Missionary Accountant of the Anglican Missionary Headquarters in Onitsha, who then gave them a letter to present to the Principal of the Awka Training College, Rev. G.T. Basden.[325]

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[323] J. Nwajagu and I. Orabasili, *History of Holy Trinity (Anglican) Church, Ufuma,* 3

[324] J. Nwajagu and I. Orabasili, *History of Holy Trinity (Anglican) Church, Ufuma,* 3

[325] Interviews, Chief Bedford Nwajagu (Umunebo Ufuma: November 12, 2011); Ernest Mogbo (Umuonyiuka-Ufuma: September 30, 2011) Also see: J. Nwajagu and I. Orabasili, *History of Holy Trinity (Anglican) Church, Ufuma,* 4

The people of Umunebo organized a delegation among their kinsmen, including young men and the elderly, to accompany the refugees when they delivered the letter to Basden. The delegates included Nwafor, Okeke, Nwangwu and Okoli. After reading the letter, Basden referred his visitors to a Mr. John Izuegbu of Ndikelionwu, an Ogbunike man who was posted to that location as a Church teacher. After going back and forth several more times to finalize arrangements, the people of Umunebo-Ufuma prepared for and awaited the arrival of Mr. Izegbu and his team. It was decided that they would be received at Obu Okonkwo Nwanyi, now the Okonkwo compound of Umunebu, because the family was considered peaceful and level-headed. Jacob Izuegbu and his group arrived in Ufuma on Afor market day, accompanied by Ndikelionwu Christians including Messengers Mark Okoli, William Okafor and Thomas Ajulu. They were pleasantly received at the *Obu*, which later served as the church building, from1910 onwards.[326]

Therefore, unlike other parts of Igboland, Ufuma was not Christianized until the late 1910s. And this was just in theory. In actual practice, Ufuma Christianity was anything but serious or deep. A CMS report as late as 1929 categorically called for prayers for Ufuma Christianity "that the people may learn to live clean lives, and not to give themselves to immorality which causes so many suspensions every month . . . that they may conquer their weaknesses."[327] In 1933 another CMS report categorized Ufuma as religiously difficult terrain.[328] What is clear from this is that although colonial offices had been successfully established in the district that encompassed Ufuma, and several Catholic and Anglican missions

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[326] J. Nwajagu and I. Orabasili, *History of Holy Trinity (Anglican) Church, Ufuma,* 5

[327] CMS G3 A3/O 1929

[328] CMS G3 A3/ O 1934

had been planted around the sub-district, conversion to Christianity was still a matter of individual choice.

For a long time, the CMS in Ufuma was patronized exclusively by the people of Umunebo. This same sub-clan, which had resisted Christian missionary incursion for decades, now saw in the foreign religion a necessary counterweight against overbearing colonial activities in the region and made conscious efforts to ally with the church. The rest of Ufuma at this point constructed the new religion as Umunebo's affair, and so they joined it only to consolidate important networks or build bridges into the Umunebo clan. The people of Umuagu-Ufuma, for instance, attended the church at Umunebo-Ufuma simply because there existed long-distance ties between the Agwunta family and the Ndikelionwu. It was recounted that missionary agents from Ndikelionwu had made regular stopovers at the Agwuntas on their way to Umunebo.[329] A few others also joined the Umunebo to strengthen marital ties and build familial networks.

Because this was the case, continued inter-ethnic rivalries slowed the establishment and growth of the church in the early years. Take, for instance, the first set of people to join the church from Ozegu, who were attracted by the activities taking place as they passed on their way to the market on Afor days. This group attended church in Umunebo en masse every Sunday. However, just as they would attend church activities in unison, they would likewise withdraw en masse at the slightest provocation or displeasure. It was this discontented group that would in 1918 invite the Roman Catholics to come, as they were "sick and tired of the Umunebo church."[330] In the same manner, the Umu-agu clan would, in resistance to the new Umunebo Christian hegemony, and in a repudiation of the Ozegu Catholic church, travel to far away Akpu

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[329] J. Nwajagu and I. Orabasili, *History of Holy Trinity (Anglican) Church, Ufuma,* 6

[330] Interviews, Chief Festus Nwankwo-Eze (Umu-Onyiba Ufuma: November 10, 2011)

to attend the Catholic Church there.[331] Such was the extent of the ethnic rivalry and discord in Ufuma, a condition which clearly shaped decisions about whether to become Christians and what denomination to belong to. It is clear that the three clans of Ufuma which come under the umbrella of the Anglican Church (Umuonyiuka, Umuogem, Umueji, and Enugwu-abo, Ufuma) had cordial relations with one another dating back to the pre-colonial era.[332]

Similar internal conflicts surfaced when it came to the establishment of schools in Ufuma. One expression of this sub-ethnic conflict can be seen on the vast expanse of land still referred to as "Ikpa College" in Umuagu-Ufuma, which hosts the Ufuma Campus of the Nigerian Federal Polytechnic Institute today. It was on this parcel of land that the early CMS missionaries hoped to establish a secondary school. Tradition has it that a lone convert in Umuagu-Ufuma, an elder of the community, gave the land to the Anglican Church so it could build a secondary school. With plans under way, members of the church community raised the initial twenty-pound deposit for the building project. But after the lead man Onyekwena of Umuagu-Ufuma passed on, the idea did not come to fruition, because indigenes who mostly regarded themselves as Catholics would rather have had a Catholic Secondary School than an Anglican School erected on their lands.[333]

The extent to which Ufuma women shaped or contributed to such conflicts in the immediate years of the church's arrival is not well known. What is clear is that Ufuma women played decisive roles in the establishment of the church among the clans from the early period. It

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[331] Interviews, Mrs. Juliana Onwudiwe (Umuagu- Ufuma: November 16, 2011)

[332] Interviews, Chief Festus Nwankwo-Eze (Umuonyiba-Ufuma: November 10, 2011); Also see J. Nwajagu and I. Orabasili, *History of Holy Trinity (Anglican) Church, Ufuma,* 11

[333] Interviews, Chief Festus Nwankwo-Eze (Umuonyiba-Ufuma: November 10, 2011); Also see J. Nwajagu and I. Orabasili, *History of Holy Trinity (Anglican) Church, Ufuma,* 13

is indeed reported that Ufuma women, especially of the Umunebo sub-clan, were not late in joining the church at its inception. Years before the CMS became established and equipped to provide attractive gifts to potential converts, women functioned as marketers of Christianity extraordinaire in Umunebo. They are remembered in public memory to have provided food for church attendees every Sunday, so that interviewees recall not wanting to miss church because of the *ncha* (African salad) and social rapport that followed church services. (Ufuma men and women described similar factors to me that drew them to the church, with the same conviction in their voices and demeanor.) Indeed, several women were among the first to be baptized upon the arrival of the church in Umunebo. Several of these women have lived on in the public memory particularly for their contributions in the physical construction of the church. They made innumerable trips of to collect sand and mud as well as to transport the drums of water needed for the construction of the church building.[334] In other parts of Igboland, women were not this consistently supportive of the church. While some are recorded as the first to convert to Christianity in their communities,[335] going against the wishes of their husbands and the entire community in some instances,[336] in other cases they exerted a major influence in discouraging their husbands from joining the church.[337]

At this initial stage of the encounter, education was considered key to converting the Ufuma, as in the rest of Igboland, for several reasons. First, the missionaries considered it easier to achieve their aim of conversion by using schools because children had not become fully

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[334] Nwajagu and Orabasili, *History of Holy Trinity (Anglican) Church, Ufuma, 17*

[335] CMS ACC F5/60

[336] CMS G3 A3/0 1889-1890

[337] CMS G3 A3/0 1889-1890

involved in the traditional beliefs of their cultures.[338] The missionaries believed that if children, who at the impressionable stages of their development, were exposed to the catechisms and Christian teaching, they would grow into Christian adults. Second, the language problem drove educational considerations of Christianizing Ufuma and Igboland in general. It was hoped that mission schools would help produce indigenous Christians who could help propagate the gospel even further. Hence, mission schools were seen as a means for generating new workers but naturally, given that the early missionaries (native and European) were largely male, women were not necessarily the target population for mission schools. [339]

While oral tradition suggests that when the people of Ufuma recognized that the European presence could translate into development and other opportunities, they embraced Christianity and encouraged a missionary presence in Ufuma, many indigenes disagreed with extending the invitation and deliberately sought to frustrate the mission. As in most peasant societies, Ufuma religious resistance overall did not align with the Gramscian picture of revolution, but rather with Scott's perception of "everyday forms of resistance" against an alien and alienating religion.[340] Although not always passive, Ufuma resistance against Christianity was mostly disorganized and utilized what Scott decisively calls the "weapons of the weak." Oral interviews with early Ufuma Christians who had non-Christian parents point to numerous

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[338] J.A. Uruakpa, "The Anglican Church and Educational Development in the Eastern States f Nigeria 1857-1966" in Shed N. Adiele ed. *The Niger Mission: Origin Growth and Impact, 1857-1995* (Uyo,Nigeria: 1996) 124

[339] Uruakpa, "The Anglican Church and Educational Development in the Eastern States f Nigeria 1857-1966" in Shed N. Adiele ed. *The Niger Mission: Origin Growth and Impact, 1857-1995* (Uyo,Nigeria: 1996) 124-125

[340] See James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak, Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985)

forms of everyday resistance by mothers and fathers who did not want their lineage members to patronize the new faith.

Ufuma oral sources tell stories that indicate gender differences in the ways men and women either received or resisted the new Christian faith. While men were reactive, women mostly resisted proactively by protecting their own. As has been noted in several other studies, slaves and outcasts constituted the largest group of early Ufuma Christians. Just as Igbo communities generally selected nonentities as their warrant chiefs in order to protect their head chief and free-born citizens, so also in the matter of Christianity, Ufuma parents preferred to send their slaves and reckless children to mission schools in order to protect beloved sons and daughters.[341] This policy of protecting loved ones from contamination by the new alien culture was greatly championed by older women and served for a long period of time to discourage Ufuma women's conversion.

Women played a decisive role in this practice of protecting freeborn citizens from contamination. According to 92-year-old Madam Okolie, "My mother would decide that I had to go to the farm or market with her on a Sunday so that I would not participate in church activities. That was how my baptism came later than my peers. . . . In those days, the Afor market could fall on a Sunday as well."[342] Another interviewee noted that his mother would sometimes "send me on an errand that would take the entire day so that I missed Sunday church."[343] Initially some older Ufuma men and women saw the new religion as a children's affair or as "child's play." Many others viewed the early church as a community of underdogs, attended by those

[341] Interviews, Chief Ernest Mogbo (Umuonyiuka-Ufuma: September 30, 2011)
[342] Interviews, Oluchi Okolie (Umu-Ogem Ufuma: September 31, 2011)
[343] Interviews, Chief Ernest Mogbo (Umuonyiuka-Ufuma: September 30, 2011)

sidelined in Ufuma society: men without titles, women without children, and a few others who had a greedy eye for colonial extras. In descriptions of how their fathers and grand-fathers responded to the new religion, Ufuma men and women noted that their fathers cared less than their grandfathers about what they were doing or whether they had joined the church. For the most part, fathers only "quarreled when church going interfered with traditional responsibilities, rites and rituals within the lineage."[344] A majority of informants noted that the new religion did not deter their parents from practicing indigenous religion and this continued into their own generation.

Generally, Ufuma oral history testifies that the majority of Ufuma men and women in the oldest age category mounted the greatest resistance against Christianity in Ufuma in the first decade of the 20th century. The oldest age category in Ufuma is made up of the members of the divining, secret, and title societies. As oath swearers, they were determined to preserve the culture and traditions of their ancestors. Their resistance was spurred by the desire to maintain their positions of authority within the community, as acceptance of the new faith was believed to minimize their standing and social status as religious practitioners and specialists.[345] For instance, one major episode of resistance remembered in public memory was sparked by the resolution of Christian missionaries and agents, upon the arrival of the CMS mission at Umunebu, to stop indigenes, especially the young, from participating in "heathen" activities like masquerading. As mentioned earlier, masquerading, like wrestling and hunting, constituted part of the Ufuma-Igbo socialization process that ushered Ufuma boys to manhood. Masquerades

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[344] Interviews, Levi Amobi Okeke (Enugwu-abo-Ufuma: November 17 and December 3, 2011)

[345] Interviews, Oluchi Okolie (Umu-Ogem Ufuma: September 31, 2011); Chief Ernest Mogbo (Umuonyiuka-Ufuma: September 30 and November 8, 2011); Levi Amobi Okeke (Enugwuabo-Ufuma: November 17 and December 3, 2011)

were believed to represent ancestral spirits; each had its grade, beginning with young initiates and leading up to older male age grades. These societies served as models of adult society, so that when missionaries demonized them, they were indirectly attacking indigenous foundations and perceptions of masculinity. Christian agents considered masquerading a "pagan" activity and the practice a slight to the Christian faith. Determined to shape new Christians along western perceptions of masculinity and gentlemanliness, the missionaries did not just seek to restrict masquerade performances through colonial law, they banned declared Christians from participating in the activities of masquerade cults.[346] Early Ufuma Christians remember vividly being punished in school if they confessed to viewing masquerade dances.[347]

The demonizing of such core indigenous practices met with active resistance. Particularly disturbed by this law were the early Christians from the Umuagu clan, who were known at that time for their great attachment to, and love for, masquerading. Naturally, many church members from Umuagu fell afoul of this new law. When confronted, some of them showed remorse, accepted their punishment and were reabsorbed into the church. Many, however, chose to drop out of the church. They went a step further, in fact, by championing the invitation of the Roman Catholic Mission to come to Umuagu-Ufuma as an indictment of the failures of the Anglican mission. It also must be said that this episode had class overtones in addition to its ethnic dimensions: the members who made their way back into the church at Umunebu were indigenes who had strong ties with core leaders of the clan, such as the wealthy Chief Onyekwena, whose

[346] Ibid.

[347] Interviews, Chief J.C. Mogbo (Umuonyiuka-Ufuma: September 30 and November 8, 2011)

economic power and marital ties to the Uchendus and economic ties to the Mba made it advantageous for the Uchendus and Mbas to continue to patronize the Anglican church.[348]

On the other hand, there were individual chiefs who made it a point of duty to resist Ufuma's early Christians. Chief Nwajagu, for instance, was not convinced by the message of the missionaries and did nothing to encourage his people to join the church. Instead, he sometimes created obstacles for them. He dealt heavily with Christians who failed to attend road work organized by himself on a Sunday. A surviving member of the Otabike Age-Grade recalled being fined and punished for failing to attend to the clearing of bush/road paths leading to the market on a Sunday, *ubosi uka*.[349] Perhaps, the most sensational brushes Chief Nwajagu had with the early converts came in 1915, when he accused some converts, as traditional chiefs (including Isaiah Nwangwu, Daniel Ike, Matthew Nwangwu, James Okeke, Sam Nwafor, Mathias Okeke, Peter Unoji, Paul Okonkwo and Nwankwo), of violating the customs of the land by going to church and sending their children to the Christian school. Such allegations against traditional chiefs and titled men operated as a system for ridiculing early Christians during this period. It is not very clear from Ufuma oral history whether Chief Nwajagu was a warrant chief, but obviously he did weild considerable powers within the colonial regime and had connections strong enough to accuse chiefs and charge them in the native court at Ajalli, where they were found guilty and severely caned, fined, and imprisoned. Around this same time, the building being used by the converts as a church was hit by a tornado and was destroyed. These series of events depressed many of the converts, who fled and took refuge at Ogidi, Abagana and Onitsha.

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[348] J. Nwajagu and I. Orabasili, *History of Holy Trinity (Anglican) Church, Ufuma,* 6-7

[349] Interviews, Andy Nwalor (Umunebo-Ufuma: October 27, 2011). The Otabike consists of the oldest surviving age group in Ufuma today.

The newly introduced Anglican and Catholic churches gained very few converts during the early years of their introduction in the 1910s, largely because of the resistance of these group and religious specialists and traditional leaders. It was as a counter-resistance measure that the district colonial office at Onitsha, influenced by the church, appointed a Christian Chief to work side by side with Nwajagu, thus dwindling his authority in Umunebo-Ufuma. Although Chief Nwajagu himself never accepted the gospel before his death, his son Simon grew up to become a Christian. [350] Another of his sons with whom I interviewed remains an ardent traditionalist to this day.

Although older men and women, especially priests and religious practitioners and those with political authority, continued to fight to stem the tide of conversion, many continued to embrace the new religion. Some joined the new Christian movement as "passive" members, while others continued their indigenous religious practices in secret.[351] As the Ufuma elders had predicted, within a couple of years Ufuma indigenous beliefs were under attack from both missionaries and indigenous converts. Secret societies were abolished and shrines were destroyed. Mr. Cheetham admits that many of the measures taken during this period were mistaken, but he still says,

> Although the first period of the Mission was very unsatisfactory from what might be called the "official" point of view, in that the organization was poor and abuses abounded, we are bound to admit that a good number of the old Christians who joined the church during this dark time are amongst the best of our church members still, so it is clear that some good work was done then.[352]

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[350] J. Nwajagu and I. Orabasili, *History of Holy Trinity (Anglican) Church, Ufuma,* 6-7

[351] John C. Messenger, 287

[352] The Lagos Standard, Wednesday, October 23, 1907 p. 5 (VOL XIV – No 6, Lagos West Africa) It is clear that this statement was made within the context of comparing the church of Nigeria with the Church of England.

Phase Two (Late 1920s-1930): Female Missionaries and the Gradual Growth of Christianity in Ufuma

By the late 1920s, Christianity had made substantial progress in the region. A religious movement that swept southeastern Nigeria, engineered mostly by the economic depression and a major epidemic, caused most of the people to accept certain elements of Christianity.[353] In Ufuma and its environs, the smallpox epidemic particularly gave missionaries an ample opportunity to gather more converts.[354] Such epidemics in the past had shaped missionary strategy for converting indigenous peoples in Onitsha and among the Yoruba. Crowther noted, with regard to the late 19th century epidemic, that "the introduction of healing art as a form of Christian ministry will attract masses, who will lose confidence in the power of their gods to heal them. Some of the native missionaries in this mission, having been able at times to relieve several sick persons from suffering by administering medicines, have been very helpful to this mission."[355] This ideology shaped missionary strategies in Ufuma and Igboland in general in this second phase and was actualized in what was known as the medical mission.[356]

The medical mission that was pivotal in shaping the church in Nigeria, and which took center stage in the missionary rivalry between the Roman Catholics and Anglicans in Igboland, began in the late 19th century at the Iyi-Enu dispensary in Ozalla, Onitsha. Around 1890, through

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[353] Nwajagu and Orabasili, *History of Holy Trinity (Anglican) Church, Ufuma,* 13. See also C.K Meek, *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937) 86; Also see John C. Messenger, "Religious Acculturation Among the Ibibio" in W.R Bascom and M.J. Herskovits (ed.), p. 287

[354] G3 A3/0 1928-1926: CMS Niger Mission Minutes of Executive Committee

[355] CMS G3 A3/0 – Annual Report for Onitsha, 1887-1888

[356] CMS M/Y/A3/1 - 4

the efforts of Rev. Henry Dobinson and his former vicar, the Rev. F. N. Eden, money was raised and medicines collected abroad for the starting of a formal medical work among parishioners in and around Onitsha. Dispensaries were held twice a week for several hours in the morning in a small shelter without walls. On the two dispensary days, patients began to arrive before 6:30 a.m. Activities began with a short prayer session and treatment was given until 1:00 p.m. In its early days, this clinic recorded up to 135 patients in the morning from different parts of Igboland.[357]

The CMS medical mission was not necessarily born out of humanitarianism, but rather reflected the Protestant-Catholic rivalry in Igboland. CMS missionaries constantly complained in annual reports that their converts frequented the Roman Catholic Missions (RCM) because "their teachings influence through means of active charity, devotions, and self-abasement" and most importantly because of the Roman Catholic attention to healthcare provision.[358] In response to this, the Anglican medical mission encouraged Christian conversion in Igboland as missionaries seized opportunities to administer holy baptism first and medicines afterwards to their patients/potential converts. [359] This missionary strategy worked only too well in the case of Ufuma women, who began to come to take advantage of western maternity supplies.

Yet it is also important to view the work of the medical mission as a response to Igbo prodding and demands for healing. As has been observed in several other studies and as will be emphasized in subsequent chapters, healing is the opiate of African religions, past and present. Ufuma men and women readjusted their religious ideologies and standards according to their need for healing. Archival records show that in the early 1900s the Church Missionary Society

[357] CMS M/Y/A3/7
[358] CMS G3 A3/0 – 12/87
[359] CMS G3 A3/0 – 12/87

was "convinced that the demand of the crowd for healing, while demonstrating the wide appreciation for western medicine, is making it impossible for medical missionaries adequately to meet the demands of the cross in which they are working." Here, missionary Ms. Hensley notes that the demands of the medical mission was so compelling that they were clearly preventing missionaries from doing their professional work as Christian doctors should, and that they were so over-burdened and that they were prevented from making their witness to Christianity explicit during this period.[360] Some of the medical mission work included the treatment of eye problems, leprosy issues, obstetrical cases, intestinal diseases and fevers. Yet at this time indigenous medicines, especially for the treatment of broken bones and related diseases, continued to thrive. Ufuma men and women clearly made decisions about which medicine (traditional or western) to patronize depending on the nature of the illness. According to Ufuma oral history, the Uchendus, noted for their traditional orthopedic skills from pre-colonial Ufuma times through knowledge passed down from generations, continued to be patronized by patients from all over Igboland even through the European missionary period.[361]

The medical mission could not have made much progress without the assistance and support of missionary wives and female missionaries in Igboland.[362] Beginning in the early twentieth century, male British missionaries were commonly accompanied by their wives and single women came as well, in contrast to the approach of the Roman Catholics, whose missionaries were wifeless. The special attention paid to indigenous women during this early period of Christianity was an extension of the struggles and agitations of female missionaries for

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[360] CMS ACC 4/ F 6 – Niger Dawn, 133

[361] Interviews, Ebere Nwafor (Umuagu-Ufuma: October 10, 2011)

[362] CMS M/Y/A3/8; CMS M/Y/A3/4

their own inclusion in missionary work in the region. This came in the wake of the increasing deployment of women in the mission field in the early 20th century to reach women who were inaccessible to male missionaries in Igboland.[363] Very few of these women missionaries in the Awka district were like Mary Slessor, who silenced mobs, calmed bickering chiefs, held palaver with the crowds and on Sundays conducted services. [364] Still, they made considerable progress in making their voice heard in male-dominated circles. In fact, prejudice against the first midwives, first by male missionaries and second by indigenous people, was very strong on account of their youth and different methods. Gradually, however, because of their skill and Christian caring, this prejudice gave way and confidence in them was established.[365] My research informants in Ufuma repeatedly pointed to the invaluable contributions of female missionaries (indigenous and foreign) in shaping their faith.

Conscious efforts were made to evangelize women as they passed through the medical mission, either through the weekly baby clinic or through maternity services. Medical missionaries shared the message of Christianity with vulnerable patients and did not miss the opportunity to extend the new faith to indigenes who accompanied patients to the clinic.[366]

The medical mission faced several difficulties, especially funding. It was also compelled by everyday matters arising in Ufuma and the Igbo region generally to handle matters that were not necessarily medical or missionary, including the building of new schools, infrastructural and

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[363] Judith Rowbotham, "Ministering Angels, not Ministers: Women's Involvement in the Foreign Missionary Movement, c. 1860-1910," in Sue Morgan, ed. *Women, Religion and Feminism in Britain 1750-1900* (Basingstoke, 2002) 179-195

[364] Basil Miller, *Mary Slessor, Heroin of Calabar: The Story of the Slim Scottish girl who dreamed of being a missionary in Africa* (Bethany House: Minneapolis, 1946) 123-124

[365] CMS, G3 A3/0 (1925) ACU 780 F1, The Diary of Dorothy Moss, "The Pattern of a Life"p. 58

[366] CMS ACC 17/ Z1

other charitable duties and employment. Annual reports on the medical mission show the constant need of the medical mission to justify the spirituality of its work. In other words, female missionaries struggled to assure their superiors in Onitsha and England that they were not just caught up in secular activities but were in the business of "conversion."[367]

Before the advent of the medical mission, missionaries had experimented with education as a strategy for converting indigenous peoples. Whereas the educational plan for converting Ufuma indigenes worked excellently for boys, an indigenous ideology of preserving the purity of girls as mothers of the nation and investors in the next generation prevented Igbo women from participating initially in missionary education. At the same time, missionaries blamed young girls for the backsliding of young male converts in Igboland since their bodies were considered sexual snares. The education of young males was prioritized because the missionaries saw in males the future of Christianity in Igboland. As a result, their sexual and marital needs became highly controlled by the missionaries.[368] But the missionary disposition towards Igbo women had to change upon the realization that Ufuma men and women would not send their female children to schools. As a means of encouraging more and more girls to attend school, proprietors initially allowed girls to attend without paying fees. Some charged girls only a half of the fees paid by boys. The few Ufuma females who attended mission schools in the early phase of Christianity were either daughters of wealthy chiefs and elders of the clan or daughters of slaves and outcasts.[369] The medical mission, with its attention to the challenges of mothers as child bearers

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[367] CMS ACC 17/ Z1

[368] CMS G3 A3/0 1910

[369] Interviews, Venerable C.O.C. Ikpa (Umenebu-Ufuma: November 14, 2011)

and rearers, filled the gap created by the reluctance of the Ufuma to send their daughters to mission schools and created the necessary conditions for the conversion of Ufuma women.

In 1924 a health institution was established at Holy Trinity Compound in Ufuma as an outpost of Iyi-Enu Hospital, attracting the patronage of indigenes at its inception and manned by expatriate nurses including Misses Martin and Yeatman. This nursing station consisted of a room with four patient beds, with a separate room for use as a labor ward and a room for the midwife and the domestic helper who accompanied her. A kitchen and sanitary annex were added, all in mud and thatch. Patients or their relations did the cooking. As did St. Faith's Church in Awka, the congregation of Holy Trinity in Ufuma accepted financial responsibility for this station and its upkeep, as well as for the welfare of the midwife, her helper, and the patients. Small fees were asked for, however, to cover expenses, wages, and the few simple medicines that the midwife was allowed to use.

Maternity work became a chief means of recruiting Igbo women converts. One reason why Ufuma women came to support Christianity was to gain protection from the increasing infanticide of the time. This attitude is understandable when it is realized that infant mortality exceeded 40%, counting miscarriages, still births, and deaths during infancy. Medical missionaries reported several cases in which a pregnant woman had become swollen and had fits and her baby was stillborn. Such cases were attributed to the machinations of evil spirits, *ajo mmuo*.[370] Ufuma women grew to trust the missionaries and their health clinics to provide them with the necessary care upon marriage. The aim of antenatal treatment was to prevent miscarriages and premature labors as well as prevent complications during childbirth. The

[370] CMS, G3 A3/0 (1925) ACU 780 F1 p. 58

general aim was to maintain women's health during pregnancy, as many women suffered from anemia or weak blood.[371]

Given the positive response from indigenous women, the medical mission expanded in Igboland. In 1925, Dorothy Moss wondered why the church was doing so much by way of maternity service and even preparing to extend its work further. The church claimed that this was because it was concerned with the health of the whole person, body and mind as well as spiritual well-being. The church believed that health in its fullest sense was God's will for mankind, his gift to them, and that maternity homes were places where a healthy way of life could be demonstrated and taught. Often in villages they were the only places where constructive health teaching was given. The importance of effective sanitation, a good well, the proper disposal of refuse, protection from mosquitoes and hookworms—all this could be taught by a keen young midwife to mothers during their stays in the Maternity Home.[372] And so while medical missions originally began to reach women where schools had failed to do so, medical work was soon extended to include Christian education. The maternity mission, as we will see in chapter five, became a model for healing homes operated by Ufuma women. Such healing homes, modeled after indigenous healing shrines and missionary maternity homes, are still prevalent in various parts of Igboland and have become the hub of female religious expression in twenty-first century African Pentecostalism.

Whereas male missionaries had previously failed in the project of educating female indigenes, the medical mission, in conjunction with female missionaries and wives of male missionaries, succeeded in creating schools specifically for women. The education of women,

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[371] CMS, G3 A3/0 (1925) ACU 780 F1 p. 58

[372] CMS G3 A3/0 (1925); ACU 780 F1, The Diary of Dorothy Moss, "The Pattern of a Life"p. 59

however, centered more on Ufuma women's bodies, as female missionaries grappled with cultural differences in hygiene, child-upbringing, and gender/sex roles between the Igbo and the British. The most attacked of female institutions in Ufuma was the practice of circumcision. Female medical missionaries argued that circumcision had no utility as a practice, ignoring the cultural meanings of such practices. Other female practices attacked by the mission to women included public dancing, since public sexuality was considered inappropriate by Victorian standards.

The missionaries established different types of educational systems. At the initial stage, the missionaries had what the Ufuma remember as Catechumens, a religious educational system targeted for those wishing to be baptized. Unlike the more general school for young boys and a few "small" girls, this catechist school did not train its students to take up positions in the colonial administration. Rather, it emphasized religion and a strict code of conduct of behavior among its female students. Students were expected to dress in certain ways and discouraged from joining in community dances and other leisure activities. Other schools set up at this time were the vernacular school, which was considered a "sub-standard school," a type of Sunday school for religion classes.[373] In Ufuma, vernacular schools were patronized mostly by older women, who learned basic English and the counting necessary for trading and communicating in the new colonial system, to aid in the creation of an African middle class.[374] Some older Ufuma women also attended these schools at night.[375] The regular six-year primary education system, on the

[373] CMS G3 A3/0 1928-1926: CMS Niger Mission Minutes of Executive Committee

[374] Ibid. Missionaries generally assumed at this point that Christianity, Commerce and Civilization, often called the 3 Cs', was wholly beneficial to Africans.

[375] CMS G3 A3/0 (1902)Interview extracts from the Annual Letters of the CMS Missionaries for the year 1902. Rev H. Proctor of Onitsha

other hand, was mostly the preserve of young boys, who were initially selected by indigenes but later handpicked by the missionaries as future catechists and teachers. Particularly influential in the education and conversion of women was the emergence of boarding schools in the early '30s. Run by missionary women and the wives of male missionaries, these schools soon became the hub of women's advancement in the colonies. The impact of women's learning in these schools was magnified by the fact that many of them married influential men in Ufuma and around Igboland.[376]

The immediate purpose of these boarding schools was to prepare suitable wives for the newly converted men who were in training for leadership positions within the mission. Of particular concern were young male converts training to be catechists. Women educated to be wives to these men were also trained to assist their Christian catechist husbands or fiancés in low level evangelical work among the Igbo and ultimately to raise "godly" Christian children in their households, including providing foster care. Sources suggest that would-be husbands who were educated were also keen on marrying educated girls.[377] Winifred Yeatman notes that "the number of men seeking Christian marriage is increasing in Awka district and some of these men are beginning to send future wives to Women's Homes promising to come every day with food and supplies for their future bride."[378] This served as an incentive to encourage parents to send their daughters to school, while some would-be husbands made it a point of duty to send their fiancées to school. At this point, the girl's training centers, including Ama Nwanyi in Awka, which several Ufuma Christian women attended, were largely self-supporting. This was partially

[376] Interviews, Oluchi Okolie (Umu-Ogem Ufuma: September 31, 2011)
[377] Western Equatorial Africa Missions (1912) Report, 36
[378] CMS ACC 4/ F 6 – Niger Dawn, 133

a reflection of the separatist ideology of the women missionaries and partially a function of a reluctance of male missionaries to support/promote African girls' education of any kind. It was generally fiancés who paid the school fees of these young women in the training homes where they were giving a smattering of domestic education.[379]

The new school system for women was nothing short of a boot camp. In a period of months, women were expected to wake up everyday at 5 a.m. and work in the farms; learn basic gardening, knitting, hygiene and handicrafts; and take turns in cooking and cleaning. Until the 1940s, the training of young women in this hostel focused on "practical and domestic work as well as simple school subjects, and of course definite Christian teaching and character training."[380] Some of the effects of domesticity were clear in that women soon began to lose their previous relevance in economic and social affairs. The plan to domesticate Ufuma women was targeted at marriage.

By incorporating education into the goal of the medical mission female, missionaries purposed to change Ufuma women's code of conduct to align with the style they were conversant with in Europe. The church site (Holy Trinity Ufuma) became a hostel for the training of young females. The initial target was women who wished to get married on a Christian model. It was from these schools that young females were to be led straight to the altar for Holy Matrimony.

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[379] According to Leith-Ross' study of Igbo women in Nneato, "If their parents should have been sufficiently enterprising to send their daughter to school, and to be willing to pay for her, then the amount spent on her is added to the dowry, with much ultimate wrangling with the would-be suitor as to the number of pencils she used or the price of her text books. Yet, the idea that the woman is purchased, in anyway whatsoever by the man, is absent. Sylvia Leith-Ross, *African Conversation Piece* (London: Hutchinson and Co, 1943) 34

[380] CMS G3 A3 1940 Diocese of the Niger Synod Report, 1940

These schools tapped into a surging demand that Christianity itself had created by its arrival. There is a good reason why young unmarried Ufuma men and women were the most ardent supporters of the new religion in this second phase of its growth. Christianity, for this young generation, represented an escape from the misery of the farms and even more importantly, especially for Ufuma women, from arranged marriages and the much disliked polygyny. The desire of young women to marry well, and the opportunism of men who saw in the new religion a means to marry not just the women of their choice, but also to do so at a reasonable cost, encouraged the conversion of young people. Messenger observed the same among the Ibibio, noting that many men choose to join the mission because it cost far less than the traditional religion, which required payments to oath swearers, workers of magic, and diviners for their professional services; materials for sacrifices, which were conducted on numerous occasions; and the great expenses involved in joining a religious society or undertaking big projects like marriage. Being a Christian meant making only a small monetary offering at the weekly church meeting and spending the littlest of funds on a dowry.[381]

In fact, when the government administrator proclaimed the law that no woman must be forced to marry without her consent, a tremendous upheaval was caused. The custom of polygamy had made it impossible for many young men to find wives. With this proclamation, a vista of bliss was opened out to thousands of young lovers. In Idumuje, for instance, there was great rejoicing and the immediately engagement of many young people who wished to live married lives together in Christian homes with happy families. The Chiefs were very angry, threatening terrible results of serious unrest and uprisings through the whole community. For a while, the law was in abeyance and many girls were carried off by their male relatives to the

[381] John C. Messenger, 290

houses of their so-called husbands (men the families wanted them to marry instead), as the law could not be brought to bear on those already in their husband's homes. Girls ran to the missionaries for protection and named lovers to whom they were already betrothed who were prepared to repay dowries to chiefs. In many cases, through a long palaver, the father was persuaded to take the dowry and set the girl free to marry by choice. Other fathers went to the native court, with less happy results for the girl. For months this battle went on, but victory was ultimately on the side of the young women.[382]

Ironically, however, while missionaries criticized the control of older men on matters of marriage and advocated the "freedom" of indigenous women to marry young men of their own choice, these same missionaries sometimes asked older indigenous men to intervene in the possible marriages of their catechists, actively corresponding with them on the question of which converts might productively take on the responsibilities of marriage and when they should wed.

In short, it was the need for converts to marry within the church that forced missionaries to reconsider the importance of women to their mission and to take a serious interest in women's education for the first time.[383] To the missionaries, successfully placing their young male and female converts in Christian marriages would represent the attainment of "civilization," as the goal of such "civilization," when allied to Christianity, was to reform the manners of the

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[382] CMS ACC 4/ F 6 – Niger Dawn, 133

[383] G3 A3/0 1928-1926: CMS Niger Mission Minutes of Executive Committee contains several notes about catechists submitting applications for permission to marry to the Board and leaving a promissory to send his fiancée to a Women's Training Home before consummating marriage; Also see Misty L. Bastian, "Young Converts: Christian Missions, Gender and Youth in Onitsha Nigeria, 1880-1929," *Anthropological Quarterly* 73:3 (2000) 147, n' 155: Bastian notes that this practice was generally in keeping with the policy of the CMS for both its European and African Missionaries who were required to be permitted from the home office in Salisbury Square before taking a wife or husband.

converted.[384] In other words, for the missionaries, "civilization" meant conformity to western social manners and customs. Attributes of this so-called "civilization" were expected to be publicly exhibited or demonstrated outwardly as visible signs of an inward grace. In other words, "conversion," as noted above, was functionally understood as orthpraxis rather than as a cognitive process.

As has just been suggested, the quest to "civilize," as proposed by female missionaries, was not so much to prevent diseases, promote infrastructure or confer other rewards of the Industrial Revolution, but rather basically to domesticate women by emphasizing their role in the establishment and preservation of the family unit. As in other parts of the continent, missionary education for women was geared towards domesticating them as wives and mothers. Domesticity, the idea that good women should remain in the home, concentrating on their husbands and children and utilizing practical skills as housewives, was a bulwark of middle-class patriarchy in late Victorian Britain and reflected the ideal expectations of women in the Church of England. It must be borne in mind that European females (single women missionaries and missionary wives alike), though they would have liked to, did not yet enjoy some of the freedoms Igbo women took for granted at this point. In fact, several CMS documents points to the reckless high-handedness of male missionaries in their constant attempts to control of female missionaries, who were being endlessly placed on probation for offenses such as an "abnormal superiority complex," "timidity," and "self-will." believed to strain relations with Europeans from the 1920s.[385]

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[384] J.F.A Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841-1891: The Making of a New Elite* (Ibadan: Longmans, 1965) 14

[385] CMS G3 A3/ O 1920

Hence when female missionaries and the wives of missionaries arrived in Awka District, domesticity was seen as an essential component of the quest to "civilize" women. Core characteristics of domesticity include the expectation that every woman should ideally marry, become a mother, and essentially limit her activities to the homestead. The first two goals were already an important focus for the Igbo female teenager. The quest to marry and ultimately to become a mother drove Ufuma traditionalists in the pre-colonial period to the arms of Ajana-Ufuma, the deity of fertility. Every woman dreamed, swayed and prayed for marriage and motherhood. Hence the missionary ideal of domesticity did not seem far-fetched, although European ideas of marriage and motherhood did collide with indigenous beliefs on the issues of polygamy and birth control.

Rather, the aspect of domesticity that was out-rightly contested was the European attempt to make indigenous women limit their duties to the domestic sphere and minimize their contacts with the broader secular sphere. In fact, Ufuma-Igbo women loved their economic activities and freedoms and there was no way of denying these to them. As we will see, they deliberately attended programs that would advance their economic viability and skipped programs that did not translate into economic opportunities or freedoms.[386] They asserted their priorities through their choices, for example, to attend sewing classes and partake in agricultural activities rather than take knitting and cooking lessons.

One can certainly understand the Ufuma women making these choices, as there was an inherent contradiction in the missionary emphasis on domesticity. As already noted by Gaitskell, the very same female missionaries and missionary wives who advocated a purely domestic life were not leading one themselves. Although the many female missionaries and wives of CMS

[386] CMS, G3 A3/0 (1925) ACU 780 F1

agents in Ufuma did not usually hold paid employment, they were frequently out at meetings and like their husbands they travelled for evangelical purposes, to such an extent that they employed domestic servants who "kept their home."[387]

Beyond the existence of contradictions such as these, missionaries themselves were skeptical of their own overall progress. Writing in 1929, Winifred Yeatman lamented that the church was basically accumulating "a mass of half-hearted followers of Jesus." She admonished that the mission's "primary aim was the building up of the church rather than having thousands of well-kept homes."[388] In fact, female missionaries soon began to see that a common problem with the school system was that many girls completed the scheme due to the call for marriage, period. It was becoming clear that just as the medical mission, with its focus on curing diseases, was not meeting the spiritual needs of the people, neither was the educational system succeeding in bring women to Christ. It was making a great number of Christian marriages possible and promoting a Victorian ideal of domesticity, but was this why the missionaries had come to Ufuma? Missionary Ms. Henseley noted that the demands of the medical mission were clearly preventing missionaries from performing their professional work as Christian doctors should; they were over-burdened and so prevented from making explicit their witness to Christianity.[389]

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[387] Deborah Gaitskell, "Housewives, Maids, or Mothers: Some Contradictions of Domesticity for Christian Women in Johannesburg, 1903-1939," *Journal of African History* 24:2 (1983) 241-256

[388] CMS G3/A3 0 1939

[389] CMS ACC 4/ F 6 – Niger Dawn, 133

Phase Three (1930s – 1040s): "Bible Women" and the Mass Conversion of Ufuma Women

CMS missionaries worried that only few Igbo women could read the Bible and asked, "When they cannot read the Bible, how can they teach their children?"[390] Yet a few who could read and understand the Bible emerged and were referred to as "Bible Women" in Ufuma and among missionaries. Although often neglected in missionary records as well as in African mission historiography, these women were crucial mediators between indigenous culture and missionary culture in Ufuma. They played a decisive role in the receptivity of the church as they modified missionary learning and grounded it within the Ufuma context, making the new culture digestible by indigenes. A close exploration of these unsung heroines of the church in Ufuma in particular and Igboland in general reveals not just a gradual metamorphosis from a church of men to a church of women, but also divulges women's resistance against Christian missions, as Bible women sifted what they considered relevant in the new religion and negotiated those things they considered irrelevant to the group.

It is important to note that the CMS practiced an indirect missionary approach in their proselytizing of Ufuma. Unlike the Roman Catholics, who hired substantial missionary labor to carry out the duties of conversion through direct interaction with Igbo indigenes, CMS missionaries were mostly African/Igbo ex-slaves from Sierra Leone and indigenous Igbo new converts. This system of indirect evangelizing shaped the gender outcome of Ufuma Christianity, as will be discussed in the next chapters of this dissertation.[391]

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[390] CMS G3 A3 1940 Diocese of the Niger Synod Report, 1940

[391] Participant observation.

By the 1930s, it was clear that the project of domesticity was doomed for two main reasons. First, the site for domestic training was artificial and the training was mostly left to indigenous women, who, although products of the system, were relatively young in faith. Even missionaries noted that one hindrance to European missionary efforts in Igboland was the fact that the living quarters of missionaries were far away from the African living quarters.[392] European missionaries in the Awka district were generally itinerant workers who traveled from a central location in Awka town to different parts of the now Anambra region. Missionaries reflected that such distance symbolized the difference in lived Christian experience between missionaries and indigenous peoples.[393] Second, missionaries had too much work on their hands, hence evangelistic work was mostly left to new converts. Missionary wives and female missionaries were few in number and overtasked. This, coupled with their incessant ill health, meant that they were not always on location in Ufuma. Over time this led to the delegation of most evangelistic work to converts. In fact, in the wider missionary community the Church Missionary Society was notorious for its "band of native workers," with itsseveral indigenous leaders and operators.[394]

"Bible Women" were trained by European missionaries in the women's homes. Most of the time they functioned as personal aides to female missionaries, helping in interpreting messages and providing moral support to the mission. Bible Women are first mentioned in the archives in the late 1920s. Missionary diaries reflected on them as mere female teachers who began with teaching in the hostels so that before they spoke to outside groups they would have

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[392] CMS, G3 A3/0 (1925) ACU 780 F1, The Diary of Dorothy Moss, "The Pattern of a Life"

[393] Ibid.

[394] *The Lagos Standard*, Wednesday, October 23, 1907 p. 5 (VOL XIV – No 6, Lagos West Africa)

accumulated a wealth of experience to draw on. Bible Women played important roles within the medical mission and in fact they usually constituted a large part of the indigenous staff of the medical mission in Onitsha. They read Scriptures to patients, sang hymns and handed out tracts to patients awaiting treatment at the dispensaries. [395]

Missionary Eva E. Ross, upon visiting five training hostels from Onitsha, Awka to Owerri, noted that "each of the Bible Women in charge of these hostels had between 25 and 40 women, preparing them for the catechumens and Baptism." She also noted that although they were doing an excellent work, one feels that they ought to be under supervision. According to Ross, "When one thinks of the training a Missionary Evangelist gets before coming to the Mission Field, who has also had the advantage of being brought up in a Christian atmosphere all her life; then think of the short training some of these Bible women get, and the majority of them have only received the Gospel themselves a few years before, and yet they are entrusted with the task of teaching these women." She reflected that it was a very big responsibility, and that it was not fair to the girls to push them into it. "Yet what can be done when all these women are waiting and begging for teaching and nobody is coming from England to do it."[396]

In this atmosphere of understaffed missionary activities, Bible Women rose to positions of authority within the CMS mission. While, as noted, Bible Women often began by teaching in the hostels, they would go from there to preach to large groups, especially in the market squares on Sundays to crowds of men, women and children. They preached in fluent Igbo and mastered the oratory skills so revered in traditional Igbo culture.

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[395] CMS, G3 A3/0 (1925) ACU 780 F1, The Diary of Dorothy Moss, "The Pattern of a Life"

[396] G3 A3/) 1928-1929 Report of Miss Ross' Work 1927

Annual meetings of Bible Women began in the late 1920s. One such annual meeting, held in September 1932 in Ogwash-Uku, was attended by Bessie Ezekwem from Awka district, one of the prominent Bible Women still remembered in Ufuma. Bible Women capitalized on the little training and limited supervision they received from European female missionaries to mold the church more into the local idiom. This particularly influenced their approach to converting women.

Where missionaries had struggled and failed to harmonize indigenous cultural beliefs with Christian ones, Bible Women provided a middle ground between both, allowing more indigenes to explore the Christian faith. A remarkable example of the activities and successes of Bible Women is found in regard to the controversial issue of marriage. Marriage was a contested terrain not just in Ufuma but in the broader encounter between missionaries (Catholic and Protestant) and African populations. Marriage presented a very strong challenge to the growth of the church in Ufuma and it affected the conversion of women as a group.

According to the CMS definition, marriage was the "lifelong union of one man with one woman to the exclusion of others."[397] Along with this, Christians were required to marry in the Church. Converts who had contracted marriage according to the customs of the country and who sought admission in the Church by baptism were to be invited and encouraged after their baptism to seek the blessing of the church on their marriage, and thus give their union a Christian character. Christians who desired to receive the privileges of the church, namely confirmation, Holy Communion and baptism of their infant children, as well as to hold office in the church, had to first conform to the regulations of the Diocese governing marriage. Mixed marriages, that is between Christians and non-Christians, could not, as a rule, be recognized by the church.These

[397] CMS G3 A3/D1 1946 – Diocesan Constitution and Regulations, 1946

missionary understandings of marriage were very different from indigenous ones, which included women-to-women marriages, polygamy, and the like.

As a critical feature of Igbo social and economic life, all Ufuma men and women were expected to marry and procreate. Marriage guaranteed the society's social, economic, and cultural reproduction and it was also an important avenue for individual accumulation of social and economic capital. Through marriage, men and women expanded the pool of people from whom they could acquire economic resources. Marriage was also an important avenue to political power. This was especially evident in the status of wives of titled men. Polygyny, while a preserve of a wealthy few, was a cherished tradition in Ufuma. A wealthy man took on more than one wife because marrying several wives and consequently having many children translated to even more wealth as the family had more hands to work the land. For Ufuma people with vast and available land to farm, marrying several wives was popular whenever it was affordable.[398] Marrying several wives often translated into affluence because agriculture demanded a large labor force to work the farms. This made polygyny and subsequently large families advantageous. The high infant mortality rate also constrained men to marry many wives in order to have many children in the hope that a good number could survive to adulthood.

But the CMS missionaries had a negative opinion of this practice. They equated polygyny with adultery and conceived it as an offence against the law of God and therefore incapable of amelioration. To the missionaries, it represented the depth of the people's immorality and as such they adopted a very uncompromising attitude towards the practice and made it compulsory for converts to dismiss all their wives but one.

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[398] Interviews, Nwafor Fred Okoli (Umuonyiuka-Ufuma: September 30, November 3, 15, 28, 2011)

The church was clearly in a dilemma as to whether to "widen the narrow gate by admitting polygamists into the church."[399] The colonials did not so much fear ridicule from the indigenous people whom they were evangelizing; rather, they feared that a more lenient attitude would give the "Mohammedans"[400] occasion to triumph and declare that their religion was better than Christianity, which was apparently adjustable in its teachings and practices. But they also feared that the "heathens" would affirm that the life of polygamy, as practiced by their forefathers, was more suitable to them than that introduced by the new religion, and that the heathen young men would take a cue from the admission of their polygamous fathers into the church, wait till they had married many wives themselves, and then apply to be received. This, it was feared, would shake the faith and determination of converts who renounced polygamy will.[401] A CMS report for 1928-9 noted that marriage according to Christian ordinance was constantly being flaunted in Ufuma Parish, leading to the backsliding of several converts.[402]

In Ufuma, Bible Women played a decisive role in managing some of the conflicts resulting from this cultural clash in the area of marriage. Two direct consequences of Christian marriage that presented a direct struggle for the people of Ufuma include thed inclusion of second, third and fourth wives in the church and the management of widowhood. Since Christians were required to marry in the church, and converts who had contracted marriages according to the custom of the country and who were seeking admission in the Church by baptism were invited and encouraged after their Baptism to seek the blessing of the church on

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[399] CMS G3 A3/0 1887 Crowther: Notes on the Life of Polygamy in West Africa, January 18

[400] Ibid

[401] CMS G3 A3/0 1887 Crowther: Notes on the Life of Polygamy in West Africa, January 1887

[402] G3 A3/0 1928-1926: CMS Niger Mission Minutes of Executive Committee

their marriages and thus give their union a Christian character, several Ufuma women lost their source of livelihood. Since women were allowed to participate in the church based on the structure of their marital status, women in polygamous relationships needed to be handpicked by their husbands to enjoy full Christian rights. In other words, a woman in a polygamous relationship did not stand a chance in the church if she was not the "one wife" handpicked by her husband.

Two informants interviewed during this research represented those who had lost their marital livelihood to the new religion as victims of the "one man, one wife" doctrine of the church. On becoming Christians, their husbands were made to choose one wife out of several and because they were less educated, they were basically relegated to the background of the church. Their awkward position in their families carried on into the church, where they were deprived of participation in the Mother's Union.[403]

What is more, indigenous widowhood practices were shaken in the encounter between missionaries and the Ufuma. Where indigenous marriage practices absorbed a young widow into the same family into which she was married and made elaborate arrangement for the care of widows past menopause, the church opposed the remarrying of younger widows by their late husbands' relatives and made no directed provision for the care of older widows in the church.[404]

While missionary archival records are silent as to the fate of women not designated as official wives by their husbands and so recognized by the church, Ufuma oral sources show that

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[403] Interviews, Oluchi Okolie (Umuogem-Ufuma: September 31, 2011)

[404] It was later on that the CMS accepted such relationships if the kin was married before the Registrar relieving the contracting parties from suspension and their children allowed to be baptized. 1927

in spite of the hardships they faced in the early period of Christianity in Ufuma, these women went on to lead normal and inclusive lives in the Christian community, largely because of the negotiations of early Christian women including Bible Women. While the Mother's Union only accepted membership from women whom the church considered married, Bible Women, through the Women's Guild, created spaces and gave membership to women not recognized as married by the church. Bible Women also made concerted efforts at championing the cause of Christian widows. Whereas in the past Ufuma traditional customs redrafted young widows into the family and provided care for elderly widows (childless or not) until their death, Ufuma informants recall the activities of Bible Women as creating a cushion in the transition from the indigenous practice to Christian practice. From their responses to me on this subject, the statement that "widows are married to the church" began to take on a whole lot of meaning.[405]

What is more, the activities and accomplishments of Bible women raise very sensitive issues. Especially sensitive is the interpretation deduced from Ufuma women's discussion on Christian spiritual maturity. For Ufuma women for example, Christian maturity was measured by proximity to the church. In other words, Christian women measured seemed to explain their faith as Christians by such statements like: "I go to church every Sunday." "I was baptized at Holy Trinity Church when you were not even conceived." Ufuma women expressed to me the importance of marrying well with the same tenacity of voice with which they explained the importance of being baptized in the church and dying well. Dying well, for most Ufuma women, means not just having living a godly life but also receiving a burial befitting of a Christian. For many Ufuma Christians, the important privilege of having one's corpse at the church altar during

[405] Interviews, Madam Bessie Chukwu (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: November 17, 2011); Mrs. Edith Onwueyenwa (Umunebu-Ufuma: November 17, 2011); Madam Lucy Agu (Umuogem-Ufuma: Novemeber 17, 2011)

a burial ceremony not only represented a life well lived, it constituted proximity to the "saints and resurrection with Jesus on the last day."[406] This issue lay at the heart of Ufuma explanation of some of the accomplishments of Bible women in Igboland.

Yet Ufuma-Igbo Bible Women were embodiments of the Victoria domesticity life as they championed the cause of the Christian marriage by being themselves married in the church. They taught their students the importance of wearing the white wedding gown by adopting indigenous symbolic meanings to the color white of the wedding gown. According to Mrs Caroline Nwafor, a Bible woman and wife of late Catechist Cornelius Nwafor, the white wedding gown symbolic of Christian marriage, signified purity, *nso*, a state of mind that was by far the most relevant in Bible Women's teaching.

Conclusion

If there was anything like a religious "scramble" for Africa, Africans shaped the way it played out, as Ufuma sources show. In evangelizing and converting the Ufuma-Igbo women of southeastern Nigeria, CMS missionaries did not just focus on the spiritual aspects of their lives, but delved into material and secular aspects as well, to the extent that African women allowed. European missionaries and their African male agents felt that their religious included the necessity to control women's social activities. In their struggle to create models out of

[406] Interviews Madam Bessie Chukwu Enugwu-abo Ufuma (November 17, 2011); Interviews Mrs. Edith Onwueyenwa Umunebu-Ufuma (November 17, 2011); Madam Lucy Agu Umuogem-Ufuma (Novemeber 17, 2011)

indigenous women, who were conceived as primary missionaries in the home front, the missionaries pursued a number of projects that were aimed by and large at domesticating Ufuma-Igbo women. For the British missionaries, the plan was to transform Ufuma-Igbo women into educated yet domesticated housewives and mothers according to the Victorian ideal. These attempts did not always sit well with Ufuma women, who from pre-colonial times occupied not just the private but the public sphere. The public sphere, under the missionaries, was largely conceived to be a male sphere. Even as wives of European missionaries, CMS female missionaries did not rise above the positions that male missionaries allowed them. Ufuma-Igbo women, through negotiations and the seemingly social "weapons of the weak," not only defied these standards by prioritizing programs and skills they desired, they also managed to create spaces for themselves within the Protestant church.

This chapter has analyzed the encounter of the Christian missionary enterprise with the traditional value systems of Ufuma and the challenges associated with managing the problems generated by the interactions. In this chapter, understanding is gained on Ufuma gendered responses to European missionary intrusion, the essence of missionary rivalry between the Roman Catholics and the Anglicans in Ufuman, and the meaning of conversion to Ufuma in the early 1920s and 1930s.

This chapter has also highlighted Ufuma-Igbo women's missionary contributions to the conversion of men, women, and children in Ufuma beginning in the early period of Christianity in the region through the life histories of two Bible women recalled in Ufuma oral history. It has also highlighted the different meanings of conversion. Whereas missionaries (European and indigenous) interpreted this process as beginning with baptism and Christian marriage, indigenous Ufuma interpreted it as a dramatic change in lifestyle, which ultimately included

attending church, changing clothes, and baptizing infant children. In all, conversion began first with an outward demonstration of change. That is, it was orthopraxis, not a cognitive process. Whether as Christians or traditionalists, Ufuma women maintain a monotheistic view of God and do not see ancestors as sharing an equal status to God but function as mediators.

From the sources I gathered, it became clear that the Bible Women were the most important factor in the ultimate success of the missionary enterprise in its third phase. They were able to moderate the European gospel messages so that they reached the Ufuma people. They did this by cushioning the gospel message with indigenous belief patterns, thus making the new message digestible to Ufuma converts and would-be converts.

CHAPTER FOUR

"FISHERS OF WOMEN": THE STORY OF HOW A CHURCH FOR MEN BECAME A CHUCH OF WOMEN IN IGBOLAND

Introduction

In January 2013, Igbo women of the Catholic Diocese of Ahiara Mbaise in Imo State, together with priests and the laity, rejected the choice of the pontiff in the appointment of a new bishop. In their protests they noted that the "imposition" of this bishop on the diocese would not "promote the spiritual wellbeing and the precious faith of [Mbaise] people . . . given its uniqueness and pastoral realities." The president of the Ahiara Diocese Catholic Women's Organization, Mrs. Felicia Nwogu, also noted that their stance was not driven by "chauvinism, but by equity, justice and fairness." She added, "We believe we have credible priests who can be made bishop, instead of imposing someone who does not understand the culture of the people and we have an obligation to reject anything that imperils the faith of our people."[407] The angry Catholics who barricaded the gate to the big Cathedral displayed placards that read "We don't want Okpalaeke as Bishop" and "The Pope should rescind his decision and appoint one of our priests."[408]

This chapter is not necessarily about the struggles of Igbo Catholicism or the deeper ethno-cultural divisions stamped on Igbo church history since colonial times. Rather, it concerns

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[407] "Ahiara Catholic faithful protest, reject appointment of bishop," by Anolu Vincent Senior Correspondent, *Daily Independent Newspaper* (Sunday January 13, 2013)
[408] Ibid.

the socio-political roles that Christian women's associations have assumed in mainline churches in Igboland. It endeavors to make sense of the changes the African church has undergone in its history from a church for men to a church of women. This subject is important because while a number of Ufuma CMS Christian women patronize African-pioneered churches, a large number of them still consider themselves Igbo Catholics and Anglicans. These women identify with these churches the way one would wear a badge of honor, oblivious of the gender dynamics operating within these orthodox and patriarchal church institutions. In my interviews with them, Ufuma women not only defended their religious affiliations as Catholics and Anglicans, they often castigated new Christian movements. Staunch in their beliefs, Ufuma women oftentimes referred to indigenous spiritual churches as illegitimate children of Christianity. According to Madam Bessie Chukwu, "The Anglican Church and the Catholic Church are the only true churches ordained by God from the beginning."[409] Of course there were exceptions to these views, as some women seemed conversant with some of the criticisms leveled against mainline churches with regard to gender discrimination. A few others argued that mainline churches are not wired or equipped to deal with peculiar Ufuma realities, including the anxieties of witchcraft and poisoning.[410]

This chapter is inspired by my observation of Ufuma women and their religious cum social activities within the Anglican Church, especially in their exclusive church groups and associations. In the time I spent in Ufuma, there was usually one activity or another going on, including meetings at individual homes, at daughter or mother parishes, and in the market

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[409] Interviews, Madam Bessie Chukwu (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: November 17, 2011)

[410] Interviews, Madam Bessie Chukwu (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: November 17, 2011); Mrs. Edith Onwueyenwa (Umunebu-Ufuma: November 17, 2011); Madam Lucy Agu (Umuogem-Ufuma: Novemeber 17, 2011)

square. In all, women of the Anglican denomination had about fifteen organizations, associations, and prayers groups in which they actively participated in. In fact, individual women were sometimes members of three or more of these types of Christian associations. At Ufuma, I was privileged to meet some of the most active members of these women's organizations. I became interested in examining these organizations and what they meant to Ufuma women as I grew more aware of their ambivalence towards the time-consuming activities of their organizations. It also became clear to me that the membership of women in these organizations or associations was directly linked to their social status, both in the secular as well as in the religious community, so that it became almost impossible to study Ufuma women's religious history without an assessment of the roles of these associations in their individual lives.

While notable scholars such as Judith Van Allen have concluded that colonialism and the spread of Victorian gender ideologies propagated by missionaries led to a loss in women's political participation and the invisibility of Igbo women as a cultural group, this study argues the contrary by highlighting avenues through which women created niches for themselves in the new era, reminding the reader that such avenues used by women was not necessarily alien but autochthonous to women's traditional political participation in history.[411] I argue that Ufuma-Igbo Christian women created spaces of authority within the Anglican Church through associations and unions including the Mother's Union, Women's Guild, and prayer groups. While these associations provided indigenous women with religious meaning in a dominant patriarchal Christian structure and allowed a platform for fraternization, they were also an important factor differentiating classes of Christian women in Ufuma society.

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[411] Judith Van Allen, "Sitting on a Man: Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 6:2 (1972) 177ff

This chapter draws largely on CMS missionary reports, archival records and oral interviews, and it is divided into four parts. The first one explores the history of female organizations in Ufuma, arguing that church women's groups stand as extensions of pre-colonial-type associations. By establishing this link, this study shows how women's associations have changed over time in Ufuma history, from pre-colonial era daughters' (*umuada*) associations to modern-era church prayer groups.

In part two, I dwell on the process that led to the gradual demonization of traditional institutions in Igbo history and particularly the way the activities of CMS missionaries affected traditional women's associations.

In the third section, I explore the transplantation of European associations like the Mother's Union and Women's Guild from European cultural setting to Ufuma starting in the late 1920s, paying particular attention to the ways in which Christian women's associations challenged the status quo of female participation in the Igbo orthodox church. I am interested in how these associations tipped the gender balance in church participation/leadership and challenged male patriarchal authority, Victorian style domesticity, and biblical notions of male headship.

In the fourth and perhaps most interesting section of this chapter, I engage the ways in which Ufuma-Igbo Christian women's associations presented opportunities for differentiating and grouping women. Although Ufuma women describe church organizations as a place for fraternization, these associations became platforms to emphasize age, marital, and status distinctions among Ufuma women as part of a larger move to create a legitimate persona for Christian women. In other words, through their numerous title taking opportunities, Christian women's associations ironically create a demarcation between rich and poor women, and

between Christian married and non-Christian married women, in Ufuma. By underscoring differences based on these categories, Ufuma women redefined marriage, respectable behavior, and Christian virtue.

The Roots of Christian Women's Associations

In chapter one, I briefly explained the dual sex system and described how a diffusion of political power defined gender differences and spheres of influence in pre-colonial Ufuma. I also briefly explained that this gender duality between Ufuma men and women translated into the political and religious spheres, so that each carried out their responsibilities without infringing on each other's territory or space.[412] Whereas men dominated the Elders Council in pre-colonial Ufuma, the dual sex system ensured that Ufuma-Igbo women also participated in the public sphere and that each sex managed its own affairs through distinct and gendered kinship institutions, age grades, and title societies.[413] Perhaps the Village Assembly, which met as the need arose in Ufuma, was the only gender neutral-organization that allowed political participation of men and women on a single platform.[414] Male/female elders and young folks

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[412] Interviews, Mrs. Edith Onwueyenwa (Umunebu-Ufuma: Novemeber 17, 2011); Also see Kamene Okonjo, "The Dual-Sex Political System in Operation: Igbo Women and Community Politics in Midwestern Nigeria," in N.J. Hafkin and E.G. Bay eds., *Women in Africa, Studies in Social and Economic Change* (California: Stanford University Press, 1976) 45

[413] Interviews, Fred Okoli (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: Novemeber 3, 2011); Also see A.E. Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in Southeastern Nigeria, 1891 -1929* (London: Longman, 1972)

[414] Judith van Allen, "Sitting on a Man": Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 6:2 (1972) 166; Also see M.M. Green, *Igbo Village Affairs* (London: Frank Cass, 1947); Sylvia Leith-Ross, *African Women* (London: Faber and Faber,

who had something to say that was of concern to all were encouraged to speak at the Village Assembly. As Judith van Allen has clearly pointed out, the mode of Igbo political discourse involved the use of proverbs, parables, and metaphors drawn largely from Igbo cultural traditions. Hence, the leaders of Igbo society were men and women who combined wealth and generosity with "mouth" and a vast knowledge of local history. The "art of conversation," as Chinua Achebe rightfully calls it, is accessible to all, as it constitutes a major part of traditional Igbo education. Ufuma indigenes learned this art through core cultural participation in the Village Assembly, as well as through cultural institutions such as age-grade and masquerade societies. Individuals unable to interpret a proverb or a parable were generally regarded as unwise members of society.[415] The matters brought before the Village Assembly in Ufuma included both religious to political matters, such as conflicts involving abominations against the earth deity and armed conflicts between village groups, as in the case of war with the Inyi in the late pre-colonial period. Other political institutions were either pro-male or pro-female associations aimed at administering needs specific to men or women.

For Ufuma women, this clear political division of labor and specialization allowed them their own governing council, which addressed their specific concerns and needs as women. Two women's associations, divided along the lines of citizenship by marriage and by birthright, protected women's social and economic interests and guided the community's development. In other words, there were two primary associations for women in Ufuma and most married women belonged to both, since they were naturally daughters (*umuada*) of their paternal lineage and

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1939) J.S. Harris, "The Position of Women in a Nigerian Society," *Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences* 2:5 (1940)

[415] Interviews, Fred Okoli (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: Novemeber 3, 2011), Judith van Allen, "Sitting on a Man," 167

wives of their husband's lineage (*inyomdi*) at the same time. The *Umuada*[416] united all Ufuma women on a patrilineal basis and as such, every Ufuma woman is potentially an *umuada* primarily before belonging to any other group by virtue of birth into the clan. In other words, the *umuada* was every woman's first and primary association, a cultural birth-right. Even when women were married outside Ufuma, they retained this position and were able to route their authority through this medium even in their marital abode.

No exclusive male institution in Ufuma rivaled the Women's Council or the daughters' (*Umuada*) associations in Ufuma. Just as women were ignorant about the exclusively male masquerade cults, Ufuma men were unaware of the activities of women in their meetings.[417] While scholars like Carwile argue that members of *umuada* did not attain their full role until they were married and became members of *inyomdi* in their husband's lineage, exogamy did not simply increase the powers or authority of an *umuada* in Ufuma.[418] Unmarried women in their roles as *umuada* in residence may have exercised even more powers than *umuadas* who married away, providing an important link for women leadership on ground in the patrilineage. This dual-symmetrical structure accorded an immense political profile to women, both in communities with constitutional monarchies like Onitsha and in the non-centralized democracies of the eastern hinterland in pre-colonial times.[419]

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[416] Translation: Congregation of first daughters

[417] Interviews, Fred Okoli (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: September 30 and November 3, 2011)

[418] Christey Carwile, "Sweet Mothers: Feminine Forms of Power in Nigeria," Ph.D., Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, 2007, p. 56

[419] Nkiru Nzegwu, "Recovering Igbo Traditions: A Case for Indigenous Women's Organizations in Development," *Women, Culture, and Development: A Study of Human Capabilities* by Martha Nussbaum and Jonathan Glover eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 445-446

A second association was for women who married into Ufuma sub-clans. Called *Inyomdi*,[420] its members exercised some authority within the clan, but this was not equal to what they exercised as *umuada* in their paternal abode. Although married Ufuma women naturally navigated these two associations during their lifetimes, women generally belonged to several other associations. Ufuma women's membership in these two associations is symbolic of the positions they occupied in their lifetimes as insiders and outsiders, straddling two worlds (natal and marital) at the same time, a quality that accorded Ufuma women immense influence in religious matters, conflict resolution, and long distance inter-ethnic trade in pre-colonial times.[421] These associations played varying roles in traditional Ufuma-Igbo society. As political units, they were powerful pressure groups. At the religious level, *umuada* leaders filled important spiritual roles as mediums especially in negotiating the rites of passage of Ufuma ancestors and the dead. As Leith-Ross notes about Nneato, the councils had both spiritual and temporal powers in that their duties were backed by the earth deity *Ajana-Ufuma* and could be enforced by "making war," "the destruction of property or the infliction of corporal punishment through ridicule by the women themselves."[422] Specific functions include the performance of rites related to birth and burial ceremonies, the enforcement of the rites of widowhood, ensuring that widows of their deceased brothers observed the prescribed widowhood rites and practices as

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[420] Translation: Congregation of lineage wives

[421] Interviews, Morrison Okonkwo (Umueji-Ufuma: November 16,' 2011); Bedford Nwajagu (Umunebo Ufuma: November 12, 2011); Nwafor Fred Okoli (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: November 3, 15, 28, 2011)

[422] Leith-Ross, *African Women,* 109

rigidly as possible,[423] judicial deliberations over marital issues within the clan, and leisure activities including ceremonies, dance and music. These associations also organized to represent specific women's interests, especially in the enforcement of customs that protected women's farm produce from being destroyed by foraging animals and rules that checked wife battery.[424] Hence, women's associations acted as agents of social control, checking deviant behavior and insisting on obedience to community norms. They also functioned as traditional courts *par excellence*, dealing out punishments for crimes committed by children as well as adults and serving the economic needs of members through the mutual aid clubs that are so common among people of African descent.[425]

In pre-colonial times, when the Ufuma operated a diffused political system, it was imperative that men and women belonged to one or more social groups for the sake of collective strength and action and to enhance community cohesion.[426] Thus, Ufuma women belonged to several associations and as a group commanded the respect of men and women alike.[427] Other women's associations in Ufuma traditional society included *ogbo* (age grades) dance groups, market associations and titled women's associations. Ufuma women fraternized in these associations. They met regularly and also informally to discuss matters arising daily in the

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[423] It is in this context that the authority of the umuada was considered sacred in pre-colonial Ufuma.

[424] Interviews, Madam Bessie Chukwu (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: November 17, 2011); Mrs. Edith Onwueyenwa (Umunebu-Ufuma: November 17, 2011); Madam Lucy Agu (Umuogem-Ufuma: Novemeber 17, 2011)

[425] Interviews, Madam Bessie Chukwu (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: November 17, 2011); Mrs. Edith Onwueyenwa (Umunebu-Ufuma: November 17, 2011); Madam Lucy Agu (Umuogem-Ufuma: Novemeber 17, 2011)

[426] Green, *Igbo Village Affairs,* 231ff

[427] Interviews, Fred Okoli (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: September 30 and Novemeber 3, 2011)

society. Like every socio-political organization, Ufuma traditional associations in pre-colonial times had their own codes of conduct, rules and regulations, fines and penalties, fees and mutual aid contributions. What must be said is that where there were inequalities within women's associations, these centered around markers such as seniority, motherhood and singleness. Of these markers, motherhood was perhaps the most important differentiating leadership factor in women's associations in pre-colonial times. A similar idiom of motherhood rises in importance in church women's associations.

Missionary Criticism of Traditional Women's Associations

The encounter between the Ufuma and CMS missionaries resulted in the gradual demonization of women's associations. Although the CMS would eventually and unconsciously reorder its missionary approach to suit the traditional Igbo system by adopting a gendered division of labor, and it would ultimately encourage Christian associations along the gender lines observable in its own male-to-male and female-to-female missionary approach, its initial assessment of traditional groups and associations was negative. To the men and women of the CMS mission, every traditional institution, including the *Umuada*, age-grades, and traditional trade unions, was tainted by "paganism" and was to be purged by every means possible. New Christian converts were discouraged from participation in these associations or in activities related to them.[428]

[428] NAE ONDIST 12/1/854 – Conflict between Christian Rights and Pagan Customs; Also J. Nwajagu and I. Orabasili, *History of Holy Trinity (Anglican) Church, Ufuma,* 6-7

Specifically because CMS missionaries and their African agents endeavored to create a distinct Christian community in Ufuma and Igboland in general, a community separate from the secular society, early Ufuma Christians were discouraged from participating in associations including age grades and *umuada* council meetings as these were considered things of the world, *ihe ndi obodo.*[429] An initial delicate cooperation between the CMS and women's associations may have been strategic for winning converts, since reports by older Ufuma Christian women suggest that although they were often ostracized by their un-converted sisters, they were allowed to attend their age-grade and women's meetings, *nzuko umunwanyi*, without much molestation by their Christian leaders in the early 1940s.[430] A few older men recall the harassment of traditionalists who did not stand for Christianity but stated that they were allowed the freedom to socialize and mix with their unconverted mates in traditional meetings like the Village Council.[431]

This initial understanding would change as more indigenes converted to Christianity in Igboland. European missionaries and their African auxiliaries would try to enforce some type of separatism between Christians and non-believers in Igboland. In several annual reports of the CMS, European missionaries basically attacked every custom that was deemed a threat to authentic Christian living in Igboland. A debate that began in Onitsha and Awka districts much earlier than the advent of Christianity in Ufuma was whether or not Christians could take titles, participate in traditional burial rites or celebrate children, femininity, manhood, or motherhood

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[429] Translation: "things of the world."

[430] Interviews, Alice Okechukwu, Mercy Ude, and Christiana Ugboaja (Enugwu-abo Ufuma, November 11, 2011)

[431] Interviews, Levi Amobi Okeke (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: November 17 and December 3, 2011)

according to customary traditions.[432] At a conference in 1909, European and African missionary agents in Onitsha combed through all traditional Igbo customs and basically distinguished between traditions Christians could participate in and customs considered abominations for Christian converts.[433] What is clear from the committee's findings is that certain practices, termed "pagan" by the missionaries, including customs involving ancestral worship and animal sacrifices, were generally discouraged for Christians.[434]

Missionary attempts to control the activities and associations of new converts were very complicated. While some group practices were outright negative, many were neutral or both positive and negative. For instance, while marriage practices involving *Uri*[435] were discouraged for young CMS converts, the practice of visiting one's future husband's relatives by Ufuma maidens was not completely ruled out.[436] Missionaries were also confused about banning wrestling altogether, because while it contained no "pagan" rites and formed an important part of recreation for men, it took place in the month of the forbidden New Yam festival. Several other associations, rites, and practices were simply moderated. *Omugwo*[437] rites, involving the

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[432] CMS G3 A3/0 1909 – Minute of the Standing Committee of the Annual Conference

[433] Ibid.

[434] Ibid.

[435] Traditional Female Body Painting/Staining with Uri, a rite done in preparation of a maiden for marriage among the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria. Interviews, Joy Anyanelechukwu Nwankwo (Enugwuabo-Ufuma November 12, 2011); Also see Simon Ottenberg, "Igbo and Yoruba Art Contrasted," *African Arts* 16:2 (1983) 49

[436] CMS G3 A3/0 1909 – Minute of the Standing Committee of the Annual Conference

[437] Omugwo is part of the tradtional practices associated with the care of a pregnant woman to the delivery and care of a baby among the Igbo of Southeastern Nigera. See Edylyne Anugwom, "Starting Out: The Omugwo Practice and Institlling the Rudiments of Childrearing in Mothers among the Igbo of Southeastern Nigera" in Pranee Liamputton, *Child Rearing and Infant Care Issues: A Cross Cultural Perspective* (New York: Nova Publishers, 2007) 158

celebration of motherhood from pregnancy to delivery, were not affected. The traditional practice of mourning of the dead (which was, by the way, a terrain under the control of Ufuma women) was clearly under attack. Missionaries decried "excessive wailing and shrieking," waking, and putting on and taking off mourning apparel, and they maintained that "other pseudo-civilized ceremonials connected with [these rites] should not be encouraged."[438]

Perhaps the most attacked aspect of women's associations in Ufuma was recreational activities that included dancing. Dance is an important part of group association in traditional Igboland. As a form of group identity, dance, like wrestling, competitive games, and masquerade races helped maintain cohesion among associations, cults, and institutions. Dance demonstrates how consciousness as a social construct is constantly being negotiated in traditional associations and can be a useful resource for understanding agency and consciousness. Leith-Ross's 1930 journal description of Igbo dance and its relevance to Igbo women's group identity is particularly telling.

> Their hands beat strongly together, regularly, without pause or break, a beat like the pulse of an unseen life, but beating with conscious vigour. And as their hands came together, their bodies swayed with the same movement, their hands slightly bent…Their song rose as if it might be the sea singing, high and free, above the long swing of the Coast rollers. Every now and then they ceased, so that the solo singers might have their chance…and sometimes a long line of women gay with kerchiefs, wound in and out, stamped and twirled in now narrowing, now widening circles. They ran into the open space like an unruly mob, but in a moment the song had mastered them, and step and gesture were disciplined, unified. Their deep-coloured cloths glowed in the long beams of the setting sun made brighter by purple storm clouds, and behind me the song rose steadily above the bending blue-clad heads. It's this song I can't describe…I can still think nothing but the Aboh dance."[439]

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[438] CMS G3 A3/0 1909 – Minute of the Standing Committee of the Annual Conference

[439] Leith-Ross, June 9-10 Journal Entry in *African Conversation Piece,* 126-127

As Ranger points out in *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa*, studies of popular culture, especially dance, are valuable for getting at the experience and attitudes of the masses. Although Ranger's assumption that dance was the manifestation and reaction of the inarticulate as the masses did not control formal means of articulating their desires – the universities, pulpit, press – this was not necessarily true of traditional Igbo culture. Nevertheless, dance as a group expression does provide an opportunity to consider how far Igbo women have had to make use of informal vocabulary to make public statements, to fraternize, and eventually to create niches for themselves within the church.[440]

Men danced, but most of all they enjoyed masquerade activities more. Their leisure activities also had a social purpose. Masquerades, for instance, helped in the maintenance of law and order. If a person failed to take part in a community project such as the cleaning of the stream without any excuse or reason, the organizer of the project would send the chief masquerader to his house to seize something of sufficient value to pay the fine that had been imposed on the absentee. The masquerader could demand a goat, a cock, etc., but if the accused paid the fine, he got this possession back. The masquerader had to ensure that justice was done to everybody. Decisions taken by the council of masquerades were generally not challenged.[441] More so, masquerade races were very much enjoyed by men, women, and youth. However, boys who had not been initiated and women were discouraged from some masquerade leisure activities. There were other masquerade characters who only sang and danced or made jokes. An

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[440] T.O Ranger, *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa, 1890-1970: The Beni Ngoma* (Berkeley; University of California Press, 1975) 3; Also see David Coplan, *In the Time of Cannibals: The Word Music of South Africa's Basotho Migrants* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) xvi; Clyde Mitchell, *The Kalela Dance: Aspects of Social Relationships among Urban Africans in Northern Rhodesia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1956)

[441] Interviews, Ekene Okonkwo (Umuonyiuka-Ufuma: August 20, 2011)

outstanding one was *Osudu*, which was the friend of men, women, boys, and girls as well as young children. At times, a boy from an age grade would challenge the masquerade owned by another member of that same age grade to a running competition.[442]

Overall, a historically ingrained system of social distancing between the sexes meant that dance, like everything else was gendered, so that men and women, boys and girls socialized and had separate leisure lifestyles. On rare occasions, dances were sometimes organized in age grade groups where men and women or boys and girls danced together. Leisure activities among men and women thrived around competition. There were dance, music, wrestling, and masquerade competitions between the nine Ufuma villages. The competitions took place in the evenings and were attended by all members of the community at large.

The most popular dance for Ufuma men was the war dance known as *abike*, which was done during the burial feast of an important man. In the pre-colonial period, it was danced exclusively as a victory dance after an inter-clan war. Only those who took part in the war or those who had succeeded in cutting the heads off some of the attackers were allowed to take part in the dance. In the colonial period, *abike* was not only fading, but it became open to any young man of achievement, such as one commemorating a university degree or the completion of an apprenticeship.[443] Other popular dances for men include the *egwurugwu* dance, in which they danced side by side with gaily decorated masquerades. This dance is said to require great skills.[444] Traditional Ufuma women's recreational activities, like those of men, included

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[442] E. O. Asiegbunam, "Western Education and Social Changes in Ufuma Clan in Eastern Nigeria," (Department of Education, Nigerian College of Technology Zaria TT & S, 1960/61) 50

[443] Interviews, Ekene Okonkwo (Umuonyiuka-Ufuma: August 20, 2011)

[444] Asiegbunam, "Western Education and Social Changes in Ufuma Clan in Eastern Nigeria," 49; Other male dances include The *ubo* dance as well as *egwu ogele*.

associations united by dance. Women danced in large groups with musical instruments including *udu* and *nkwo-nkwo*.[445] They held contests between members of different age grades and also between the various age grade units.

The importance of leisure for Ufuma women cannot be overemphasized. Yet traditional music and dance was much more than plain leisure. It provided a rallying point for Ufuma women and in the face of conflicting opinion and agenda, it delivered the much needed unity in women's associations. For many, music and dance spoke louder than voice. It was at the heart of the act of "sitting on a man," women's ridicule of supposed male authority and in its dynamism lyrics could be verbally targeted at defunct patriarchal structures and individual subjects. Leisure associations were also a determinant of social mobility in Ufuma history. Margaret Green notes that bonds were reenacted between wives and daughter through dance in pre-colonial times, ensuring unity in group actions.[446] As we will see, music and dance became an important factor in attracting women, as well as men, to the church, to the point that the same activities missionaries once called "heathen" became the backbone for rallying women to the cause of the CMS in Igboland.

African dance was declared wicked and obscene by European missionaries and colonial administrators beginning in the 1930s. This was largely because dance was looked upon as being essentially "sexual in tone and therefore demoralizing."[447] Of course, only a few European personnel noted that traditional ceremonies and dances had a great deal more to them than the

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[445] *Udu* is made of an ordinary earthen pot with a long neck and a hole made on one side.

[446] Green, *Igbo Village Affairs,* 206

[447] Leith-Ross, *African Women,* 311

"silly, pointless, ugly" things that the average white person saw in them.[448] Bearing in mind that young Igbo women's bodies and sexuality were perceived as snares that could "entangle the missions in dangerous local politics" as well as destabilize the "young converts" who were expected to lay the foundations of the Anglican Church throughout Igbo-land, banning dance was an integral part of missionizing Igboland.[449] Male missionaries particularly wondered:

> How is it possible for the young people to be either pure in thought or chaste in deed? When the older girls & women are unclothed to the waist, and when even among Christian mothers an upper covering is considered a 'fad,' rather than an act of decency, is it to be wondered at that the young men fall an easy prey to the enticements of the girls? The African Christian woman has yet to learn her responsibility in this direction, and we trust that the Missions to Women held during the year in this District and else-where, to be followed by a Conference of Women on Social and other subjects next year at Onitsha, may lead women to see their duty in this matter of Social Purity."[450]

In 1937, a ban on African dance was justified based on this concern as according to the missionaries, "nearly all native dancing and drumming roused bad associations."[451] By the 1940s, when the Christian missionaries' clamp-down on women's gathering and leisure activities was at its height, Ufuma Christian women recall not being able to hold group meetings or attend traditional dance festivities. They were also discouraged from attending traditional women's council meetings because they might be asked to contribute towards some pagan feast or

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[448] Leith-Ross, *African Women,* 306

[449] Misty Bastian, " Young Converts: Christian Missions, Gender and Youth in Onitsha, Nigeria 1880-1929," *Anthropological Quarterly* 73:3, (2000) 150; CMS G3 A3/0 1910 – Annual Letters by Rev. J. Wilson

[450] CMS G3 A3/0 1910 – Annual Letters by Rev. J. Wilson

[451] Journal Entry March 4, Sylvia Leith Ross, *Africa Conversation Piece* (London: Hutchinson and Co Ltd, 1943) 55

sacrifice or be asked to join in some ritual singing and dancing.[452] Although women continued to cooperate as far as business was concerned, since the goals of traditional associations were the betterment of women economically and socially, a religious divide affected the level of rapport between Christian women and their unconverted sisters in Ufuma.

For men, the missionaries were also very strict. Male children were not simply forbidden to take part in traditional celebrations; many boys gave up the possibility of joining men's secret societies, a major avenue to status in traditional Ufuma life entirely. While a few boys may have taken advantage of this religious separation, since it provided an escape route from arduous communal tasks and responsibilities within age grades, a majority felt deprived of group associations.[453] Missionaries' control of their new Christian converts did not stop with just "heathen" activities. Young Christians were also discouraged from participating in activities that were non-CMS, so that informants recall being flogged in school if they attended a Catholic Church Bazaar the Sunday before.[454] Women in particular were discouraged from becoming familiar with women or men who had converted to Catholicism or to one of the indigenous Christian churches that sprang up around Ufuma in the third decade of the twentieth century. The ties with the Anglican Church were expected to supersede every other, religious and secular. In other words, religious allegiances in general and denominational patronage in particular were to be exclusive and in fact, CMS missionaries would construct indigenes as having "backslidden" if they married Catholics and switched their allegiance to the Catholic Church.[455]

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[452] Interviews, Mrs. Edith Onwueyenwa (Umenebo-Ufuma: November 17, 2011)

[453] J. Nwajagu and I. Orabasili, *History of Holy Trinity (Anglican) Church, Ufuma,* 6-7

[454] Interviews, Mrs. Edith Onwueyenwa (Umenebo-Ufuma: November 17, 2011)

[455] CMS ACC4 F8

All told, European missionaries deemed it fit to restructure Ufuma-Igbo leisure patterns and associations. The schools became important sites for rebranding men and women's lifestyles according to the precept of European missionaries. Victorian style domesticity was the model for Ufuma-Igbo women. It must be said that missionary schools, like traditional rites, had their own aesthetic attractions and their own religious basis. There were tests of accomplishment and physical punishment for behavior in both. The school, as a form of initiation, permitted social mobility within a particular set of social relationships and organizations, as did traditional rites.[456] Naturally, while girls found female models in the wives of their teachers, men found male models in male missionaries. Hence, what the school provided was an alternative to age grades and initiation groups for men and women of Ufuma.

Some types of activities or leisure patterns were imported into Ufuma schools by the missionaries, who promoted sports in their colonies, for example, as a form of social discipline intended to inculcate a shared set of social values and conformity to missionary rules and colonial hierarchy. Leisure as directed by the church was thus lauded as a socializing space in which young girls and women could fraternize. Yes, as many scholars have explored in various studies, it was not long before African men and women embraced such spaces, made them their own, and customized it to suit their own social, political and economic ends.[457]

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[456] See Simon Ottenberg, "Colonialism and the Individual: A Nigerian Life History" in *Igbo Religion, Social Life, and Other Essays* edited by Toyin Falola (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2006) 200-201

[457] See Laura Fair, *Pastimes and Politics: culture, community, and identity in post-abolition urban Zanzibar, 1890-1945,* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001)

New Christian Women's Associations

Ironically, the same leisure patterns which missionaries and European personnel first condemned as having a negative effect on Christian growth in Igboland ultimately became the backbone of efforts to ensure women's participation in the church in Ufuma. As men and women of Ufuma unequivocally pointed out, the youthful Christian bands dressed in colorful attire and parading through their *Ilo* during the period of missionary enterprise enticed them to look forward to joining the church. This makes it clear that European evangelical strategies were adapted to suit indigenous interests. Ufuma women recall how travel with peers into neighboring Ajalli for dance and music competitions ensnared them in the church. Ufuma men recall the bands that marched through Enugwuabo-Ufuma streets every Sunday morning and admit that these led them to the church.[458]

As a result, through the interplay of indigenous interests, the European missionary education and domesticity projects, and the missionaries' goal of making converted indigenes exemplary Christians, several associations emerged as European missionary responses to the need to sustain African participation in the church. Alongside European-introduced associations, indigenous leisure patterns, including the previously condemned music and dance, reemerged within the church in Igboland. In other words, Ufuma-Igbo women engaged in the new Christian women's associations as they did in pre-colonial associations, seizing them as a platform for group assertion in the Christian community.

For their part, female missionaries first tried to establish women's groups at school to stem the tide of women's interaction with non-converts and especially the incidence of women

[458] Interviews, Mr. and Mrs. Ferdinand Okoli (Umuonyiba-Ufuma: August 24, 2011)

going off to get married to non-Christian villagers. One such group established in the Awka district was the Scripture Union, mostly attended by the few women who could read their Bibles in the early 1930s. By encouraging Christian women who had graduated from the training homes to meet periodically as "Old Girls" or members of Christian women's associations, missionaries hoped that as "iron sharpened iron," Ufuma women could retain their Christian faith through controlled rapport. Archival records show that within the same period, regular women's conferences were established by joint committees of female missionaries and prominent Old Girls in Ufuma. The first of these conferences was held in January 1910 at Ozala, Onitsha Waterside, where CMS women missionaries maintained a residence and offices within a mostly male-dominated mission compound. Over seventy women, youthful and married to CMS educated men, attended the conference, many coming from what were then formidable distances. Besides prayers and a lengthy discussion of the future of mission education for women in the Igbo-speaking areas, the Old Girls were encouraged to discuss their personal situations.[459]

Another women's association, the Women's Guild, started in the 1930s. It was originally introduced by Bishop Frank Jones and his wife, Frances, in the diocese of Lagos. It was open to all baptized women of the Anglican Church. Members of the Women's Guild, like the Mother's Union, subscribed to six rules, including the admonishment to reach the Bible and pray every day, to uphold the sanctity of marriage and raise godly Christian children, to lead exemplary lives void of "debt, corruption, alcohol, blasphemy and slander," to attend church services and women's meetings and to win souls for Christ regularly. [460]

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[459] CMS G3 A3/ 0 – 1910; Misty L. Bastian, "Young Converts: Christian Missions, Gender and Youth in Onitsha Nigeria, 1880-1929," *Anthropological Quarterly* 73:3 (2000) 149

[460] CMS G/Y A3/2 1940 – Diocese of the Niger Synod Report, May 4-10, 1940

European-introduced associations combined spiritual and imperial purposes. When in the late 1930s European Missionaries, in their relative kindness, extended membership of the Mother's Union to indigenous Igbo women, the Union remained largely in cities and under the leadership of European CMS women.[461] Originally founded in 1876 by Mrs. Mary Sumner[462] in England and officially recognized as a church organization in 1887, one of the founding principles of the Mother's Union was that the home ought to be the basic foundation for character and religious formation for British women. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Mother's Union came to believe that in order to further women's calling as Christian mothers they needed to do more than simply awakening maternal responsibility in British women.[463] Mother's Union members especially those in the mission field soon began to extend the union to colonized women.

From 1896 onwards the MU began consciously and deliberately to establish itself as an imperial organization. This involved much more than collecting a membership in British territories or creating a central council on which diocesan presidents from the colonies were entitled to sit. The MU developed an imperial corporate ideology to unite and sustain home and overseas members in a common purpose and "growing sense of a worldwide Anglican identity

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[461] CMS G/Y A3/2 1940 – Diocese of the Niger Synod Report, May 4-10, 1940

[462] Mary Sumner Vocational School, Awka stands in memorial of this event in the history of the church in Nigeria. See Report of Second Annual Diocesan Women's Conference of the Mother's Union and Women's Guild (Oko: 1994) 5

[463] Judith Rowbotham, "Ministering Angels, not Ministers: Women's Involvement in the Foreign Missionary Movement, c. 1860-1910," in Sue Morgan, ed. *Women, Religion and Feminism in Britain 1750-1900* (Basingstoke, 2002) 179-195

[that] coincided with the age of high imperialism."[464] Also at the heart of MU's understanding of its mission to the women of 'the commonwealth' was the concept of "divine patriotism," embodying a sense of Christian Imperial duty to "civilize" the "heathen." For female European missionaries, this state of mind came with a sense of moral superiority that would especially be deployed in the debates over appropriate Christian motherhood practices in the colonies.[465] While records show that membership of the MU was reserved for urban Igbo women in Onitsha, Awka and Owerri in the 1940s, Ufuma women did not qualify for membership until later.[466]

In keeping with the ideal of monogamy, liturgies of admission to the Mother's Union (MU) institutionalized and reinforced the importance of Christian marriage and Victorian virtues of domesticity. At their swearing in, Igbo initiates were expected to profess the following five goals: to uphold Christ's teaching on the nature of marriage and to promote its wider understanding; to foster the upbringing of children in the faith and life of the church; to maintain a worldwide fellowship of Christians united in prayer, worship and service; to promote conditions in society favorable to stable family life and the protection of children; and, lastly, to help families in adversity. This enrollment service usually took place after a Holy Communion or Morning Prayer service. The first prayer of the newly admitted members of the Mother's Union

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[464] Cordelia Moyse, *A History of the Mother's Union; Women, Anglicanism, and Globalisation, 1876-2008* (Suffolk UK: The Boydell Press, 2009) 81; Kevin Ward, *A History of Global Anglicanism* (Cambridge, 2006) 300

[465] Moyse, *A History of the Mother's Union; Women, Anglicanism, and Globalisation, 1876-2008,* 81-82

[466] CMS G3 A3/0 1940 – Diocese of the Niger Synod Report, May 4-10, 1940

is entitled "Teach Us to Train Our Children for Heaven."[467] The same liturgies reinforced Victorian domesticity and biblical patriarchal principles as found, for example, in Ephesians 5:22-23, a passage that admonishes wives to submit to their husbands as to the Lord and establishing the headship of men in the family.[468]

As diocesan organizations, the Women's Guild and the Mother's Union had the bishop's wife serving as president and the archdeacon's wife as the vice president. Wives of the vicars were enrolling members and had the primary responsibility of preparing candidates for admission. These women ran women's organizations as a place where mothers could fellowship and learn the care of children and upbringing through group effort and shared knowledge. This was usually punctuated with bible study, prayers and talks/workshops.[469] Through these group meetings, Ufuma sources point out, women began to "shoulder offices of responsibility in the church," becoming less satisfied with being left on the margins in church participation and duties.[470]

Regular women's association conferences held annually created avenues for Igbo women to fraternize broadly, allowing them to look outward beyond their natal and marital abodes, thereby encouraging a pan-Igbo women's identity. At these conferences women raised concerns about marriage, their families, the church, and their children's education. CMS records show that

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[467] Ekpunobi, "The Church of Nigeria: Occasional Services," in *Oxford Guide to the Book of Common Prayer: A Worldwide Survey* by Charles Hefling and Cynthia Shattuck (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 2008) 307

[468] Ekpunobi, "The Church of Nigeria: Occasional Services," in *Oxford Guide to the Book of Common Prayer: A Worldwide Survey* by Charles Hefling and Cynthia Shattuck (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 2008) 306-307

[469] Grace Iwuagwu, "Women Organizations as Partners in Progress" in Rev. Canon Shed Adiele (ed), *The Niger Mission: Origin, Growth and Impact 1857-1995*(Uyo, Nigeria: 1996) 167

[470] J. Nwajagu and I. Orabasili, *History of Holy Trinity (Anglican) Church, Ufuma,* 15-16

women raised important questions, such as, "How is it that if a man's wife dies, he can marry again, but a woman cannot marry again?" This question arose over the policy of a Christian woman being banned from marrying her deceased husband's brother. Women asked, "If it was lawful for the Jews to marry the deceased husband's brother [as provided for in the Old Testament], why is it not legal in this country?"[471] For Ufuma-Igbo women, Christian women's associations provided a platform to share their interests and once again, it also served as pastime.

A 1924 Report of the CMS reports that

> the women look upon the conference as a great social treat and regard it as a time for making friendships and discussing women's problems together. There can be no question that many of the women learn more from quiet talks together than they do from the meetings, profitable though they are.[472]

Christian women's associations were quite appealing to Ufuma women perhaps because they afforded a structure similar to the one found in the traditional system, whereby men and women operated separate territories of influence. A greater appeal came with the Mother's Union, especially its much celebrated "motherhood." Initially, however, the Mother's Union "theology of mothering" had its root in the traditional Anglican teaching around Mothering Sunday, which focused on the "mother church" but later extended to family life in Britain. In other words, the Mother's Union differentiated between the spiritual motherhood of the church and earthly motherhood within individual families.[473] Hence, in the colonial context, European missionaries emphasized the former (the spiritual motherhood of the Church of England) above the latter (earthly motherhood within the family), as this clearly benefitted not just the CMS

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[471] CMS G3 A3/0 1909

[472] CMS ACC4 F8

[473] Moyse, *A History of the Mother's Union; Women, Anglicanism, and Globalisation, 1876-2008, 108-110*

agenda but the imperial plan. In this context, female European missionaries and the Church of England represented the ultimate motherhood.

In the years that followed, Ufuma-Igbo women would transpose the European understanding of motherhood and relocate its meaning, authority, and power within a more indigenous ideology. Bearing in mind that motherhood was central to African women's personal and cultural identity long before the missionary incursion into Igboland, an understanding of motherhood as "social identity"[474] had to be adapted to suit multiple understandings and expectations specific to the time period. For instance, in the pre-colonial period, motherhood as women's identity was deployed in inter-ethnic wars for diplomatic negotiations between Ufuma women and their paternal lineages. It was also routed in internal gender struggles when in the act of "sitting on a man" (*Ichike n'ana*) Ufuma women diabolized their private parts (the female genitalia) though group action to seek change.[475] Another utilization of the concept of motherhood was witnessed in the Women's War of Igbo women against their colonial oppressors in the late 1920s.[476] With the many changes going on during the colonial period, it only makes historical sense that Igbo women in general reordered ideas about "the good mother," womanhood, gender identity, birth-control, and child-upbringing based on their changing circumstances. As Christian women, Ufuma-Igbo perceptions of motherhood would combine Christian principles with indigenous core beliefs. An important instance was the Mother's Union

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[474] On this definition of motherhood see Cherryl Walker, "Conceptualising Motherhood in Twentieth Century South Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 21:3 (1995) 424

[475] Interviews, Regina Okonkwo (Ozegu-Ufuma: August 17, 2011)

[476] Judith van Allen, "Sitting on a Man: colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 6:2 (1972)

attempt to spread the use of birth control into Ufuma to control births in Igboland. On this issue, Ufuma-Igbo women held strongly to traditional birth-control through breastfeeding.

Perhaps a meeting point in conceptions of motherhood between Ufuma-Igbo women and European CMS missionaries was the agreement on prayer. Igbo women clearly took this principal MU calling further than European missionaries intended. As we will see in the next section and in chapter five, women's active roles in prayer meetings, prayer houses, and prayer crusades is reminiscent of their previous roles in traditional Ufuma as priestesses and prophetesses extraordinaire. In fact, the emphasis on prayer as the Christian woman's calling would guide the emergence of Ufuma women as pioneers of prayer houses in Ufuma history. What is clear is that women's roles as leaders of prayer groups in the Anglican Church in Ufuma afforded women a new platform to take a stand, air their concerns, and have their voices heard in a new patriarchal religious system.

Class and Status Distinctions within Christian Women's Organizations

Before European missionary influence started decreasing in the period following the Second World War, Igbo indigenes were already reordering church associations to suit their varying interests. While Christian women associations remained an important platform for making their voices heard within the church and placed women as a major pressure group campaigning not just for the rights of women but for equal educational opportunity for their children, Ufuma-Igbo women also reorganized their activities within church associations to suit their interests. Of particular interest to many new converts remained perhaps music and dance.

Frances Hensley brought the question of the new musical bands to the attention of the CMS committee in its 1924 annual meeting, noting that the bands "are making themselves felt in our church life" and worrying that missionaries may be "called upon to take action [against them]." She pointed out that although band activities were prominent during weddings, they were also used extensively for evening performances to provide music for dancing after church. In her words, "the question is rather a delicate one but something will have to be done to regularize the use of these bands otherwise there will be a danger of many young folks being drawn back into old customs under a new guise."[477]

As Christian women associations began to reorder their priorities along the lines of traditional institutions, the new fraternity that emerged was not exactly like the old. New Christian women's associations became less egalitarian as Igbo women's differences in education, lifestyle, religion, and class were brought to light. In the 1950s and 1960s these differences became even more rigid as Ufuma women went back and forth between big cities including Onitsha, Enugu, Awka and Lagos. Lines were drawn not only between resident and itinerant Ufuma women but also within each group. In other words, there was a difference between itinerant women who basically traded in the big cities and those who held "white-collar jobs." Likewise, there was a marked difference between stationary Ufuma women who were local farmers/trader and those educated few who taught in Ufuma primary schools. Although class differences were mostly drawn based on women's pre-occupation, several other groupings was forged based on other variables including spirituality. Ufuma women differentiated between women married in the church and ran their homes based on Christian principles and women on whom only traditional rites and a bride price were paid. In their conversations with me, women

[477] CMS ACC4 F8

of the latter category likewise espoused an air of superiority over women who missed a Christian marriage but also went on to marry non-Christian husbands.[478]

Because missionaries were already making conscious efforts to categorize women, the new divides between married Christian women and their "pagan" married sisters, between rich women and poor women, and between the educated and less educated became strongly pronounced. In several records of the CMS, female missionaries differentiated between "Big Girls," who were missionized and groomed for marriage to catechists,[479] and "Small Girls," who were relegated to vernacular or day schools in Igboland.[480] What is more, even though other women's groups emerged like the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), founded in 1921 by Mrs. Howells, the wife of the Assistant Bishop on the Niger, because the Mothers' Union was very selective and strict in the appointment of its members, the YWCA was not open to all Igbo Christian women. Although it claimed to provide a uniformed Christian Association for unmarried women and for some older women who were not married in the Church, and though it aimed to give its membership a sense of belonging to and of recognition in the Church, non-western educated Ufuma women were denied membership.[481] The YWCA women were given fundamental Christian training as women or as mothers for a good Christian home, for decency and for the fulfillment of their duties as Christian women. In the church, they

[478] Interviews, Gladys Nwankwo (Umunebo-Ufuma: October 12, 2011)

[479] CMS ACC4 F2 – Journals and Letters of Francis Dennis 1910

[480] CMS GY A3/2

[481] Interviews, Madam Bessie Chukwu (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: November 17, 2011)

participated in a variety of ministries including the choir and side wardenship. But they were not allowed to read lessons even when they were literate.[482]

By the 1950s, Ufuma-Igbo women known as "Big Girls" and "Small Girls" in missionary records were grouped into the Women's Guild and Mothers Union; the former being for all women of the church, while the latter was for those who were married and met other necessary requirements. Educated and Christian married women received extensive support from the church as means to an end, while their non-western educated sisters were construed more or less as burdens to the mission. A gap was thus created between Christian educated women who became teachers, nurses, midwives, and secretaries and their uneducated sisters who remained farmers and traders in Ufuma. As wives of catechists and pastors came to lead women's associations in this period of dwindling European influence, they would naturally assert their leadership over the other women. When checked against the traditional system, where the spokeswoman was distinguished not just be age but by oratory skills and charisma, the new leadership system was clearly out of step with the old. Yet the rekindled emphasis on prayer and other traditional leisure art forms including music and dance would not only draw new women to the church, it would also provide a new platform for extensive fraternization beyond Ufuma.

As more indigenous Christian women took over the leadership of women's associations, differences became less pronounced in structural organization, but distinctions became more evident in material wealth and title taking. Women's associations including the Mother's Union became tools to emphasize age, marital, and status distinctions among women as part of a larger move to create a legitimate persona for married women. Through its numerous title taking activities such as *Ezinne* (translation: 'the good mother'), a title established to celebrate

[482] Grace Iwuagwu, "Women Organizations as Partners in Progress" in Rev. Canon Shed Adiele (ed), *The Niger Mission: Origin, Growth and Impact 1857-1995*(Uyo, Nigeria: 1996) 165

motherhood in Igbo Anglicanism, women's associations did not only become a platform for class reification but a field for reconstructing the meaning of motherhood. Motherhood in this context combined European interpretations that rallied around the domestic sphere to traditional interpretations which exalted a broader point of view. Whereas in the former, a mother's role was relegated to the immediate household, in the latter Ufuma-Igbo Christian women emphasized the traditional principle of *nne ora* (Mother of all) which reified women's roles beyond the household. The new idiom of motherhood, bearing the earmarks of traditional perspectives was extended to include the care of children beyond one's household and even the care of the community at large. This new call oftentimes necessitated enormous wealth.[483]

Consequently, although titles such as *Ezinne* were meant to honor women who had lived exemplary lives both in the church and in their homes by raising godly children, they soon became commercialized and attracted women with the financial resources to buy such titles. Such practices created a demarcation between the rich and poor, Christian married and non-Christian married women in Ufuma. By underscoring differences based on these categories, Ufuma women redefined marriage, respectable behavior and Christian virtue within the church. *Ezinne* title holders therefore represent the evolution of CMS "Big Girls" over time. Hierarchies were also established in the church and women's associations between wives of catechists and lay Christians and wives of unconverted indigenes. [484]

In subsequent years, Ufuma women of the Women's Guild and Mothers' Union combined to form the *Ochirigwe* Meeting. Several other women who did not fit into the above

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[483] Josephine Nwafor, Umunebo-Ufuma (October 28, 2011)

[484] Interviews, Madam Bessie Chukwu (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: November 17, 2011); Mrs. Edith Onwueyenwa (Umunebu-Ufuma: November 17, 2011); Madam Lucy Agu (Umuogem-Ufuma: Novemeber 17, 2011)

groups would end up in various prayer groups. Initially, these were named after some of the pioneer members of the church including Isaiah Nwangwu, Stephen Onyekwena, Aaron Okeke and John Agwunta. Hence women groups were initially named Otu–Nwangwu, Otu–Onyekwena, Otu–Okeke and Otu–Agwunta. These groups engaged in rotational hosting of prayer meetings, at which they also discussed the progress of the Church. They took turns hosting prayer meetings and Saturday church compound cleanings and they engaged each other in healthy competitions at harvests and other occasions to benefit the Church. In later years, the groups were renamed Otu-Udo, Otu-Okwukwe, Out-Anulika and Out-Ifunanya.[485] A unified Ufuma Christian women's prayer assembly became known as Nzuko Ogige. As the oldest organization, also known as the Women's Prayer Meeting, it was comprised of all the registered members of every congregation. Its responsibilities included supervising the affairs of the women in the church and the meetings of women within the church. On the many Saturdays I saw them meet, these women prayed, organized night vigils with special guests invited, and organized clean-up and material assistance for members. At the end of this meeting, the women went out in twos for evangelism and home visitations.

Although it was mostly dominated by Christian women, partially because of their educational and economic advantages, all Ufuma women, Christian and non-Christian, came under one umbrella organization, the Women's Home and Abroad meeting, popularly called the August Meeting in the 1950s. Where missionaries once drew rigid lines between "saved" and unconverted women, the Catholic and Anglican Ufuma women's associations now create bridges across ethnic divides through the August Meeting. The origins of "August Meeting" in Igbo women's history is not very clear. While oral interviews claim that it was in existence from the

[485] J. Nwajagu and I. Orabasili, *History of Holy Trinity (Anglican) Church, Ufuma,* 15

late 1970, studies by other Igbo scholars claim that it began in the late 1980s in the Old Anambra State for development purposes and group action within rural communities.[486]

Founded in 1955, this organization has been ably led over the years by capable and dynamic women like those of the pre-colonial past who did not just have oratory skills but also possessed economic and social skills to unite the groups towards achieving developments in all spheres of their lives.[487] Patronized by Ufuma men and women at home and abroad, the grand "August" annual meeting, which would usually last for about a week, united women of all walks of life under one platform and created opportunities for women to organize, discuss and deliberate on issues that affected them as a group and to decide how to tackle or solve the different problems confronting them as wives and daughters of the lineage.

A top priority on the agenda of Ufuma August Meetings is fund raising to aid several development projects. Beyond their individual churches, these women's development projects include those initiated by women themselves, such as the modernization of the market stalls, as well as those initiated by their male counterparts or husbands, such as the digging of a bore hole for water at a Ufuma primary school. As a self-help organization, the August Meeting also runs credit unions, providing women with financial base and with training on how to run businesses. As a forum to empower women, annual August meetings solidified women's relationships across Igbo communities and thus broadened their identity beyond the local.

The Ufuma Women's Home and Abroad Meeting can also be placed in the context of an ethnic women's economic movement that engaged economic independence as route to women's self-assertion in an increasing patriarchal society. By participating in the International Women's

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[486] Akachi Odoemene, "(Re)Venturing into the Public Sphere: Historical Sociology of 'August Meeting' among Igbo Women in Nigeria," *Africa Development* 36:2 (2011) 232

[487] J. Nwajagu and I. Orabasili, *History of Holy Trinity (Anglican) Church, Ufuma,* 15-16

Day celebrated around the world annually, Igbo women made connections and addressed some of the broad issues affecting women the world over. In August meetings, Ufuma women would go beyond their constituency to invite women from all works of life to speak to them. Activities were usually spread across the week.

Conclusion

The history behind how women created spaces for themselves in male dominated orthodox churches is not entirely clear. What is evient is that CMS missionaries and indigenous women restructured the church along traditional lines by separating male/female spheres of influence. Although this chapter may make it sound as if Ufuma-Igbo women operated outside the corridors of the church in their exclusive associations, Ufuma-women saw within the missionary instituted Mother's Union a new outlet to express the traditional women's council role. Hence they sustained the MU by active participation early on, and through it they participated in activities within the church. Ufuma men unanimously note that they cannot run any project in the church now without the support of the women's wing.[488]

What has been said is that traditionally, Igbo women had allegiances that extended beyond their marital households, whether through continued participation in their natal patrilineages (*umuada*) or through the relations developed in trade or among other *inyomdis* (wives of the lineage). For Ufuma women, the right to exclusive associations as a group was a given since pre-colonial times, so that when the CMS missionaries tried to reorder the terms of

[488] Interviews, Venerable C.O.C. Ikpa (Umenebu-Ufuma: November 14, 2011)

women associations and fraternities, Ufuma women utilized the traditional/indigenous political kit of women's associations to create spaces for themselves within the church and make themselves relevant in the new patriarchal religious system. In other words, Ufuma women have always had rights to exclusive associations as a group since pre-colonial times, and although the coming of Christianity presented a different platform, it did not alter this structure. Christian women's associations grew by leaps and bounds just as the Anglican Church membership multiplied.

But it was a very difficult process that witnessed the attempted disintegration of women's organizations in the early days of missionary influence. This process of disintegration also involved the demonization of women's leisure activities, activities that were the rallying point for women's associations in pre-colonial times. Ufuma women resisted these measures mostly by negotiation, so that by the end of the colonial period, women as a political unit had not only reemerged within and through the church, they had also redrafted missionary recommended leisure activities in the church, retaining aspects of the new and merging them with the old.

Ironically, the formerly demonized leisure lifestyles became one of the strategies European missionaries employed in trying to attract Igbo men and women to the church. Ufuma women confess to the role worldly activities had in luring them to attend churches with their friends. The missionaries soon realized the importance of music and dance, so they established a brass band at school. Missionaries noted that students put more in their performing than they expected. Ufuma people came to enjoy European events such as Empire Day with its sports, feasting and merry making, as well as the Christmas, Easter and New Year celebrations introduced by colonizers. Men and women of Ufuma equally pointed out that the youthful Christian bands dressed in colorful attire and parading through their *Ilo* during the period of

missionary enterprise entinced them to look forward to joining the church. In the case of Ufuma, indigenous forms of associations including the age grade system as well as traditional *umuada* associations provided a fertile ground for such missionary-influenced leisure to thrive. For instance, the infamous "August Meetings" organized by Ufuma-Igbo women both at home and abroad have evolved over time, so that they now bear not just the marks of the types of leisure activities the missionaries encouraged Ufuma women to participate in, but also the age-old *Umuada* organization enjoyed by Igbo women from pre-colonial times.

Where African scholarship has in the past engaged leisure and Christianity in separate contexts and made hardly any effort to examine ways in which religion and leisure intertwined, an approach that risks trivializing the essence of Christianity for African women and men in Igboland, this chapter documents some of the ways in which Ufuma women and Igbo women in general continued to contest and create spaces for themselves in the so-called "mainline" churches in Nigeria. Bearing in mind that traditional associations dealt with matters beyond the social including the religious, Ufuma-Igbo women did not mind bringing their leisure to the church.[489] This study is an attempt to explain the meaning of the social activities of women's fraternities in the church. Although CMS missionaries intended to create churches controlled by men and patronized by women, women have taken control of the church to such an extent that

[489] In pre-colonial times, I gathered that women's associations dealt with affairs beyond the social including the religious. Such groups like the Umuada and Inyomdi would talk about and agree upon the sacrifices to be made to Ajana-Ufuma and consult diviners and meet for dances. The religious and the secular were meshed. They also participated in the administration of justice both as wives or daughters of Ufuma. Like Leith-Ross notes on Nneato-Igbo, the councils had both spiritual and temporal powers in that their duties were backed by the earth deity Ani and could be enforced by "making war," the destruction of property or the infliction of corporal punishment as in ridicule by the women themselves. See Leith-Ross, *African Women,* 109

although a few men control leadership posts, women hold the majority of positions of authority within church groups both individually and collectively. In other words, despite missionaries' sustained efforts to be "fishers of men," they caught women instead.

CHAPTER FIVE

WOMANIST AFRICAN INDEPENDENT CHRISTIAN MOVEMENTS

Introduction

When I told people in Nigeria that I was studying *Uka Ekpere Ufuma* as part of my dissertation, they almost always had something negative to say about the organization. Only a few acknowledged that it was one of the earliest indigenous initiated churches in Igboland and that several Pentecostal ministries had arisen from it, including the now-famous Christian Pentecostal Missions with branches in hundreds of Nigerian cities and abroad. Individuals who were aware that the church wore uniforms and that members were always dressed in white tops were also very quick to identify *Uka Ekpere Ufuma* as that "white garment church" in their descriptions. While the wearing of uniforms particularly makes the church visible to public scruity and castigation, the average Nigerian knows little or nothing else about *Uka Ekpere Ufuma*. The best I got from knowledgeable individuals in the community regarding the movement was in regard to its gift of prophesy. Villagers in Ufuma told stories about individuals who were very sick and whom western medicines and doctors could not heal, but who went to the church a got their healing through a direct prophetic message from the Holy Spirit.

The rise of African Independent/Initiated Christianities (AICs)[490] is often explained as an African reaction to colonial domination, a rejection of missionary control, or a response to

[490] AICs are those African Christian movements that draw on African indigenous religious ideas and cultures in their Christian practice. They often disagree with this definition and argue that their Christian character is authentically/purely a Christian one.

Protestant denominationalism and scriptural interpretation.[491] Historians often regard AICs among the Igbo as a phenomenon infiltrating in from the more religiously radical Yoruba of the southern parts of Nigeria. Thus, a majority of the studies of AICs in Igboland focus on the activities of Yoruba Aladura churches (the Church of the Lord, the Eternal Order of Cherubim and Seraphim, the Apostolic Church and the Celestial Church of Christ) that have been transplanted into the eastern region.[492] In such studies, the Igbo are tacitly considered incapable of adapting Christianity to their own indigenous religious milieu. Building on this premise, scholars like Ayandele have argued that the Igbo conversion to Christianity was "nothing short of an epic." In an earlier study, Ayandele asserted that "not even in Ijebuland, similarly conquered by the British invaders and where the gospel achieved an amazing success, were the walls of 'pagandom' to collapse Jericho-wise as in Igboland."[493] In other words, the Igbo swallowed Christianity completely and so among them, forging new religious movements that merged traditional religion with Christianity, as AICs are prone to do, was difficult. Ayandele maintains that following the destruction of the Arochukwu Long Juju by the British invaders in 1902, "the Bible rolled through Igboland like a juggernaut, crushing the gods to atoms."[494] There was no indigenous strategy to check this European assault for "the Igboman . . . was in no

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[491] Alan Anderson, *African reformation: African Initiated Christianity in the 20th Century* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, c. 2001) 27

[492] See Nkem H. Chigere, *Foreign Missionary Background and Indigenous Evangelization in Igboland* (Munster: Lit, 2001) 414 Also see Edmund Ilogu, *Christianity and Igbo Culture: A Study of the Interaction of Christianity and Igbo Culture* (New York: Nok Publishers, 1974) 61, 111-112

[493] E.A. Ayandele, "The collapse of 'pagandom' in Igboland", *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 7(1) (December 1973), pp. 127.

[494] Ayandele, 125-139; Also see F. Hale, "Debating Igbo Conversion to Christianity: A Critical Indigenous View, *Acta Theologica* 2006:2,
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way disposed to invoke the already discredited traditional religion to halt the white man's religious intrusion into his world and invasion of his being."[495] In trying to redeem the Igbo from this misconstrued interpretation, a scholar like Ogbu Kalu, in his essay, "Color and Conversion,"[496] unsatisfactorily blames the Igbo "fascination with the exotic" (i.e. white people and their ways), local distrust of black missionary personnel, as well as other material and immaterial factors. While it is easy to dismiss Ayandele's claim as historically biased since resistance, however passive, is a given wherever conditions of repression exist, the preent lack of studies on indigenous Igbo AICs leaves this claim unopposed.

This chapter seeks to redress this situation by presenting the history of one of the first and perhaps the most enduring African Indigenous Christianities in Igboland, the All Christian Practical Prayer Band (ACPPB), founded between the late 1940s and the early 1950s. The seeds of sectarianism were definitely sown earlier, because a 1928 CMS report provides a hint. Although Ufuma Anglicanism had expanded by 1928 to include some sixteen daughter churches and it had recorded a great number of converts, we are informed that the progress was inconsistent and that regression had set in. "Baptisms were not performed at Alunawta owing to the unsteadiness of the Christians there"[497] and members of Ufuma Parish were constantly under suspension for "immorality," "unruliness," and "stiff-neckedness."[498] In the same year, a number of Christians in the Parish had also regressed and professed to be known as a sect called

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[495] Ibid.

[496] Ogbu U. Kalu, "Color and conversion: the white missionary factor in the Christianization of Igboland, 1857-1967", *Missiology: An International Review*, 18(1) (January 1990), pp. 61-74.

[497] CMS G3 A3/0 1928-1926: CMS Niger Mission Minutes of Executive Committee

[498] CMS G3 A3/0 1928-1926: CMS Niger Mission Minutes of Executive Committee

"Faith Tabernacle." Although their ring leader "Isaiah" would die in the same year after a sudden illness, the inadequacies of the church to sustain teachers in the Parish may have also contributed to a deepening of sectarianism in Ufuma.

The ACPPB was founded by Madam Nwokolo (aka Nwanyi Ufuma), a woman who in the late 1940s started healing through prayer, fasting, and the use of holy oil. Drawing on the intrinsic democratic mores of Igbo religio-political culture, Madam Nwokolo refused the pressure to inaugurate and register a separate church, insisting that it was a "Praying Band." She advised those she had cured to go back to their own denominations. This example of Madam Nwokolo was not followed by the more "institution-minded" prophets and prophetesses who, with or without connections to her, dotted Igboland with hundreds of similar indigenous Christian movements.[499]

There are two identifiable sources of inspiration for the ACPPB and other indigenous groups of churches in Igboland; external and internal. On the one hand are externally influenced American Pentecostalism and other Nigerian Separatist Movements, and on the other are indigenous influenced indigenous movements. Within the twenty five years between starts of the First and Second World Wars (1914-1939), Igboland felt for the first time the influence of a separatist Church as well as of an American sect.

In 1916 the Garrick Braide secession had taken place in the Delta area and entered Igboland through the Christ Army Church, which was organized from the secession. Braide had been influential member of the Anglican Church. At Saint Andrew's Bakana he was the Pastor's Warden around 1914-1915. He later developed efficacy in divine prayer healing and a prophetic attitude to religion, which for some time he employed in this pastoral work, but he later

[499] Edmund Ilogu, *Christianity and Igbo Culture: A Study of the Interaction of Christianity and Igbo Culture* (New York: Nok Publishers, 1974) 61

organized what he called a Prophetic Movement. This was declared heretical by Anglican Bishop Johnson, in charge of the Delta area. A large number of members from various Anglican churches who sympathized with Garrick Braide joined him in forming the first Prophet Church, which was the first breakaway church that grew in Igboland.[500]

The American sect that arrived within this period was the Faith Tabernacle "Church," another faith healing Christian movement.[501] This time period in the history of the church in Igboland is important because it witnessed an exodus of missionary expatriates from Igboland and slackened foreign control of the growth of the church in the region. During this period, there were hasty efforts to find trained Igbo Christians to man educational and administrative posts hitherto occupied by European missionaries. What is more, Igbo educated laymen were multiplying not just in numbers but also in knowledge of happenings elsewhere, including in Yorubaland, and hence were becoming more and more critical of missionary activities.

While I cannot argue that the American Faith Tabernacle or the Yoruba *Aladura* churches directly influenced the rise of ACPPB, given the pace with which Nigerian communities integrated in the colonial period, a study of the movement is a major contribution to Igbo religious history. Beyond the aforementioned racial-ethnic and colonial explanations given for the rise of AICs, this study proposes gender politics as a factor compelling the rise of what I call "womanist AICs" in Igboland. I define "womanist" AICs as Christian religious movements rooted in the lived experiences, cultural identities, and gender history of African women in definite contexts. My list of "womanist" AICs includes the ACCPB and other ministries (mostly founded by African women) including Grace Tani's Church of the Twelve Apostles in Ghana

[500] CMS G3 A3/0 1934
[501] CMS G3 A3/0 1928

and Alice Lakwena's Movement in Uganda. While these movements may draw on core Christian principles in their practices, they incorporate elements of indigenous religion, especially those aspects that enact the ritual importance of women in African society in areas of healing, prophecy, motherhood and family solidity. These movements may also equip women to mobilize against Christian traditions that are oppressive through a womanist reading of biblical texts. They may also re-establish an indigenous gender structure by emphasizing complementarities and gender-based division of labor within the church/organization. It is on this premise that this essay lays claim to a new category of African Christianity, arguing that female-pioneered movements like the ACPPB and others with certain attributes identified above may allow us distinguish between two typologies of African Christianity, "womanist" movements and others.

In an approach informed by history, biography and the anthropology of religion, this chapter aims to contribute to the knowledge of female-initiated Christian movements in African history. As history and biography, it traces the beginnings of the All Christian Practical Praying Band (ACPPB) and the life history of its founder, Madam Sophie Nwokolo. As anthropology, it assesses the rituals and symbolisms associated with indigenous gender principles and religious practices evident in the movement. Beyond the often mentioned racial and colonial explanation given for the rise of African Independent Churches (AICs), this chapter proposes gender politics as a fundamental factor compelling the rise of womanist AICs, especially the All Christian Practical Praying Band (ACCPB) and other African-initiated ministries so founded. As an exercise in the biography cum history of the late Madam Sophie Nwokolo (aka Nwanyi Ufuma) and the All Christian Practical Praying Band, gradually established in the late 1940s, it examines the convergence of Christian and Igbo indigenous religious ideas and examines how symbolisms

are constantly deployed in female-founded ministries. It interprets ACPPB gender practices as outcomes of intersecting local cultural legacies from Igbo indigenous beliefs and Christianity.

Madam Nwokolo's Life History

Oyodo Ugwori (later Madam Nwokolo) was born in 1920 to the family of Ugwori Nwaegaji and Ogbonne Idu Origba of Ogbodu village in Ovoko town of Nsukka.[502] Her parents practiced subsistence-farming, planting yams, coco-yams, and cassava and other small vegetables.[503] Consistent with the gender division of labor operative in Igboland, Oyodo's mother planted coco-yams, cassava and other garden crops, as the cultivation of yams was considered a male prerogative. Farming was a family occupation and Oyodo and her siblings often accompanied their parents to the fields to assist in planting, weeding, and harvesting. Whereas farming was originally subsistence, the changing economic realities of the 1920s brought about by the new British influenced cash economy in colonial Nigeria led Oyodo's parents to become involved in some form of trade. To be able to pay taxes to their colonial overlords, they sold some of their farm produce at the local Ovoko market in exchange for the rare and over-valued European currency, in lieu of cowries or trade by barter.[504] The family reinvested the money earned through this means back into the colonial economy via the taxation

[502] Biography of Madam Nwokolo in "Celebration of Life of Mama Sophie Ogochukwumerem Nwokolo (Nee Ugwori) 1920 – 1926", Published by St. Peters Anglican Church, Ufuma (2006)

[503] Interviews, Victoria Udeni (Ovoko Enugu: August 16, 2012)

[504] Birgit Muller, "Commodities as Currencies: The Integration of Overseas Trade into the Internal Trading Structure of the Igbo of South-East Nigeria", *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines,* Vol. 25, (97) 1985, pp. 72-73

levied on all adult men in Igboland and they also purchased a few European manufactured products including Nwaegaji's bicycle.[505]

Oyodo's early years coincided with the close of the First World War, the early beginnings of the Great Depression and the famous influenza epidemic that snatched the lives of many children in Nigeria, and so she lived them in relative poverty. The First World War had plunged many Igbo citizens into the production of cash crops (palm produce in particular) that were exported to Europe for the war effort and to sustain the economic endeavor connected with the Industrial Revolution.[506] The problem with cash crop production was three-pronged. It was not only labor intensive, requiring the participation of entire families, it was also not a staple product. What is more, the colonials who controlled the market as primary consumers cum exporters dictated the price for cash produce.[507] This meant that whatever the colonials offered in exchange for palm oil produce was what poor farmers like the Ugworis earned for their laborious endeavors. To return the once economically buoyant colony to its pre-First World War economic status, the British also increased the taxes levied on men and threatened to introduce women in the taxation scheme in the late 1920s. The British colonial government took little account of Igbo socio-political organizations and ignored the effects on its subjects of the global economic crisis associated with the Great Depression in their plans for post-war consolidation. In 1929, when Igbo women of Ogbonne's generation became convinced that they were to be taxed by the British Government, they staged a bitter resistance known as the Igbo Women's War, *Ogu*

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[505] Interviews, Sylvanus Ugwori (Ovoko Enugu: August 18, 2012)

[506] Chima Korieh, "Voices from Within and Without: Sources, Methods, and Problematics in the Recovery of the Agrarian History of the Igbo", *History in Africa,* Vol 33 (2006), p. 233

[507] Onwuka N. Njoku, *Economic History of Nigeria: 19th and 20th Centuries* (Enugu, Nigeria: Magnet Business Enterprises, 2001)

Umunwanyi. At the end of this war, which threatened the very foundation of British imperialism, Igbo women stood both as models of African feminism and as revolutionaries charged with threatening colonial peace, the acclaimed *pax Britannica*. In the struggle that ensued between the colonized and the colonizer, for which Igbo women drew on traditional forms of resistance that combined religious and social strategies of making war, including the act of "sitting on a man,"[508] their interactions with the colonial economy was transformed. Whereas women like Ogbenedu may not have participated in the tail winds of the women's war in Nsukka, 1929 marked the beginning of even greater tensions between African women and the British. It also marked a turning point in women's history as an even more institutionalized sidelining of Igbo women in religion and state heralded more challenges.

Oyodo was a traditionalist from birth. Her parents practiced indigenous Igbo religion, becoming Christians of the Anglican denomination only briefly after Oyodo's birth. Oyodo's father remained an Anglican until he became the eldest in his clan (Ogbodukwu of Ovoko), at which time he informed the church that he was withdrawing to assume his rightful position among members of his clan as "Onyishi."[509] Christianity was obviously not fashionable in the 1920s as it is in today's Ovoko. In fact, Oyodo's family attributed their daughter's survival of the epidemic that broke out in the late 1920s, which snatched away the lives of many Nigerian children, to the potency of Ovoko ancestors.[510]

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[508] Judith Van Allen, "Sitting on a Man": Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women, *Canadian Journal of African Studies* Vol. 6,No. 2, Special Issue: The Roles of African Women: Past, Present and Future (1972) p. 170

[509] Interviews, James Opata (Ovoko Enugu: August 11, 2012) *Onyishi* is a title given to the eldest male of the clan in several communities in Enugu State Nigeria.

[510] Interviews, Sylvanus Ugwori (Ovoko Enugu: August 18, 2012)

If Ufuma had a history of powerful female deities and extra-ordinary traditional women functionaries, Ovoko had an even more compelling religious history. The people of Ovoko, like the Ufuma and several other Igbo communities, worshipped a Supreme Being, *Chukwu*, and a host of other deities in the religious pantheon. Prominent among the Ovoko is the female deity *Ala*, who like Ajana-Ufuma is construed to be the mother of the clan, ensuring the fertility of crops and the longevity of life in Ovoko. Subordinate to *Ala* are other female religious intermediaries bridging the gap between the Supreme force *Chukwu* and the people of Ovoko. Ovoko boasts of several female deities celebrating motherhood, womanhood and sisterhood among its people. Women were responsible for maintaining the shrines of their ancestors, consulting with diviners over issues related to birth and death in the family, offering of sacrifices, and other religious responsibilities within the homestead.

One of these deities known as *Umuada*[511] is particularly dedicated to the daughters of each Ovoko sub-clan. Each family unit had its individual shrines maintained by women. Oyodo's mother may not have been a renowned priestess in Ovoko but she was definitely the priestess of her immediate household, to say the least.[512] Like *Umuada*, the deity *Ekwee*, another beautiful deity representing the feminine universe, guaranteed the religious authority of Ovoko women, especially during burial rites. At the death of an elder, especially the Onyishi, *Ekwee* was invoked through women's singing, dancing and sacrifices on behalf of the deceased. Like *Onuodozi*, who demanded gifts including cloths to be sent on behalf of women upon their deaths,

[511] The Umuada deity is named after traditional women's council predating the colonial period in Igbo history.

[512] Interviews, Sylvanus Ugwori (Ovoko Enugu: August 18, 2012)

Ekwee (the most beautiful of Ovoko deities)[513] served the purpose of appeasing the spirit of the deceased and ensured the completion of religious rites for women married into Ovoko villages.[514] Little Oyodo was naturally socialized into some of the religious beliefs, principles, rituals and specific religious symbolisms, taboos, and ancestral rites associated with Ovoko people.

Young Oyodo was taken regularly to church and to mission school at a very young age because her parents valued the prospect of western education in the new political economy that had emerged in the early 1920s. Oyodo's parents, like most adults of southern Nigeria during the period, came to associate European technological achievement with western education and became more willing to pay the price to learn the secrets of "white power," as an aged Ovoko elder called it.[515] They were aware that formal education conferred several definite advantages to colonial subjects. Western education created employment opportunities as literates began to fill minor administrative and bureaucratic positions within the colony. Churches needed teachers and catechists, and business concerns needed clerks, accountants, buyers, and sales representatives to function.[516]

Talbot made a note of this in his writing in 1923:

> An extraordinary longing for book-learning and the power to speak and write English has invaded the native mind in the last few years; this appears to arise

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[513] Ovoko women are believed to have followed this deity in their search for extra-ordinary beauty.

[514] Interviews, James Ugwuanyi (Ovoko Enugu: August 17, 2012)

[515] Interviews, Chief Ernest Ugwuanyi (Ovoko Nsukka: August 16, 2012)

[516] Magnus O. Bassey, "Missionary Rivalry and Educational Expansion in Southern Nigeria, 1885-1932", *The Journal of Negro Education,* Vol. 60, No. 1 (Winter, 1991) 45

> partly from a genuine wish for European culture and partly from a desire to raise themselves in the social scale and get away from manual work.[517]

What is more, oral accounts show that communities went as far as funding the erection of schools with their own cash and communal labor.[518] In fact, in the early 1920s Christian missions began to insist on proof of ability to pay for the services of a teacher, so money for a teacher's salary sometimes accompanied the request for a school from communities asking for teachers. Communities gave presents in cash and kind, including chickens, yams, eggs, and fruits, to catechists as well as to the white missionaries as bribes/encouragement to build schools.[519]

Thus parents, including Oyodo's, viewed European education as a positive investment and as an opportunity to deliver the family from future adversity. This notion that the school was a way out of economic destitution fed into missionary rivalry in Igboland. In measuring "conversion" by the number of school attendants, Protestants and Catholics fought to dominate Igboland and were divided about what should be the objective and content of native education. They were skeptical of the value of education to native evangelization and Christian conversion, especially knowing that the attraction it had was only superficial. Yet the realities of missionary rivalry (between the Church Missionary Society and the Roman Catholic Missions) in every Igbo village made education an indispensable instrument for evangelization. In other words, indigenous demands for schools and the desire to match their missionary opponents sustained missionary education in colonial Nigeria. Zappa, for instance, believed that "the children who

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[517] P. A Talbot, *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria,* Vol. 4 (London: Frank Cass, 1969) 124

[518] Interviews, Chief Ernest Ugwuanyi (Ovoko Nsukka: August 16, 2012)

[519] C.N. Ubah, "Western Education in Africa: The Igbo Experience, 1900-1960", *Comparative Education Review,* Vol. 24, No. 3 (Oct. 1980) p. 375

attended mission schools for material reasons were unlikely to become devout Christians"[520] and rightfully discerned that most of his Igbo converts were more interested in pursuing education for reasons other than their own personal spiritual development, yet he was unsuccessful in his opposition to building schools in western Igboland. This rivalry was at its peak in the 1930s when Oyodo started attending school. Children were beaten for mingling in indigenous practices such as a masquerade dance and if you were an Anglican, you were punished for attending a Catholic Bazaar.[521]

Clearly, the two missions (Protestant and Catholic) had different histories and evangelical approaches. Years after the Berlin Conference of 1884-85 endorsed British claims to Nigeria, the French Catholics did not concede defeat. They still hoped that in eastern Nigeria they could supplant their religious rivals, the Church Missionary Society (CMS). Two different French Catholic missions in Igboland, the Society of African Missions (SMA) and the Holy Ghost Fathers (Spiritans), competed strenuously with the British Protestants CMS for the conversion of Igbo souls.[522] The Catholic plan for evangelizing Igboland was remarkably different from the Protestant one. Bishop Shanahan's two part plan involved a "Christian village" in the first phase, which involved efforts to create entire villages made up of Catholic converts, while the second phase called for a "village school" that build Christians through education. The strategy employed by CMS missionaries, on the other hand, involved the utilization of African

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[520] Elizabeth Isichie, *The Ibo People and Europeans* (London: Macmillan and Co. 1973) 155

[521] Similar rivalry exists today in Igboland.

[522] Eddie E. Okafor "Francophone Catholic Achievements in Igboland, 1883-1905", *History in Africa*, Vol. 32 (2005) 307

evangelists and catechists from neighboring Yorubaland and Sierra Leone.[523] This detail is relevant to Oyodo's life history because her "conversion" was to the African-led CMS mission. In the more popular Roman Catholic approach, a fascination with Europeans lured more Igbo citizens, but the Protestant spirit of the CMS appears to have played a role in shaping Oyodo's later ministry because it featured African church leaders.[524] However, even though the Anglican Bishop Crowther championed the cause of African Christian leadership from the onset, his idea of an independent African church did not imply separation from the communion of the Church of England, but rather had the goal of creating dioceses under African bishops.[525] Moreover, the CMS may have championed the training of African converts for bishophood because of the lack of European personnel in the field and also because of the need to translate the Bible and the prayer book into the Igbo language.[526]

Oyodo was baptized Sophie Ogochukwumerem around the age of 8 years, having attended a series of catechetical vernacular "schools." Here Sophie learned Scripture, which she memorized in the vernacular. She was introduced to the three R's (reading, writing, and arithmetic), dictation and spelling, hygiene, physical health drill, and singing. In arithmetic, students were expected to be able to count in the vernacular, to write these numbers on a wooden slate, and to be able to add and subtract basic number figures using sticks. Drill consisted of

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[523] Ekechi, 179, Also see: Magnus O. Bassey, "Missionary Rivalry and Educational Expansion in Southern Nigeria, 1885-1932", *The Journal of Negro Education,* Vol. 60, No. 1 (Winter, 1991)

[524] Ogbu Kalu, "Color and Conversion: The White Missionary Factor in the Christianization of Igboland, 1857 – 1967", *Missiology: An International Review,* 18 (1) (jan. 1990), pp. 61-74

[525] *The Nigerian Pioneer*, Friday July 20th, (1917) 5

[526] CMS G3 A3/0 1889 – Item 170

simple exercises, and in singing, children were introduced to selected hymns.[527] The colonial curriculum ensured a limited literacy level. Proficiency in English and mathematics for the "natives" was just enough for practical purposes of communication, trade with the colonials and payment/calculation of taxes.

Oyodo was among the very few women who received a western primary education during the late 1920s and early 1930s in Ovoko. The first Ovoko citizens to access western education were slaves and outcasts, as Igbo titled men disdained the new religion and all its paraphernalia, including the school. However, realizing the benefits of western education, as those who learned to speak the English language and acquired other Western knowledge became clerks and got placed in positions of authority throughout Igboland, parents willingly allowed their children to go to mission schools. However, the patriarchal culture of Igbo society meant sons and heirs were the ones marked for western education *ab initio.* Young girls like Oyodo did not participate in western education until the 1930s.[528] Prejudice against the education of women was deep seated, initially because it represented a drastic change in women's roles. Moreover, western education cost money, and since parents viewed it from a utilitarian standpoint, they thought it a waste of time and money to educate daughters, especially since the prime beneficiaries would be their future husbands.[529] Meanwhile, parents also believed that education reduced a girl's chances of finding suitors, since no man would make a fool of himself by marrying a woman unless his own skills and knowledge were demonstrably higher than

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[527] C.N. Ubah, "Western Education in Africa: The Igbo Experience, 1900-1960", *Comparative Education Review,* Vol. 24, No. 3 (Oct. 1980) 381

[528] Ekechi, 24

[529] Ubah, "Western Education in Africa: The Igbo Experience, 1900-1960", *Comparative Education Review,* Vol. 24, No. 3 (Oct. 1980) 385

hers.[530] However, as educated men increased in numbers, it became clear that some of them wanted, as wives, girls who had acquired at least rudiments of this educational system. Once this demand was created, many parents began to appreciate that it might in the end be in their best interests to send their daughters to school; even in the short run they could recover part of the expenses by raising the bride price.[531] Still, for the most part, schools were for young Ovoko boys and were run mostly by male teachers.

One of Oyodo's teachers was a young Christian convert posted to the Anglican Church in Obeachala in Ibeku, Ovoko, later St. Peter's Anglican Church, Ovoko. Eleazar Nwokolo was an indigenous missionary and catechist employed by the Anglican Church. Originally from Ufuma in the present Anambra state of Nigeria, it was under his tutelage that little Oyodo grew in "obedience and zeal in the things of God."[532]

Eleazar Nwokolo admired young Oyodo so much that many years after he had left Ovoko and was posted to various parts of Igboland, he decided to visit Ovoko again and was glad to see that little Sophie had grown appreciably. Although Sophie had just turned 13years old, Eleazar Nwokolo could not resist the urge to negotiate for her hand in marriage. With the consent of her parents, Sophie relocated to Ufuma with her future husband, where she continued her primary education before transferring to Ama Nwanyi Training Center in Awka, where prospective

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[530] CMS G3 A3/0 – Proceedings of the CMS 1902-1903; Interviews Chief Ernest Ugwuanyi, Ovoko Nsukka (August 16, 2010)

[531] Ubah, "Western Education in Africa: The Igbo Experience, 1900-1960", *Comparative Education Review,* Vol. 24, No. 3 (Oct. 1980) 186

[532] Biography of Madam Nwokolo in "Celebration of Life of mama Sophie Ogochukwumerem Nwokolo (Nee Ugwori) 1920 – 1926", Published by St. Peters Anglican Church, Ufuma (2006)

Christian brides were prepared for marriage.[533] At the women's training home, Sophie was educated on the domestic and religious responsibilities of women in a context that referenced Christian standards. Sophie was encouraged to learn different types of trades and crafts, including tailoring, sewing, and knitting. She relearned farming and gardening. Most importantly, she received basic clerical and evangelical training as the bride of a catechist. These trainings played a role in shaping Sophie's ministry as an evangelist and prophetess in the following years. Sophie and Eleazar Nwokolo had their Church wedding (different from the traditional Igbo wedding) in Holy Trinity Church, Ufuma, in 1943. Their union was blessed with eight children of which seven survived, four boys and three girls.

Towards the end of the 1940s, Madam Nwokolo was afflicted with an illness that defied western orthodox medicine. Reportedly forced to try "alternative medicine" within the Christian faith but outside the Anglican Church, Sophie visited one of the two African house churches in Ufuma (the Apostolic Church) in search of prayers and healing. Her husband Eleazar interpreted Sophie's action as an insult, an abomination to the Anglican Communion to which they were devoted. Because she had committed this "religious sacrilege," Eleazar refused to acknowledge Sophie when she returned to the church. He warned his family members neither to visit her nor to bring Madam Nwokolo back to his house.[534] Eleazar's action was not unusual, because early CMS converts were socialized to view African churches outside of the Anglican Communion as "heathen."

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[533] Biography of Madam Nwokolo in "Celebration of Life of mama Sophie Ogochukwumerem Nwokolo (Nee Ugwori) 1920 – 1926", Published by St. Peters Anglican Church, Ufuma (2006)

[534] Biography of Madam Nwokolo in "Celebration of Life of mama Sophie Ogochukwumerem Nwokolo (Nee Ugwori) 1920 – 1926", Published by St. Peters Anglican Church, Ufuma (2006)

Thus abandoned by her husband and his family in Ufuma, Sophie Nwokolo survived through the help of members of the Apostolic Church. To save her marriage, Sophie agreed to seek prayers within the established church. Lawrence Okeke, an Anglican from Umueji-Ufuma, had been conducting prayers privately in his house for some time. Sophie Nwokolo's illness diminished after she began receiving prayers from Lawrence Okeke. Shortly afterwards, oral history has it, the spirit of prophecy and visions fell upon her. Lawrence Okeke, in his capacity as a visionary, informed Sophie Nwokolo of her unique calling and advised her to start praying at their home in Umunebo. By the late 1940s, Madam Nwokolo's ministry had started in earnest in their little living room and compound in Ufuma. Until her death in 2006, Madam Nwokolo served the Lord with all her might and heart, remaining an ardent and faithful member of the Anglican Church and a registered member of the Women's Guild and the Mothers' Union in Ufuma.

The Peculiar History of the All Christian Practical Praying Band (ACPPB): Thick Description

The history of the All Christian Practical Praying Band (ACPPB) is unique. Whereas most ministries like it with over 250 branches worldwide have metamorphosed into a full-fledged denomination, ACPPB maintains a non-denominational character, accepting members from Catholic, Protestant and Pentecostal groups. Madam Nwokolo resisted all pressure to declare the Praying Band a church in the institutional sense, and this often forced members desirous of conventional leadership positions to secede from the movement. Several core members of the praying band have seceded and founded their own ministries, including the

overseer of the infamous Christian Pentecostal Mission in Nigeria. In Igboland, the ACPPB is constructed as a Christian pilgrimage/retreat site and as a hospital providing shelter for anyone visiting Ufuma and healing for those who are sick. It emerged at that period in Igbo history when the realities of modernity doubled the anxieties of poisoning and witchcraft, a period when antagonist urban and rural dwellers feared being killed by charms and medicines. The ACPPB is remembered in oral history as having provided a safe haven for not just its members but also for Igbo refugees during the Nigerian Civil War of 1967–1970. When international agencies discovered that there was mass concentration of people at Nwokolo's residence, they delivered food to Madam Nwokolo to enable her feed the people there.[535]

The ministry itself has an awkward history, having emerged with recognizable opposition from the CMS Anglican Church yet remaining an affiliate of the church. It is on this matter, and in its style of worship and teaching, that ACPPB is unique. Let us first consider this latter attribute.

Every Sunday morning, the "inmates" inhabiting the ACPPB camp ground file out to their respective churches, including Holy Trinity Anglican Church. After fulfilling this denominational obligation on Sundays, and on every other morning at 8am, "inmates" file into the chapel attached to the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Nwokolo. On Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays at 8 pm, they hold their evening prayers together. The gatherings on Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays at 4 pm are considered the "great" healing occasions,

[535] Daniel Aka and Okeke Chika Jerry, "ACPPB International: History and Doctrine" accessed online at http://acppb.gositestudio.com/thedoctrineDD.pdf (December 2010) 9

attracting visitors from different parts of Igboland.[536] As in a hospital, new "inmates" are seen, interviewed, and admitted every Thursday and Saturday at 3 pm.

Running through ACPPB teaching are elements of missionary influence but also of core indigenous religious beliefs. In emphasizing the awareness of the supremacy and holiness of God in its teaching, ACPPB draws on both Christian and indigenous precepts. A Christian reading of holiness is observed in the open condemnation of idolatry among its members. Members are discouraged from taking *ozo* titles, participating in *muo* societies, and making protective and defensive charms. An indigenous reading of holiness lies in ACPPB regulation that "women in their menstruation period do not enter the chapel at all [but] . . . remain outside till the period is over."[537] In tune with indigenous beliefs, the ACPPB operates on the belief that sin is the root of all evil and mishap. This forms the religious groundwork on which ACPPB is built. Scriptural teachings center on crime and punishment and emphasize spiritual law over worldly laws. It is believed that prayers go unanswered because of sin. Hence, "many were told to go and be at peace with their God. Others were told that their spiritual arrogance has separated them from God; they sinned but refused to admit that they were sinners; while others were not disturbed by sin."[538] Based on this belief, the usual saying, according to Okeke's 1972 report, is *Iburo onye-uka, ga gbanwee onwe gi*, meaning "You are not a [true] church person, go and redeem yourself." During daily prayers and meetings, prophets and prophetesses point out the ugliness of sin and its consequences on the spiritual, economical, social, and overall well being of a Christian. Thus the ACPPB, like most African initiated Christian institutions, ascribes bodily

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[536] CMS HT/B/42/226 – Report: Ufuma Praying Band by D.C. Okeke (1972)1-2

[537] Daniel Aka and Okeke Chika Jerry, "ACPPB International: History and Doctrine" accessed online at http://acppb.gositestudio.com/thedoctrineDD.pdf (December 2010) 52

[538] Ibid

illness and mental afflictions to the negative activities of supernatural forces including witchcraft and ancestors. These beliefs shape the activities of the ACPPB and influence the type of prayers that are offered for members seeking healing.

Christianity, by ACPPB standards, combines belief with works. Inmates are expected to live exemplary lives worthy of emulation, to be humble, to be diligent with time and money and to pray at all times. Daily prayers are evangelical in nature, directed towards touching the heart, rousing commitment, and addressing the needs of inmates. Just like the Azande diviners very well studied by Evans-Pritchard,[539] music plays a healing therapeutic role in *Uka Ekpere Ufuma*, as hands and voices are lifted in chapel services. Hymns and songs, mostly written by Madam Nwokolo herself, provide a means of identity construction as they convey combined indigenous and Christian values to the group. The biblical themes set forth in traditional tunes and rhythms in ACPPB Songs are intended to invoke the presence of the Holy Spirit during prayer meetings. Prayer sessions are noticeably long, lasting about two and half hours or more, punctuated by periods for worship, prayers, visions, thanksgiving, and the blessing of water, oil, crosses and end-of-fast prayers. The anticipation that one is going to be called or given a message through prophesy keeps the spirit of the movement alive throughout the service. Almost tangible is the real sense of desire of members to participate in worship, to receive God's blessing, to hear God's message through visionaries and the Scriptures.[540]

A second unique characteristic of the ACPPB, as noted above, is its awkward relationship with the CMS Anglican Church. While the praying band has everything it needs to run a successful separatist church (vision, personnel, group support and a large following), its

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[539] Evans Pritchard, Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande (Oxford: Clarendon Press,1937) 148-182

[540] CMS HT/B/42/226 – Report: Ufuma Praying Band by D.C. Okeke (1972) 3-4

members maintain an active connection with the Anglican Church. Their simultaneous lively involvement in the life and practices of the praying band makes it very unique. In fact, a great percentage of its enlisted members considered the praying band a "cell" within their individual established church, similar to Men and Women's Prayer Meetings, the Women's Guild and the Mother's Union in the Anglican Churh.[541] While members did not wish to renounce their Anglican Church membership, they also did not wish to forsake the praying band, through which "they were brought to the saving experiences of the power of God."[542]

This, no doubt, generates an embarrassed feeling within the Anglican Church, as it must wonder what the praying band offers that the Church does not, and why members would not be content with involvement in just one group or the other. These questions were the basis of a 1990 Diocese of Awka ultimatum when a committee was appointed to dialogue with the All Christian Practical Praying Band (ACPPB). The committee's responsibility was to reconcile the practices of the Praying Band with those of the Church of England in Nigeria and reach a conclusion on whether it members should be excluded or included in the Anglican Church. After a series of meetings between 1990 and 1995, the committee recommended that the Anglican Church declare unequivocally that the ACPPB had no relationship with the Anglican Church and that both the clergy and the laity of the Anglican Church should be barred from participating in the religious activities of the ACPPB or face excommunication.[543]

This trouble caused a major division in the Ufuma Anglican church as a whole and may have been felt in other branches of the ACPPB nationwide. The Holy Trinity Church was thrown into

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[541] CMS HT/B/42/226 – Report: Ufuma Praying Band by D.C. Okeke (1972) 4

[542] CMS HT/B/42/226 – Report: Ufuma Praying Band by D.C. Okeke (1972) 5

[543] 2003 Synod Report (The Church of Nigeria, Diocese of Awka, 14-18 June 2003) 78-79

turmoil between the years 1978 and 1988. The lasting effect of this struggle is that many Christians quit their allegiance to the Anglican Church. Many more continued to leave after the crisis caused when several new-generation churches were planted by independent Christian movements in and around Ufuma in the '70s. Orabasili notes that although everything was not particularly rosy and running smoothly in the church before this turmoil, "the crisis arrived and snapped the cord that bound the members together."[544] The implementation of the resolution of Niger Diocese, that all Anglican Church members who belonged to religious groups that were not in communion with Anglican Church should be excommunicated from the church, was at the root of the chaos.

The crisis was particularly disturbing because the founders of the prayer band were strong members of Holy Trinity Church. The man Eleazar Nwokolo, a retired Anglican catechist, was a long time parochial committee member and in particular the church treasurer for several years, a role which he performed credibly. According to Okeke's report, Mr. Nwokolo's Christian spirit and sense of duty earned for him and the Praying Band the admiration and respect of greater number of Ufuma people. His wife Sophie Nwokolo was also very active in the church and for a time Chairlady of the Home and Abroad Women's General meeting in Ufuma. Madam Nwokolo's largeness of heart to the church and the community was legendary. In addition to all the positions she held in the Anglican church, the people of Ufuma recall with nostalgia how numerous people from all over the world who visited *Uka Ekpere Ufuma* had been very supportive, at the prodding of Madam Nwokolo, of Holy Trinity's programs and projects. Above all, many members of the Trinity Church were already members of the Prayer Band, which the

[544] J. Nwajagu and I. Orabasili, *History of Holy Trinity (Anglican) Church, Ufuma,* 25

church did not condemn at inception and indeed tacitly supported. These members of the Praying Band were also actively involved in the life of the Church in several capacities: as school teachers, college and university lecturers, and as leaders of youth fellowships and other related organizations. (Similarly ACPPB members who attended the Catholic Church were leaders in organizations such as Catholic councils.) In fact, Holy Trinity Church and the local Roman Catholic churches were filled on Sundays and Saints Days by inmates of the Praying Band visiting from different parts of Nigeria. Both the Anglican pastor and other members in the villages attested favorably to the good work of the ACPPB, so that members' allegiance to the ACPPB was rather too strong to bend to a Synod ruling. [545]

Overall, the new policy of the Diocese was a shock to members of the church and it is reported that many members of the Anglican Church in Igboland could not understand the reason for this policy and were particularly irked by the implications of its implementation in the church. Ufuma Christian men and women lamented that they were not consulted before the Anglican Church leadership took such a crucial decision. As a matter of fact, Igbo Anglicans in general believed that the policy was targeted at Holy Trinity Ufuma because of a fear that the ACPPB would dominate the Anglican Church in different parts of the country in the near future.

Daggers were drawn and the church broke into two camps.[546] Those who supported the directive of the church leadership were a very small minority compared to those who opposed it. In other words, the minority, many of whom apparently believed that the mark of a good church member was to be loyal to the decisions of the leadership, was on the side of the new diocesan

[545] CMS HT/B/42/226 – Report: Ufuma Praying Band by D.C. Okeke (1972) 5

[546] The priests in charge of Holy Trinity Anglican Church Ufuma at that time were Revs. Igbanugo, Okoye, and Otubelu.

policy while a majority continued to favor free association with the ACPPB. According to Nwajagu and Orabasili, the implementation of the church's resolution "threw Holy Trinity into a period no one would wish to witness again," breeding enmity between brothers and sub-clans and slowing the progress of the church in every area of endeavor.[547] This period of Ufuma religious history is reminiscent of the early period of its church history, when denominational allegiances were built based on familial networks and pre-colonial inter-village politics.[548] According to oral history, the church could no longer meet its financial obligations, debts accumulated, oddities took place at services, pulpits were violated, and impunity took over. The minority sat in they front and threw jibes at those seated at the back. They, in turn, would walk out of the church once it was time for the sermon and collection. This period opened the doors for the arrival of new-generation churches in Umunebonato, which drew their first members from disillusioned and disappointed members of Holy Trinity. Reconciliation came after a few years. According to Nwajagu and Orabasili, reconciliation was like a dream and it actually started through a dream. Two daughters of Umunebonato married in Enugwu-abo had dreamed separately, but on the same night, that horrible things awaited the people if the crisis did not end. One of them woke up the next morning and headed to the home of the other to recount her dream, only to find that the other dreamed the same dream. They both agreed that it was really serious and initiated reconciliation steps through prayer, preaching and home visitations reminiscent of the Ufuma Bible Women discussed in chapter three. The reconciliatory process

[547] J. Nwajagu and I. Orabasili, *History of Holy Trinity (Anglican) Church, Ufuma,* 25-26

[548] Discussed in chapter three

also involved the Roman Catholics, on whom the crisis had rubbed off, as its members were also being drawn to the new churches springing up in the region.[549]

ACPPB came through this crisis unscathed. Rather than losing members, it multiplied in followership and became even more popular in other Igbo villages.[550] In its defense, the leadership of the ACPPB wrote to His Grace, the Most Rev. M.S.C Anikwenwa, on September 18, 2002, pledging loyalty to the Anglican Communion and re-affirming the commitment of the Praying Band to the tenets and ideals of the Church of England. Still, the ACPPB maintained that it was an organization for all Christians and not just for Anglicans alone. It emphasized that its Anglican members had been advised that their Anglican Church responsibilities were to take precedence over ACPPB activities. The leadership also recommended that Anglican chaplains be stationed in ACPPB branches to monitor and report any unworthy activities to the Bishop. It reiterated that the activities of ACPPB were scheduled to avoid any conflicts with activities in the Anglican Church.[551] All of this raises the question, why is the ACPPB so attached to the Anglican Communion?

The relationship that the ACPPB shares with the Anglican Church is reminiscent of pre-colonial religious organization, in which healers were either stationary or itinerant religious consultants. Traditional healers were either located and consulted in a shrine, or else invited to a particular location to meet a specific need. The element of consultation implied that healers were not seen as ultimate solutions to problems and the individual consulting had his/her own religious priorities. In other words, an individual could consult the priestess of Idemili in Nnobi

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[549] J. Nwajagu and I. Orabasili, *History of Holy Trinity (Anglican) Church, Ufuma,* 26

[550] Interviews, Elder Dan Nwokolo (Umunebo-Ufuma: October 13, 2011)

[551] 2003 Synod Report (The Church of Nigeria, Diocese of Awka, 14-18 June 2003) 80

and yet continue to worship his/her ancestral spirits. Consulting a healer was therefore a matter of choice and necessity rather than of routine obligation. This principle perhaps informs the organization of the ACPPB, like other Christian movements studied in and around Ufuma.

It is important at this point to establish that although the ACPPB seems like a dependent religious community, it is by every measure a self-contained independent ministry. Its independence lies in its detached historical evolution as a separatist Christian movement in Ufuma. The self-contained structure of the ACPPB is reminiscent of other female pioneered Christian movements in and around Ufuma. ACPPB Ufuma runs a camp/hostel, a healing home, a temple/chapel, a private school, farms and a store. The camp hosts ACPPB members from different parts of the world in weekly rotations and annually. Next to the hostel stands a healing home occupied by members and visitors in search of healing from ailments ranging from mental illness to sickness caused by traditional poisoning. A community kitchen lies between the hostel and the healing home, overseen by the resident woman leader or one visiting the community that day. While women prepare meals, men tend the farm and run errands around the compound including repairs and maintenance. A private school located across the fence from the compound[552] is run by the leadership of the group and specifically headed by Mrs. Nwokolo, the wife of the current visionary leader of the organization. Although the school is private, fees are subsidized, especially for members, and several scholarships are offered as well. A store that connects the compound with the temple across the strip sells anointing oil, white t-shirts, the Igbo bible, cross necklaces, ACPPB hymn books and groceries.

[552] The compound is a very large space containing the hostel, the healing home, kitchen and some farm lands.

The temple itself is of simple bungalow architecture with stained glass windows and an iron door. The temple has two entrances, at the front and back. The front door is used mostly by the elder and leaders of the movement and visionaries who sit on the platform in front during services. On my first visit to the chapel in 2010, I was asked to take off my shoes at the entrance, between the gate and temple. In fact, attendees from the hostel and healing homes would usually walk bare-foot from the compound to the temple across the street. Upon entering the chapel that summer in 2010, I was quickly assigned a seat by an usher. These seats were allocated according to gender so that men and women sat on different sides of the church. However, not long after that the women's side filled up and women began to take seats at the back of the men's side.

On the altar of the ACPPB chapel is a huge cross made of stone. The altar is shaped like a table and made of marble, and on this table sits a bell, a 7-stem chandelier, two flower vases holding seemingly plastic flowers, and a stainless tray that seemed empty from my seat. The table was draped with white curtains and through the curtain another marble stand could be seen on which another cross, this time made of wood, was displayed. On the floor by this curtain lay labeled glass bottles (transparent wine bottles) filled with water. The same water is blessed after the service and prayers.

The elders generally walked into the temple during the time of worship. A bell was used to regulate the worship as it signaled the beginning of service, the change between songs and also the demarcation between different temple activities from praise to prayers. Different prayers lasting between 3-5 minutes were led by men and women leaders in the temple. Prayers emphasized forgiveness, righteousness, faith and purity. Prayers were immediately followed by a sermon that built on these specific Christian teachings. During the prayers and sermon, members busied themselves writing down in detail the message and prayer points. The practice of journal

keeping is a legacy of literacy handed down from Madam Nwokolo. Members recorded prophecies, messages and prayers spoken in the temple daily, mostly in Igbo, and they strongly believed that by so doing they were keying into the realm of the spiritual.[553]

The ACPPB is particularly appealing to people suffering from a number of diseases including stroke, mental illness, ulcers, cervical meningitis, deafness and dumbness, who all came for healing. Barren women and young men and women in need of a spouse and financial breakthroughs also troop to the ACPPB. Most of the church workers, helpers, visionaries, camp/hostel directors and assistants, and other men and women leaders were once brought to *Uka Ekpere Ufuma* to have one ailment or the other cured. There they received help and ever since remained active members of the Praying Band. With regard to the ACPPB healing ministry, there was no official teaching against the use of medical drugs or other medical know-how. In fact, Okeke reports that an inmate who suddenly fell sick was rushed to a nearby hospital for emergency care. Yet there was a general preference for divine and spiritual healing by inmates. Prayer that included anointing with oil and drinking the supposed "holy water" were generally preferred to taking paracetamol for a migraine.[554] Moreover, several inmates arrived the camp having tried in several hospitals to have their sickness cured, but to no avail.

The ages of members and inmates of ACPPB varied between 25 and 70. Very few children accompanied their parents to the camp; they sometimes attend a nearby school while their parents remained on the ACPPB camp ground for healing. Members included educators, lawyers, nurses, business leaders, home makers, apprentices, accountants, police officers and

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[553] Personal journals consulted during this research were useful in exploring some of the pertinent gender issues that lay underneath every sermon, prayer and activities of ACPPB.

[554] CMS HT/B/42/226 – Report: Ufuma Praying Band by D.C. Okeke (1972) 6

magistrates, among many other occupations. Everyone without regard to class was humbled through the rigorous admission process. They were all expected to live within the camp, participate in all fasts and prayers and to walk around the camp barefooted. Meanwhile, one's acceptance into the camp was conditional upon the favorable reception of an "admission vision," after which inmates were trained to pray independently. Camp assistants guided individuals through this process and in fact, healing was attributed partially to the rigorous attention to prayers by the individual.[555] Fasting was an important and inevitable consequence of living in the camp. Individuals were usually given three days or more during which one prayed earnestly and workers in charge of each block of hostels were there to assist and encourage inmates on ground. Individuals who wished to close or end their fasts filed into the temple when it was time for prayers and of these, some were refused on grounds that they did not "end their fasting well."[556] This was an important duty of the visionary, who, after eliminating the unworthy, signaled for the final prayer for those remaining by the main visionary, Nwokolo.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the Sunday evening service at ACPPB Ufuma was this prophetic prayer time. After sermons and scriptural messages were shared, *Uka Ekpere Ufuma* members were invited to present their offerings. They approached the altar bearing gifts in their hands and prayers were said for them as they knelt on the altar. Unlike in other ministries I have observed, only a few members of *Uka Ekpere Ufuma* participated in giving offerings, *onyinye*. Their faces were burdened with anxiety, perhaps by the fear of having their offerings rejected, as occured in many services I attended. As prayers went up for members presenting their offerings, the visionary group seated on the corner of the altar usually gave prophesies that struck fear into

[555] Interviews, Mrs. Gladys Anyaegbunam (ACPPB-Ufuma: December 17, 2011)

[556] CMS HT/B/42/226 – Report: Ufuma Praying Band by D.C. Okeke (1972) 6-7

the heart of the giver as well as the hearts of other members still seated. At my first visit, for instance, a gentleman presented his offering on the altar but during the prayers, he was singled out and commanded by a prophetess to leave the temple and find his way to the house of the man he was holindg a grudge against before bringing *onyinye* to the house of God. Visions were thus used during offerings to make sure that "the right mind was brought to bear upon the gift."[557] Similarly, Okeke reports how

> a whole group of enthusiastic worshippers numbering about twenty eight [were] asked to go back with their gifts, because of various reasons which the visioners gave. A man who wanted to offer a ram was sent back three times because 'the spirit rejected' his gift. When he came the fourth time, it was accepted…Others were asked to withdraw with their gifts because they had not repented. They were left to realize that what mattered most was the giving of their lives to God."[558]

Other incidences include the refusal by the elder general to bless a cross necklace because the member who presented it was doing so for the wrong purposes. A similar process was observed during prayers for water, oil, and crosses. Congregants could be singled out for various reasons such as unbelief, sin, or anger. It must be said that holy water, anointed oil and crosses are regarded as symbolic representations of God's power. At every service I attended, the visionary leader reminded members that the water, oil, and crosses were nothing in of themselves and emphasized that the power of God worked through faith and not through such vessels. The extent to which members understood this may be another story altogether.

Occasionally groups and individuals were seen kneeling at one corner of the compound saying their prayers. When the need arose (as was the case with a mentally disturbed inmate who yelled throughout my visit one afternoon in August 2010), visionaries, the woman in charge, and

[557] CMS HT/B/42/226 – Report: Ufuma Praying Band by D.C. Okeke (1972) 10

[558] CMS HT/B/42/226 – Report: Ufuma Praying Band by D.C. Okeke (1972) 10

other workers join in prayers for inmates. Several similar occurrences I witnessed show the role of prophetic messages in the ACPPB as a Christian group and the gender dynamics at work within the movement, in which more women serve as visionaries than men.

Visions were crucial to *Uka Ekpere Ufuma.* They controlled every activity of the ACPPB in the camp, including the admission of members and inmates, offerings, prayers, blessing of bottles, oil, and crosses, and the hospitality extended to visitors. While Okeke's report documents several faulty prophetic statements, the confidence that ACPPB visionaries inspire in members in and around Ufuma cannot be stated lightly.[559] It was the basic belief that visions were guided by the Spirit, but that the gift of seeing visions was not given to everyone. While Mrs. Nwokolo and her first son are considered the greatest visionaries of the movement, Mr. Nwokolo and the first daughter lacked it. Interestingly, children and teens can be visionaries in the ACPPB even though they are usually not church workers. Several members have found the visions true to their lives and in sharing their testimonies have drawn more people to the movement. What is more, the visionaries take their role seriously and consider their work to be legitimated by the Holy Spirit and divine inspiration.

Uka Nwanyi Ufuma as example of Womanist AIC in African History

It is my argument that the gender history of the pioneering figure; the gender roles operative in a ministry; the symbolisms associated with practices of healing, deliverance, prayers, prohibitions, and other religious rites; a conscious womanist reading of biblical

[559] CMS HT/B/42/226 – Report: Ufuma Praying Band by D.C. Okeke (1972) 7-8

teachings and Scripture; and the nature of internal gender relations are the characteristics of "womanist" Christian movements in African history. Bearing in mind that the exposure of African men and women to Christianity in the period of missionary encounter was unequal, and the fact that men were more favored than women in the colonial Christian structure, it is understandable that African Christian women played more dominant roles in indigenous pioneered churches than in established denominations. As pioneers in ministry, Ufuma women seem to have drawn from traditional practices of healing, prophecy, and even biblical interpretation to give African women's religious movements a unique character, quite different from that of churches pioneered by African men.

Although not every Prayer House has been pioneered by a woman, much can be gleaned for this study from the roles of women operating within Prayer Houses and similar African Initiated Churches (AICs) where women have taken leading roles and maintain positions of authority. Such history presents a gender reading and categorization of denominations in Africa. Womanist Christian movements bear the marks of traditional gender structures and emphasize complementarities and the gendered division of roles within the church. There is no role that is exclusive to or reserved for men in the ACPPB. Male and female play complementary roles, hence male leaders are assigned to male living quarters and the same is true for women. Visionaries are both male and female and from my several visits it would appear that female visionaries predominate. Women did the cooking while men did the fetching of water for the cooking on the campground. Women sat at the right corner of the chapel with children occupying the back row behind the women; men sat on the left side.

Yet an underlying patriarchal ideology, particularly influenced by its CMS missionary background, shaped early ACPPB gender ideology. In the early period of ACPPB history,

women could not preach in the chapel. Mrs. Nwokolo notes that women leaders and the special status accorded to wives of male leaders are recent developments.[560] Although Mr. Nwokolo argues that the Holy Spirit does not differentiate based on gender, hence the equal participation of men and women in the ministry,[561] earlier on the movement discriminated against women. Menstruating women were not allowed into the temple and although women participated in the cleaning of the chapel, only men were allowed close to the altar.[562] Female members were also the target of various restrictions based on the ingrained belief that women and girls are distractions to men. Such rules included: "Females are not allowed to enter into the chapel with their hair exposed. They must cover their hair; they must not put on earrings, or necklaces or wrist watches. They should not wear mini-skirts, tight dresses", or outfits with cuts at the rear.[563] For their part, men were to shave their beards before entering the temple and they were not to put on necklaces or wristwatches or face caps. These objects of modernity were believed to "deaden faith," by taking the spirit out of things, if I may borrow Engelke's words.[564] By observing these rituals, members emphasized their connection with the Holy Spirit by leaving behind the trappings of this world.

What is more, a gender reading of Madam Nwokolo's calling, which is similar to that of several female religious leaders, recognizes that it also mirrors the typology of spiritual callings in the African religious past, where religious callings or events like spirit possession occurred

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[560] Interviews, Mrs. Agnes Nwokolo (Umunebo-Ufuma: October 13, 2011)

[561] Interviews, Elder Dan Nwokolo (Umunebo-Ufuma: October 13, 2011)

[562] Daniel Aka and Okeke Chika Jerry, "ACPPB International: History and Doctrine," 53

[563] Daniel Aka and Okeke Chika Jerry, "ACPPB International: History and Doctrine," 53

[564] Matthew Engelke, *A Problem of Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) 7

following major illnesses.[565] It is important to establish at this point that in traditional African philosophy/thought, spirits could manifest themselves indirectly through illness, bad luck, barrenness, and similar misfortunes. It was believed that sickness connected to spiritual calling often coincided with troubled/failed marriages or miscarriages, and it has been observed in the rise of female spiritual leaders within organizations ranging from traditional African religious groups to AICs. In Flora Nwapa's work *Efuru*, the main character's spiritual calling to serve *Uhamiri*, a river goddess, follows a visit to the *dibia* for the cure of barrenness and recurrent dreams.[566] In eastern Africa, where female spirit mediums prevail, certain illnesses associated with adolescence and young adulthood are considered signs of spiritual calling and the gift of prophecy.[567] Diagnosis and treatment require the services of ritual specialists such as a *dibia* in the case of the Igbo. Such spirits are often possessive, in which case they usually request the initiation of its victim into an appropriate cult group. Between the Acholi and Alur, a certain chiefdom *jok* possessed the keeper of the shrine, or one of the chief's wives, who would then have special powers of divination. In the case of the Acholi, spirit possession became a common phenomenon, falling on women indiscriminately, giving rise to numerous local cults of affliction that were explicitly associated with the transformations then taking place in Uganda.[568] Among the Lugbara (and Madi), there were medium diviners who acted as healers and gave advice when sickness or misfortune was thought to be due to an ancestral intervention. Likewise among the

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[565] Biography of Madam Nwokolo in "Celebration of Life of mama Sophie Ogochukwumerem Nwokolo (Nee Ugwori) 1920 – 1926", Published by St. Peters Anglican Church, Ufuma (2006)

[566] See Flora Nwapa, *Efuru* (London: Heinemann, 1966)

[567] Iris Berger, "Rebels or Status-Seekers?: Women as Spirit Mediums in East Africa," in Nancy Hafkin and Edna Bay (eds) *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976) 165

[568] F.K Girling, *The Acholi of Uganda* (London: H.M, 1960) 161

Yoruba, the calling of the famous prophetess "Mother of Israel," Christianah Olatunrinle[569] of the Christ Apostolic Church in Ondo State, came after a spiritual affliction similar to the one in the picture painted by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, where Chinelo the priestess of Agbala prophesied only when afflicted with the spirit of Agbala.[570]

Madam Nwokolo's calling is therefore reflective of the calling of several female prophets in African history. Agnes Okoh, another female church pioneer in Igboland, had a similar calling. Agnes' husband Anyele died in 1930, leaving her with their young daughter, who later died at the age of 13 in 1938. Agnes reportedly developed a migraine and began seeking healing in one mission hospital to another. She visited native doctors, seeking traditional medicine, when it became clear that curing her migraine was beyond the powers of western medicine. After years of suffering, Agnes visited Prophetess Ozoemena, who healed her through prayer. Agnes's prophetic ministry began right afterwards and in 1947 her ministry began in earnest.[571] The widespread occurrence of sickness and psychic crisis in the life of prophetesses such as Madam Nwokolo draws attention to the importance of healing in female Christian ministries and is symptomatic of the impact of indigenous religion on African Christianity.

Ritualism and symbolism play important roles within the ACPPB. Although they take on Christian meanings within the Praying Band, the symbolism and rituals associated with the ACPPB are actually drawn from a host of indigenous beliefs and entities. For instance, references to witchcraft beliefs and rituals observed by menstruation women, alien to mainstream Christianity in Africa, are some of the symbolisms drawn in from indigenous religion that make

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[569] Elizabeth Isichei, *Varieties of Christian Experience in Nigeria* (London: Macmillan, 1982) 143

[570] Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958)

[571] Thomas Oduro, Christ Holy Church International, 1947-2002 (Lagos, Nigeria: Greater Heights Publishers, 2009) 75

the movement peculiarly feminine. Female cleanliness, which can be physical and spiritual, is an important factor in the Igbo religious worldview. For instance, the great value the Ufuma place on "motherhood" as a social identity also brings with it a high moral responsibility that involves sexual sanctity and the ritual cleansing of bodily fluids. The lack of individual or group cleanliness in these areas is believed to cause ailments including difficulty at childbirth or serious illness and frequent deaths in the family and in the community at large. A woman's menstrual blood is believed to diminish spiritual potency and that upon contact with blood (whether menstrual or from violence), one must be cleansed by purification rites. Failure to do this is believed to bring about misfortunes attributable to the anger of mother earth, Ajani-Ufuma.[572] That Madam Nwokolo's ministry observes similar indigenous purification rites associated with menstruating and considers it an abomination for its members to wear the color red to the temple[573] bespeaks the transportation of indigenous ideas, principles, and symbolisms to Madam Nwokolo's ministry. While the constraints put on menstruating women make it difficult to place women in key offices within the church, the practice in itself seemed like a liberating practice to the women interviewed during my research. ACPPB women consider this restriction on menstruating woman, as well as women who have just delivered babies, as necessary for rest and the full recovery of the woman. Inmates were glad that they were exempt from doing any major chores or fasting during these times.

Other rituals observed by the ACPPB that are drawn from indigenous Igbo religion include bell ringing before and during services. Writing on the history and doctrine of the ACPPB, Aka

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[572] Emefie Ikenga-Metuh, "Ritual Dirt and Purification Rites among the Igbo", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 15, Fasc. 1 (1985) 6

[573] The symbolic meaning of the color red to the Igbo is shrouded in mystery. On the one hand, while it could be represented by blood of sacrifice symbolizing spiritual appeasement, when worn on the chief priest it evoked an ominous presence.

and Okeke note, "Ringing the bell is very important because any average human being believes that ringing bell entails inviting the presence of spirits. Churches ring bells before beginning the service [and] likewise native doctors before performing their rituals."[574] Although ACPPB doctrine goes on to explain that it is the Christian spirit that is invoked through bell ringing, the practice itself is drafted from indigenous Igbo beliefs and can be understood in that light.

What is more, ACPPB is renowned for its witchcraft deliverance sessions, and this explains the popularity of the church among Igbo women. Perhaps since witchcraft accusations have become synonymous with women, the church has attracted more women than men in its history. In the 1970s, when the killing of people with charms was rampant in Igboland and a number of people feared the attack of "witches and wizards," the Band ran a series of special services targeted at expelling witchcraft spirits from members and their families. The ACPPB believes strongly in its ministry of exorcising witchcraft. In fact, a circular of January 3, 1971 specified that no worker or member of ACPPB should belong to any secret society whatsoever. Perhaps it was believed that traditional societies were the breeding ground for witchcraft. Those who were already holders of *Ozo* and other titles were called upon to renounce their memberships forthwith and stop partaking in such activities.[575]

Some of the gender struggles that female AIC leaders experience are related to this subject of witchcraft. Members who fell out of her ministry, mostly males, have accused Madam Nwokolo of witchcraft. One of the loudest voices against Madam Nwokolo's ministry is that of Mr. Theophilus Chuka Okeke, a native of Ufuma who unequivocally called Madam Nwokolo's ministry a "den of witchcraft." In his book entitled "The Miracle Finger Points at a Den of

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[574] Daniel Aka and Okeke Chika Jerry, "ACPPB International: History and Doctrine," 53

[575] Daniel Aka and Okeke Chika Jerry, "ACPPB International: History and Doctrine" accessed online at http://acppb.gositestudio.com/thedoctrineDD.pdf (December 2010) 19

Witchcraft Disguised as Ufuma Prayer Band,"[576] seemingly confusing visions with fact, Okeke writes,

> Ufuma is now Satan's enchanted ground, and terrible events which the eye cannot see are happening all around it. The Scourge of a "religious spirit anointing" bewitched upon it by Ufuma Prayer Band attracts several kindred witches to it. The effect being that the devil himself openly canvasses Ufuma as "God's own town" and the home of God, where as it is the Satan's enchanted ground. Eighty percent of the private churches and prayer groups attracted to it are products of witchcraft, which is the deceit of the Religious Spirit.[577]

The association by accusation of the ministry with witchcraft and indigenous healing practices demands further gendered interpretation because such constructions were aimed at getting Madam Nwokolo to refute her position in the ACPPB as mother. The idiom of motherhood is deployed in womanist AICs to give the movement legitimacy in a patriarchal system. Motherhood as social identity presents Igbo women with a measure of power and authority. In the ACPPB, it provided Madam Nwokolo a legal platform to lead. Madam Nwokolo was considered the "mother" of Ufuma and the ACPPB and was fondly called "mama" by those around her. Members constructed Madam Nwokolo's motherhood in the light of biblical figures like Deborah, and in her capacity as prophetess and diviner she was highly respected in the religious and secular communities. By targeting this very foundation, Madam Nwokolo's opponents were challenging her authority in the ACPPB. This incident is symptomatic of the challenges Christian women leaders in African initiated Churches.

Witchcraft accusation is therefore a prominent symptom of the gender struggles in African initiated movements. Take, for instance, the event that occurred on June 14, 1983, when

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576 Theo Chuka Okeke, "*The Miracle Finger Points at a Den of Witchcraft Disguised as Ufuma Prayer Band"* (Nigeria, 2002)

577 Daniel Aka and Okeke Chika Jerry, "ACPPB International: History and Doctrine," 58

a young medical doctor, Arinze Udemezue from Enugu-Ukwu, was castrated and placed secretly in the premises of the Praying Band at Ufuma headquarters. He was taken to the sick bay, where he waited to be admitted as a member of the ACPPB. Some hours later, his mother raised an alarm, accusing the Praying Band of having castrated her son. Madam Nwokolo and some other top leaders were arrested and detained by the Nigerian Police. The man later died after 10 months at UNTH Enugu. At the time of his burial, the truth was revealed that the Praying Band was not responsible for the incident. Then Enugwu-Ukwu women got angry at the mother of the deceased. They accused her of being responsible for the death of her son. She was stripped naked and paraded at the popular Nkwo market at Enugwu-Ukwu in Anambra State. Madam Nwokolo's respect as a mother was questioned during this trying period.[578]

Conclusion

In a Religious Report published in 1972, Enyidah notes that the leaders of Prayer Houses are clever men and women who devise means of attracting members to the church, and "in addition to the attractive names . . . they also employ drumming, dancing, and the singing of English and Native choruses. In fact, music dominates their worship, and as Africans love dancing, it can easily be understood why many people (especially the women folk) are found there."[579] The history of "Prayer Houses" as a Pentecostal movement in Nigeria dates back to the colonial period. They go by several attractive names such as Healing Home, House of Prayer,

[578] Daniel Aka and Okeke Chika Jerry, "ACPPB International: History and Doctrine," 59

[579] Alex O. Enyindah, "The Pentecostal Churches as I see them" (Nsukka, Department of Religion, Report of Seminar, 1972) 94

House of Prophecy and many other such names that express their attention to household religious problems. They are found in almost every nook and cranny of Nigeria, from among the Ibibio to the Yoruba. In Igboland, their preponderance coincides with women's Christian ministry, as more women pioneer these churches than men. One of the major explanations for the rapid expansion of these Houses of Prayer is their claim to traditional healing powers. Naturally the sick want the restoration of their health, and so it is understandable when a lot of Christians are attracted to them, because most orthodox churches do not particularly pay attention to healing. Although prayer houses in and around Ufuma vary in structure and size, several of the "Prayer Houses" visited in the course of this study ran healing homes/ministries where members and visitors took residence in the church as they healed. In fact, on one of my visits to a "Prayer House" run by Aunty Mary in Ndikelionwu, I was made to register with a flat fee. Afterward, I was given a card and also seated according to a queue. Likewise, on my first visit to ACPPB, the question asked by the gateman was whether I was seeking admission, as one would ask at a hospital.

Prayer houses are more appealing to women than men. For one thing, more women and fewer men take advantage of healing on a daily basis. Even western medicine will agree that health needs are substantially greater among older women when compared to men and that although women have fewer economic resources to access medical care, they form the majority of those who take advantage of health care. As was the case with the Medical Mission in Ufuma under the CMS mission, the search for healing has continued to shape women's religious preferences since the 1940s.[580] To barren women with little financial support, the first option is a healing home. Another attraction to the church is the prevalent belief in poisoning among

[580] CMS ACC 4/ F 6 – Niger Dawn, 133

Ufuma indigenes and the Igbo in general. In search for solutions for such mysterious problems, indigenes run to these churches for help. A few attend healing homes to prosper financially and in their marriages. A gentleman interviewed during this research was motivated to join the ACPPB by his wife. Unlike the women raised by European missionaries, who were perceived to be "wayward," women of praying bands were generally submissive, inclining towards more traditional gender roles.

When missionaries introduced the practice of excluding women from religious leadership and from the pulpit, indigenous Igbo churches emerged and flourished around traditional women's roles. This points to the continued influence of indigenous religion on African Christianity. Among other things, this chapter has provided proof that although the Ufuma-Igbo embraced Christianity, they did not necessarily discard indigenous values. In embracing both religious faiths, Ufuma-Igbo men and women transform each one, adapting them to suit their varying interests based on what was culturally correct in Igbo customs. The gender structure of the ACPPB as well as other ministries in and around Ufuma mirrors the traditional dual system that emphasized a polarized gender structure of complementarities between men and women and separate spheres of influence. While male leaders supervised men in the camps, female leaders oversaw women's activities in the ministry.

What is more, although ACPPB Christianity is premised on a notion of absolute difference and separation from things of the world, *ihe ndi obodo*, it articulates a vision of Christianity that fits within the traditions of Igbo religion. The ringing of bells and rituals pertaining to menstruating women are both examples of this. More so, African Christian healers, like their indigenous counterparts the *dibia*, are considered effective because they take seriously what their congregations consider the root causes of illness, namely witchcraft and the

breakdown of social relationships (especially between the living and the dead). By discouraging the wearing of certain cloths, colors and ornaments by women, Uka Ekpere Ufuma suggests that the materiality of the world can be a barrier to reaching Christian truths.

CONCLUSION

In the first few weeks of my field research, I thought my dissertation was doomed. I worried about what I was to uncover in a town that was not only sparsely populated but whose religious material culture had been destroyed by overzealous new generation Christians in the name of revivalism. About eight years ago, some key religious figure, including Madam Victoria Okonkwo of the Praying Beads Ministry, had led a crusade aimed at "cleansing" the village of ancestral worship. This crusade involved a mass burning of "idolatrous objects" and "shrines" in the community square at Enugwuabo-Ufuma.[581] Ufuma commentary on this crusade suggests the beginning of a new era and consequently an end to an old era of indigenous beliefs. For many, this crusade marked the seal of Ufuma Christian "conversion" to Christianity. Yet, in spite of the these, oral interviews with Ufuma indigenes (especially *ndi dibia*[582]) tells a different story altogether: stories of women negotiating the religious terrain of saints and ancestors, shrines and churches in their desire to have children, men seeking power and authority by negotiating traditional culture and symbolisms, and people seeking to identify, through traditional means, the religious causes of their misfortunes in life. I was fortunate to have conducted interviews with these men and women who even as Christians seem to have absorbed some of the pre-colonial religious history of the town and other who have come to embody (perhaps modernized aspects) of indigenous religion in their capacities as traditional title holders and traditional healers.

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[581] Interviews, Ernest Asiegbunam (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: November 9 & 11, 2011

[582] *Ndi dibia* refers to Igbo traditional healers and religious specialists

This dissertation posits that it is about time we shift our focus from men's religious experience by including women thereby, treating both male and female historical actors with equal representation. Like Hodgson and Peterson argue, this involves the exploration of conversion "as a grammar of ethnic and gendered debate."[583] In doing both, this study has mostly privileged the voices of previously silenced Igbo women (alongside some Igbo men) and especially centered Ufuma pre-colonial religious history in its rendition of the history of African Christianity. In engaging conversion as a union of several variables and dynamics – social, political, economic, and cultural – this thesis maintains that indigenous beliefs and principles shaped Ufuma response to Christianity and more importantly, Ufuma women of southeastern Nigeria played key roles in the religious sphere between 1900 and 1970.

This study yields three major conclusions highlighting changes and continuities in Igbo women's religious experience and history from pre-colonial times to the post-colonial period. One, in the pre-colonial period, Ufuma women weighed heavily in the religious domain and were important factors shaping the tide of religious change in their capacities as healers, female prophets and priests. Secondly, Ufuma women's religious positions were not altogether lost in their encounter with the missionaries rather their roles expanded as Christianity provided a broader playing field. While creating ample opportunities for women to engage more widely in the religious realm, the Church also created a new platform for women to fraternize. Ufuma women went on to shape the course of women's conversion in their roles as "Bible Women" and also created spaces of influence through Christian women's associations and prayer group in the new patriarchal structure. Thirdly, in contrast to the focus on male pioneered independent

[583] Dorothy L. Hodgson, *The Church of Women: Gendered Encounters Between Maasai and Missionaries* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005) 257; Derek Peterson, "Wordy Women: Gender Trouble and the Oral Politics of the East African Revival in Northern Gikuyuland," *Journal of African History* 42:3 (2001) 489

Christian movements, this dissertation presents the history of All Christian Practical Praying Band (ACPPB) and its founder Madam Sophie Nwokolo with the argument that Ufuma-Igbo women of southeastern Nigeria were perhaps one of the first to pioneer an indigenous independent Christian movement in Igbo history.

This research has dutifully argued that a dual gender structure, which left its mark in the religious realm, allowed women to maintain specific positions of authority in traditional Ufuma society. In their capacities as prophetesses, priestesses and spiritual practitioners, Ufuma-Igbo women played different but complementary roles to their male counterparts. Certain inalienable religious rights, given not based on gender but on other skills (oratory, medicinal, prophetic etc) placed Ufuma women at the fore-front of religious change. In discussing Ufuma-Igbo women's encounter with the CMS missionaries, I conclude that elements of the old structure of women organization were revived in the new Christian church. Ufuma women created niches within the church through active participation in numerous church organizations and associations similar to traditional women's councils and dance groups. A complementary gender structure similar to the pre-colonial system of organization was deployed to demarcate between men and women's roles within the church. While men organized in men associations, Ufuma-Igbo women's associations including the Mother's Union created a stage for women to socialize and to make their voices heard in the church.

Furthermore, this long essay argues that as 'Bible Women,' Ufuma-Igbo women helped cushion the gospel message by making it digestible to their peers, men and women alike. By giving cultural specific meanings to new Christian ideals such as Christian marriage, Bible women provided opportunities for the gospel message to take root in Ufuma women's lives. In all, it is the superior roles women played in the religious sphere from pre-colonial times that

allowed them to lead independent Christian movements a few years after the spread of Christianity in Igboland. A close examination of one of these churches, All Christian Practical Praying Band (ACPPB) and several others pioneered by Igbo women of southeastern Nigeria prompted a consideration of prayer houses as womanist churches in African history. Although open to debate, this study has explored some of the distinguishing factors between ACPPB and male pioneered African churches and has concluded that the unique appeal to women and the encouragement of women's prophetic ministries including the deployment of traditional female principles in its core values make women's Christian movements unique.

The all-important conclusion that has been reached in this study is that the pre-colonial era was a period of authority and power for Ufuma-Igbo women and this was mostly accessed through religion. In the absence of a centralized political structure, religion was the rallying point for social, economic, and political organization among the Igbo. Within this structure, an ideology of equal opportunity built around the principle of complementarities allowed women wield power that were sometimes at par with their male counterparts and many times superior as women straddled multiple roles as mothers, priestesses, prophetesses and 'medicine women,' care giver in the period before colonial rule. In other words, the historical significance of gender complementarities both in the secular and in the religious realm established conditions necessitating the rise of women in dominant positions in the religious sphere. More so, a gender reading of spiritual entities whether constructed as male, female or genderless, reveals that male and female spiritual forces and spiritual specialists interact in a common space characterized by mutual and complementary respect.

On another plain, this study also concludes that Ufuma-Igbo women were harbingers of religious change on the eve of British colonial rule. In highlighting the migratory patterns of women and their personal shrines over time and place, this dissertation shows that women's shrines were associated with specific spirits from the migrating region and brought with them specific sets of beliefs that resembled those of the woman's natal clan. In other words, the exogamous nature of Igbo marriage that allowed women to migrate with the deities of their paternal abode to the communities into which they were married placed Ufuma-Igbo women at the center of religious change in pre-colonial Ufuma. Such migratory patterns enriched not just the religious pantheon of her marital abode but also her patrilineage to which she visited annually.

By prioritizing internal factors engendering religious change over external factors in the pre-colonial period (often studied as undercurrents of the trans-Atlantic slave trade), this study has emphasized the important roles of itinerant male and female religious practitioners in the Igbo region in the spread of culture specific ideas across Igboland on the eve of the Christian era. In their travels back and forth between societies in the Igbo region and beyond, traditional practitioners including Mgbafor and the Aro were key agents of religious and cultural change not just during but before and after the period of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Furthermore, this study concludes that Ufuma-Igbo women were not docile but played active roles in shaping the history of the encounter between the Ufuma and the Church Missionary Society (CMS) missionaries. In sustaining the argument that the conversion of Ufuma men and women was dictated by choice and not of coercion, this study highlighted Ufuma invitation of

the missionaries. This action was intended to check the excesses of the new colonial order but would develop into a larger relationship that will attempt to depose Ufuma traditional culture. Even at that, Ufuma choices to convert/remain Christians or shun the new religious cult encircling their neighborhood in the early period of the 1900s was dictated and shaped by age-old politics between rival sub-clans. This explains the present division of Ufuma clans into exclusive Catholic and Anglican factions.

Often times, women choices in the encounter like the choice to patronize western medicine and maternity services over traditional medicines and midwives influenced missionary strategies as observed in the expansion of CMS medical mission from the 1920s in Igbo church history. More so, by the second phase of missionary expansion, Ufuma women's decisions to accept or reject the new faith was likewise shaped by the realities on ground such as the prospect of marrying a catechist and a member of the rising social class and educated elite in the new colonial structure in Igboland. This evidence lends voice to my conclusion that Christian conversion meant different things to different Ufuma-Igbo women and therefore, it must be considered as a process involving an examination of the life history of the individual.

Through active participation in the evangelical process, Ufuma-Igbo women in their capacity as 'Bible women' (a group of few indigenous women that could read the bible) played increasing roles within the CMS mission from the late 1930s. By supervising and assisting in the dispensaries, holding open-air crusades, one on one/house to house evangelism, Bible women tilted the growth of the church in favor of indigenous women. This study shows that "Bible women" facilitated the conversion of Ufuma men and women by building cultural bridges between the missionaries and the people, thereby cushioning the reception of Christianity in Ufuma. Although these women imbibed the very essence of British Victorian-style domesticity

especially propagated by female European CMS missionaries during this period, they also gave indigenous interpretations to their Christian learning and teaching.

In spite of the patriarchal character of main-line churches in Africa, Ufuma-Igbo women created strategic spaces and carved important niches for themselves in the Anglican Church in Ufuma. Through participation in multiple associations and organizations including the Mother's Union, Women's Guild, and prayer cells, Ufuma women reenacted age-old women's associations including *umuada* and *inyomdi* groups within the church. Within these groups, Ufuma women enjoyed not just the types of leisure activities the missionaries encouraged, they also redrafted pre-colonial leisure styles missionaries forbade into the church. Igbo women's church associations provided much more than plain leisure. It created a platform for action and allowed an even broader outlook for women beyond Ufuma. This broadening of outlook is evidenced as idioms of motherhood became redefined in the Mother's Union. What is more, women's associations also offered a rallying point for Ufuma women and in the face of conflicting opinion and agenda, it delivered the much needed unity in the fight against inequalities for their children and the community at large.

Ufuma women had fewer contacts with the missionaries but whenever there was contact, it left its mark on women and CMS missionaries alike. Yet, because the first missionary contacts was made with Ufuma men, right up to the late colonial period, and missionary work seemed to concentrate on men's religiosity, churches pioneered by indigenous Igbo women draws substantially from traditional religious principles. It is also arguable that as missionaries concentrated on the men's religiousity in the belief that they represented all Ufuma men and

women alike, it was easier for Ufuma women to pass on their religious knowledge so that female elements dominated independent Christian movements in Igboland as a whole. This argument can be made for the many female pioneered churches and prayer houses in Igboland. Another concrete example is how Ufuma catholic women ascribe qualities once identified in the earth deity *Ajana Ufuma* in the image of the Virgin Mary, the only female pantheon of the new faith.

In my argument for womanist churches in African history, I have maintained that the gender history of the pioneering figure; the gender roles operative in a ministry; the symbolisms associated with practices of healing, deliverance, prayers, prohibitions, and other religious rites; a conscious womanist reading of biblical teachings and Scripture; and the nature of internal gender relations are some of the factors differentiating "womanist" Christian movements from pro-male churches. In exploring the history of All Christian Practical Praying Band and its founder Madam Nwokolo, I argued that certain rituals and symbolisms drawn from indigenous religious knowledge play important roles within the womanist churches. Although they take on Christian meanings within ACPPB, associations and references to witchcraft beliefs and rituals exclusive to menstruating women, practices alien to mainstream Christianity in Africa, are some of the symbolisms drawn in from indigenous religion that make the movement, ACPPB peculiarly feminine. What is more, beyond the often mentioned racial and colonial explanation given for the rise of African Independent Churches (AICs), this study concludes that gender politics is a fundamental factor compelling the rise of womanist AICs, especially 'All Christian Practical Praying Band' (ACCPB) and other African initiated ministries founded by women including Grace Tani's Church of the Twelve Apostles in Ghana and Alice Lakwena's Movement in Uganda.

Perspectives

Rather than depicting Africa's past as m e r e l y determined by currents emanating from some western core, this study has privileged Africans as historical actors, operating within culturally specific motivations in shaping their own history. It argues that it is about time African historical studies begin to redirect its discussion on gender to consider religion and spirituality as an analytical category. Likewise, studies on Islam and Christianity should not be considered complete except a history of indigenous beliefs and principles are engaged. It is only in the context of these considerations that gender and religion in Africa can proof satisfactory. Dorothy Hodgson supports this standpoint in her argument that spiritual beliefs and practices are central to the "production, reproduction, transformation, and negotiation of gendered identities, of masculinities and femininities."[584]

What is clear is that the worldview of the Igbo is enshrined and reflected in everyday reality and the ways in which Ufuma men and women react to childbirth, death, marriage, other cultural practices. The implication of this is that indigenous religious beliefs abound so much that the Christian cannot always be separated from the Indigenous practitioner. In other words, both religious systems are fused in the mind of the Ufuma so that there cannot be a study of Christianity (and probably Islam) in Igboland without a requisite appraisal of indigenous religious beliefs and practices. Therefore, an alternative method to the study of religion in Igboland and perhaps Africa as a whole (Indigenous Religion, Christianity, and Islam), is an approach that takes indigenous religion as the vantage point/lens through which Christianity, Islam, and/or the New Traditional African Religion should be studied. While the old

[584] Hodgson, *The Church of Women: Gendered Encounters Between Maasai and Missionaries,* 258

historiography privileges Christianity, missions, westernization and colonialism over indigenous religion, this alternative approach will give agency to indigenous religious ideas and at the same time provide insights into the diversity of Igbo receptions of other religions.

What is more, there is the need to adress the chaos in scholarly categorization of African Christian denominations. My research reveals the discoloration of these categories as mainline churches, Pentecostal ministries and African Indigenous Churches (AICs) all exhibit similar characteristics in belief and practices. All these categories attract crowds through their prophetic, deliverance, and signs-and-wonders ministrations including the supposed "orthodox" Catholic Church. It can be said that their non-traditional approach and openness to the miraculous have not only checked the drift of the Igbo Christian back and forth across denominations but has colored the very nature of Igbo Catholicism and Christianity in Igboland. In fact, more demand have been made on orthodox churches recently to indigenize the churches by taking in greater features of Igbo culture like Ozo title, polygamy and other significant aspects of traditional Igbo society and specific groups like the Charismatic have emerged to defend these aspects of traditional life. It is on this premise that this study demands a reassessment of Christian denominational categorization in Africa and suggests a two way analysis that differentiates between pro-male and pro-female churches in African history.

Many questions are yet to be asked or imagined. For instance, this long essay lay claim to a new category of AICs and argues that female pioneered AICs have some distinguishing attributes that may allow us refer to them as womanist AICs but there is still much to be studied around this argument. What is more, there is much to be said with regard to the contributions of

former dibias and children of traditional medicine men and healers in the rise of spiritual churches all over Igboland. It was around this historical environment that several healing homes and prophetic type churches emerged in Igboland in the last phase of colonial rule and until date, pioneering leaders of Christian ministries are daughter, sons and grand-children of religious healers in Igboland.

Of particular interest for future research is a comparative study of religious deities and specialists and mapping across societies as well as the boundaries of gender and sex in African religious expressions. A comparative study of this sort will allow conclusions that do not only speak to the gender identities operative in African society but will allow us make relative generalizations that differentiate between centralized and decentralized societies, agricultural based and pastoral societies. Such academic ambition will mostly be met through collaboration with scholars of religion in Africa working in different locales. At another level, it will be interesting to explore the new face of African indigenous religion in the modern period especially paying attention to changing approaches to healing, exorcism, prophesies, and religious symbolisms. Perhaps, such interests could be broadened to the African Diaspora. At this level, it would be interesting to understand how gender roles in the religious realm survived in African communities in the New World since the period of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Inquiries of this sort will fill important gaps in the study of gender and religion in Africa.

What has been said is that the study of Igbo and African religion definitely has a long way ahead and there is an advantage in approaching issues related to religion from an interdisciplinary standpoint. This study calls for a reassessment of such terms like polytheism and monotheism and its application to African religions. It would also be a profitable to look at changes in Igbo religion in the context of “modernity” and “secularization” and a more elaborate

work than this is needed on women and gender in Igbo religion. Pertinent questions should include; how women gain and exercise power through religion and how men and women negotiate gender complementarities in Igbo religious and political culture? More importantly, could Igbo religion be considered a proselytizing religion in the twenty first century?

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Oral Interviews

About 60 semi structured interviews were conducted between August 2011 and August 2012 in Ufuma, Awka, and Ovoko. These interviews were mostly carried out with traditional rulers, church leaders, indigenous women leaders, members of the community and a few outsiders. Of these numbers about fifty percent were older men and women above 70 years of age. The rest varied in age but equally from different parts of the nine Ufuma villages. The interviews were conducted in our shared languages, Igbo and Pidgin English. Except for a few women interviewed in the market and three others who refused to be taped, interviews were taped and simultaneously recorded down in short hand during the interview. A 'Life history approach' was the initial strategy and depending on the detail provided, more specific questions were asked. Interviewees who requested to remain anonymous are identified by pseudonyms.

Select Interviews

Lucy Agu (Umuogem-Ufuma: Novemeber 17, 2011)

Obianuju Aguwa (Umunebo-Ufuma: December 4, 2011)

Ernest Asiegbunam (Enugwu-abo Ufuma: November 9 and 11, 2011)

Mrs. Asiegbunam (Enugwuabo-Ufuma: November 13, 2011)

Bessie Chukwu (Enugwuabo-Ufuma: November 17, 2011)

Mr. and Mrs. Ferdinand Orji, (Umuagu-Ufuma: November 18, 2011)

Modesta Ilechukwu (Umuogem-Ufuma: October 12, 2011)

Venerable C.O.C. Ikpa (Umunebu-Ufuma: November 14, 2011)

Chief and Mrs. J.C. Mogbo (Umuonyiuka-Ufuma: September 30 and November 8, 2011)

Franca Nnodim, (Umuagu-Ufuma: October 19, 2011)

Ebere Nwafor (Umuagu-Ufuma: October 10, 2011)

Chief and Mrs. Basil Nwankwo Ndokwamufu (Umueji-Ufuma: November 8th & 12th 2011)

Chief and Mrs. Festus Nwankwo-Eze (Umuonyiba-Ufuma: November 10, 2011)

Bedford Nwajagu (Umunebo Ufuma: November 12, 2011)

Andy Nwalor (Umunebo-Ufuma: October 27, 2011)

Nene Nwogo (Umueji-Ufuma, September 30, 2011)

Elder and Mrs. Dan Nwokolo (Umunebo-Ufuma: several dates between Aug. and Dec. 2011)

Chief A. Obi-Okolo (Umuagu-Ufuma: December 11, 2011)

Alice Okechukwu (Enugwu-abo Ufuma, November 11, 2011)

Emelia Okeke (Umuogem-Ufuma , September 12, 2011)

Chief and Mrs. Levi Amobi Okeke (Enugwuabo-UfumaNovember 17 and December 3, 2011)

Ekene Okonkwo (Umuonyiuka-Ufuma, August 2011- May 2013)

Chief Morrison Okonkwo (Umueji-Ufuma: November 16, 2011)

Regina Okonkwo Ozegu-Ufuma: August 17, 2011)

Ferdinand Okoli (Umuonyiba-Ufuma: August 24, 2011)

Chief Fred Okoli (Enugwu-abo Ufuma, several dates between September and November 2011)

Maggie Okoli (Umuagu-Ufuma, October 11, 2011)

Lovelyn Okolie (Umu-Onyiuka-Ufuma, October 22, 2011)

Oluchi Okolie (Umuogem-Ufuma, September 31, 2011)

Kajetan Okolo (Umuonyiuka-Ufuma: November 7, 2011)

Christiana Okolo (Umuogem-Ufuma, November 12, 2011)

Caroline Okoro (Umuogem-Ufuma, October 12, 2011)

Juliana Onwudiwe, (Umuagu-Ufuma, November 16, 2011)

Edith Onwueyenwa (Umunebu-Ufuma, Novemeber 17, 2011)

James Opata (Ovoko-Nsukka: August 11, 2012)

Victoria Uka (Umueji-Ufuma, November 16, 2011)

Victoria Udeni (Ovoko-Nsukka: August 16, 2012)

Mercy Ude (Enugwu-abo Ufuma, November 11, 2011)

Christiana Ugboaja (Enugwu-abo Ufuma, November 11, 2011)

Chief and Mrs. Sylvanus Ugwori (Ovoko-Nsukka: August 16, 2012)

Chief Ernest Ugwuanyi (Ovoko-Nsukka: August 16, 2012)

James Ugwuanyi (Ovoko-Nsukka: August 16, 2012)

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The National Archives, Kew Gardens, London, United Kingdom

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National Archives Enugu, Nigeria

School for Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London Special Collections

Local Archives/Libraries

Holy Trinity Church, Ufuma Archives

All Christian Practical Praying Band (ACPPB), Ufuma Archives

Faith Cathedral, Awka Archives

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