

Between the Sacrilegious feminine and the Sacred masculine of Gendered Spaces: A Femino-cultural hermeneutical reading of Afikpo-Ibo Oral Traditions*

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*Acknowledgement: *This work received TETFUND Institutional Based Research Grant 2021/2022. We are grateful to the awarding institution for the funding of our project on Afikpo orality.*

Abstract

Different critical studies have questioned gender and sexuality in traditional African societies and African oral traditions, underscoring the African hegemonic masculinity that underlines African cultural practices. Afikpo orality and culture have been viewed through diverse theoretical and ideological perspectives with minimal attention given to discourse on women. Afikpo cultural and mythicized gender politics has not been fully interrogated and its discursive potential remains untapped. This study, therefore, examines the dialectic of the sacrilegious feminine and the sacred masculine of Afikpo-gendered spaces. The research intends to interrogate Afikpo *Ogo* social space and its ritualistic performances, masquerades, cultural assemblies and proverbs in order to demonstrate how its gender ideology and patriarchal hegemony undermine feminine identities. It goes further to determine why *Ogo* as a material social space is the highest embodiment of gender politics as presences and absences of bodies are sexually and culturally constructed, being both sacrilegious and sacred. Though there are different aspects of Afikpo oral tradition and material culture, this study prioritizes Afikpo erotic gendered proverbs, *Ogo* culture and its ritualistic practices over other artistic and cultural forms. The significance of this study is defined in the location of Afikpo gender ideology in its oral traditions and material culture, demonstrating how this ideology systematically



aligns with Ibo mythology that calibrates cultural times into seasons and zones, giving birth to gendered spatialities and temporalities of Afikpo festivals and material culture. The work adopts feminist cultural hermeneutics as a theoretical framework and ethnography as a methodology.

Keywords: Afikpo, Cultural hermeneutics, Gendered spatiality, Gendered temporality, oral tradition, material culture, Ogo men cult

Introduction

It was not until the eighteenth century that the question of the place, importance, and future of the female gender began to be asked. Why is the voice of the woman suppressed? Why is she prevented from accessing privileges that her men folk take for granted? Why is the woman's attempt at equality and her plea for equity regarded as an affront to the sacred and therefore sacrilegious? The attempt to give answers to these questions began in Europe in the 18th century to address the social order in which traditional laws and practices discriminate in matters such as sex, status, class and privileges. Some scholars (Anjoy, 2016; Goldie, 1894; Aye, 2009; Afella, 2016) have traced the inferior perception of women to the sacred books, customs and traditions. Gendered spaces are common amongst religious groups, cultures and traditions where access to specific topographies bestows a sense of entitlement. There are, however, efforts to change the status quo from every perspective: religious, cultural and traditional. The quest to halt the obvious segregation of the female gender which began in the 18th century culminated in the formation of women's movements who in 'the spirit of the time' and in spite of themselves attacked the established order. The Enlightenment is used to describe the spirit of the 18th century. This was the great age of reason. It is defined as the period of rigorous scientific, political, social and philosophical discourses that characterized European society. It was a period of change in thought and reason which according to Roy Porter (2001) was decisive in the making of modernity. During this period, centuries of custom and tradition were brushed aside in favour of exploration, individualism, tolerance, equality, liberty and many others. Feminist movements were aimed at challenging social orders in which traditional laws and practices discriminated against female folks. According to Billington Greig as quoted by Udu (2016), feminists sought the following:

Reorganization of the world upon a basis of sex equality in all human relations; a movement which would reject every differentiation between individuals upon the ground of sex, would abolish all sex privileges and sex burdens and would strive to set up the recognition of the common humanity of woman and man as the foundation of law and custom (p. 181).

However, the question at the heart of this research is whether the reorganization of the world based on sex equality in human relations can be achieved. The Western nations may answer the question in some form of positive affirmation but not the developing nations. Many developing societies, particularly in Africa and Asia still operate the patriarchal social systems where the men are in charge of everything that pertains to life and living. In such societies, it is the men who allot existential space(s) to the women. In these societies, the men turn deaf ears to advocates of gender equality, preferring or insisting on upholding and preserving the female-suppressing traditional, religious and cultural practices of the ancients. One such society where the men still hold on to the traditions of the fathers is Afikpo. According to Ottenberg as quoted in Ishaya (2014), “the Afikpo people rely much on tradition, on an orientation to past events as precedent” (p.1). This reliance on traditions by these people has impacted and still continues to impact negatively on the female gender. This can be seen in the specification of spaces either as masculine or feminine in Afikpo town. Masculine spaces are forbidden to the females and are seen and termed sacred spaces. Encroachment whether by omission or commission is sacrilegious and will attract heavy sanction for the offender.

This research aims to read Afikpo oral traditions and material culture through the lenses of feminist cultural hermeneutics as captured in her myths, proverbs, cult and social festivities such as *Ogo*, *Iko*, and *Ikeji* amongst others and interpret its male-gender preferences. Suggestions would also be proffered on how to balance the equilibrium in a highly patriarchal and gender-sensitive society.

Afikpo, Oral Traditions and Material Culture

Afikpo is situated in the present-day Ebonyi State after crossing from Imo and Abia States. It is an ethnical subgroup in Southeastern Nigeria and one of the numerous small confederations of villages in Ibo country (Ottenberg, 1968). Afikpo Town is typically a composite nucleated village group or conglomeration of thirty villages collectively called the Afikpo village group (Aja, 2005). Afikpo is an ancient town; several archaeological findings support the claim that the Afikpo civilization existed as far back as the Neolithic age (Elechi, 2003). *Ndi-Ehugbo* (Afikpo people) have a rich cultural heritage which includes folk literature, pottery and wrestling, *Ikeji* (New Yam) festival, *Iko* festival, *Ehoma* Fishing festival, and *Okumkpo* community theatre, among others. Ajah (2021) affirms that all these oral traditions define the identity of *Ndi Ehugbo*, Afikpo people and their *Afikponess*. Simon and Phoebe Ottenberg are the most important researchers who have contributed specifically to the study of Afikpo Ibo society (Cheng Chang 1980). Such anthropological research (see Ottenberg 1968; Cheng Chang, 1980) and historical works (Aja, 2005; Mbey, 2004) clearly show the ethnography of Afikpo and its rich cultural heritage and folklore. However, there is no exposition on literary forms and contents of Afikpo



oral literature because the works of these scholars are only based on socio-historical perspectives. Ottenberg's *Masked Rituals in Afikpo* (1975) is worthy of mention; it is centred on the Afikpo material culture of *Okumkpo* masked performance with its cathartic effects on Afikpo traditional agrarian society. Characteristically, Afikpo oral traditions comprise different traditional forms of legends, myths, epics, tales, and proverbs among others, revealing the ancestry, philosophy and mythology of Afikpo Ibo society. Legends of Igbo Ukwu (Igbo Omaka Ejali), Nkalu, Ohaodu and Egu, tales of migration of origin and myths of Ajiberekwukwu, Ehoma Lake, Osim Ugwuoke (Osu), among others are recycled through oral communication with different versions of different narrators.

Afikpo is equally rich in material culture. It has not drawn much attention from scholars of anthropology, ethnography, and cultural studies. Therefore, Afikpo material culture is a major component of the study. Simply put, material culture is the object-based aspect of the study of culture (Prown, 1982). Some of the examples of Afikpo material culture are Ogo cult, Ogo masquerades, Ikeji (New Yam) festival, Iko (Friendship) festival, Okumkpo traditional theatre including Ebu Mbe festival, Ehoma (fishing) festival, Mgba (wrestling) festival, title-taking ceremonies including the highest male and female titles such as "Omume" (men) and Olariwe (women), Aluta Nwanyi (marriage) including Nkwa Nwite (bridal marriage ceremony) among others. This study will mostly dwell on Ogo and its patriarchally ritualistic ceremonies that discriminate against Afikpo women. However, Afikpo oral traditions and material culture are true reflections of Ibo traditional society that have been described as highly gendered.

Gender and Ibo Culture

Gender is a social construct that establishes and differentiates the status and roles between men and women particularly in the way they contribute to, participate in and are rewarded by the economy and the prevailing social system (Udu, 2016). Biological and ideological categories are often made, as people are born man or woman, but feminine or masculine gender practices are socially and culturally constructed. People are taught what the appropriate behaviour and attitudes, roles and activities are for them and how they should relate to other people. This learned behaviour is what makes up gender identity and determines gender roles' (cited in Chidinma, 2013, p.49). Gender in Igbo oral traditions has been studied (Okonkwo, 1992; Azuonye, 1992; Opatá, 1992; Okafor, 2001; Udemmadu, 2019; Emeka-Nwobia, 2008) and grossly perceived as patriarchal since patriarchy is perceived as the primary causative factor for the challenges which bedevil women within the African traditional religion and culture (Sande, 2021).

Gender relationship influences the lives of men and women in any society, they determine opportunities and privileges, especially in patriarchal societies. Among the Ibos, gender relations are patriarchal in nature and therefore highly dominated by the male. The Ibos inhabit the Southeastern part of Nigeria and their region is made up of five States that include Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo. Ibo-speaking communities can also be found in large numbers in neighbouring states of Rivers and Delta. The Ibos constitute the third largest ethnic group in the country. The traditional Ibo society is very gender sensitive and patriarchal. The Ibo male child is brought up to see himself as superior to the female child and he is made to understand this very early in life. Thus, the male child is seen as being very important by both men and women in the traditional Ibo society. Achebe (1958) in his classic novel portrays the importance that the Ibo society places on the male child over the female child when Okonkwo slaughtered a goat after his wife delivered three male children in succession for him while Ekwefi mourned her inability to give him a son.

Achebe's (1958) narrative depicts the patriarchal system of the Ibo society. Patriarchy is a system that places men at the top of the social and political ladder. It is a system that considers women as inconsequential, powerless, inferior and incapable of fulfilling any reasonable task. But this was the traditional patriarchal system of years gone by; today's Ibo society may not be typically traditional because according to Ozumba (2005), they have become one of the most sophisticated tribes in the present Nigerian nation. They are profoundly educated, widely travelled, economically advanced, socially advanced and psychologically active. These attributions may be correct in the sense that the Ibo society is evolving but this does not in any way take away completely the entrenched patriarchal practices of the people that are embedded in their orality, customs and traditions. These customary traditions and practices are still seen in the allocation and access to social spaces between the male and the female. The female is denied access to specific social spaces and privileges not because she does not want to access the space or enjoy the privileges but because traditions and customs have placed a barrier between her and her choice of space. Her action is termed sacrilegious or an abomination if she insists on accessing or enjoying a sacred space meant only for men. The consequences of sacrilege are dire and costly; it may lead to banishment or the offering of expensive sacrifices to the gods of the land. In Afikpo, despite education and modernity, sacred spaces and times are still the restricted privilege of the initiated men.

Fieldwork

The decision to deal with an ethnography that combines material culture and oral tradition agrees with Samjee (2000) who affirms that “bringing together oral and visual texts enhances the quality of writing ethnography because visual knowledge based on visual thinking and analysis certainly adds to viewing culture” (p.102).



Since the chosen approach is qualitatively literary and ethnographic, coupled with the fact of the researchers' lived cultural experiences as Afikpo indigenes, this methodological choice intends to deepen the depth of cultural knowledge and to validate cultural data through structured recorded interviews of aged elders comprising of *Horris*, *Oniikaras* and *Esaas*, two males and two females in Ukpa and Ugwuegu communities who are respected custodians of cultural experience. Aja (2005) prescribed interviews with knowledgeable elders of the villages of origin of each festival as ways of unearthing cultural facts. Two factors account for the choice of these people: age and cultural experience. Both enjoy a symbiotic relationship because it is the age that validates traditional cultural experience or vice versa. These age groups are directly and indirectly involved in Afikpo's legislative, executive and judicial responsibilities by participation or consultation. Culturally speaking, Afikpo operates an age-grade system. This structure stratifies elders into Rikweri, Oniikara and Horii, Ekpuke Essa and Ekpuke Eto whose functions are executive, judicial and legislative. The Essas are members of the Afikpo Supreme Council with the Eto (youth) as the executive arm (Aja, 2005). One of the interviewees, Horii Gabiel Agha Mbey, author of *Origin of Ehugbo* (2004), is a consummate reservoir of Afikpo cultural knowledge. Others are Madam Priscilia Mbey (Oniikara), Madam Ada Uro (Oniikara), and Mr. Samuel Inya (Essa).

The structure of the interview was thematically gendered with fourteen (14) questions for men and thirteen (13) questions for women. They touched on different aspects of Afikpo culture and its relationship with men and women, ranging from the biodata of interviewees, cultural festivals and its rituals, Ogo tradition and its initiation, sacred spaces and its desecration, and cultural time zones, among others. The pieces of information gathered authenticate and complement bibliographic resources in some major seminal works on Afikpo such as G. A. Mbey's *Origin of Ehugbo* (2004) and R. O. Aja's *History of Afikpo Circa 1600* (2005). Though these publications offer a historical overview of Afikpo, they equally reveal the asymmetrical positionality of Afikpo women because of the prevalence of patriarchy in Afikpo cultures and traditions.

Sexuality and Masculinity in Afikpo Oral Traditions and Material Culture

To understand sexuality and masculinity in Afikpo oral traditions and material cultures, feminist cultural hermeneutics offers the required investigative and analytical perspectives. The interrogation of African gender ideology is fundamental in these oral practices that are distinctive of gender difference, hegemonic masculinity and gendered spaces. Afikpo culture consists of "male-dominated religious rituals" (Cheng Chang, 1980) and thereby constitutes a form of masculine othering as some cultural practices, ideologically charged, are simply metaphors of masculinity. This calls for the "hermeneutics of Afikpo tradition" where tradition

becomes the subject and object of interpretation (Okonda, 2017). Theoretically, the study benefits from the insightful contributions of feminist cultural hermeneutics (Kanyoro, 2002; Oduyoye, 1995; Russell, 2004; Tenson, 2015). Kanyoro (2002) defines it as the analysis and interpretation of how culture conditions people's understanding of reality at a particular time and location.

The examination of Afikpo culture which largely exists in its oral forms depends on a hermeneutical conceptual framework since the people's cultures shape their worldviews expressed in their oral art forms and performances and this culture "ultimately is less about texts, and much more about people and their everyday lived cultures" (Storey, 2009, p.34). In this study, Afikpo womanhood is conceptualized and performed as "bondswomen of culture" (Tenson, 2015), suffering from what Oduyoye calls "the fetters of culture" (cited in Russell, 2004) because of the inherently gendered othering in its cultures and our "interpretation of the "other" is not to understand the "other", but to understand ourselves through our understanding of the "other" (Huang, 2006, p.189). Since this "other" is feminine, it naturally evokes the analytical questions of gender and therefore equally falls under gender studies of Igbo orality.

To localize gender discourse in unwritten cultures presupposes the existence of patriarchal epistemologies in prehistoric oral traditions. Rezeanu (2015) confirms that "gender studies tend to give priority to gender differences that legitimize masculine hegemony" (p.10), however, the social construction of domestic masculinities and femininities ride on the back of gender ideology situated in myths, legends, proverbs, and cultural practices. To Hussein (2005, p.59), "gender ideology is a systematic set of cultural beliefs through which a society constructs and wields its gender relations and practices." It can be admitted that this ideology prescribes social gender roles known as "behavioural norms associated with and expected of males and females in a given society" (Kobia, 2017, p.128). In Afikpo, gender ideology is set on both oral traditions and material culture. It is needful, to begin with some selected Afikpo proverbs related to women and end with material cultures such as Ogo and its masquerade activities, Ikeji and Iko festivals among other gendered cultural practices.

Afikpo Women in the Eyes of Afikpo Proverbs:

Like other Igbo and African proverbs (Opata, 1992; Okoye, 2001; Udemmadu, 2019; Wanjiru et al. 2015, Dzahevie-Quarshie and Omari, 2021), Afikpo proverbs are highly gendered, though it is admitted that African proverbs are "predominantly a male genre that often evaluates the characteristics of women negativity" (Wanjiru et al, 2015, p.59). Before sampling some of these proverbs to demonstrate how Afikpo women are socially and culturally constructed, it is pivotal to state that Afikpo



mythology prescribes the positionality of all sexes with respect to cultural and social privileges and opportunities. For example, the act of “Igba okwa” (adultery) is culturally forbidden; however, in Afikpo (Ehugbo), “only the women and not the men are held accountable for adultery” and generally obliged “to perform purification rites” (Mbey, 2004, p.78). When the adultery-related proverb is rendered thus: “Gi agbaghi okwa I ni-je ijie”, meaning “if you do not commit adultery, your movements portray you do”, it makes an explicit and implicit reference to the woman, not the man. The majority of Afikpo erotic proverbs refer explicitly to female sex organs or acts while others objectify womanhood as seen in the following:

S/N	ORIGINAL VERSION IN AFIKPO LANGUAGE	TRANSLATED VERSION IN ENGLISH
1	Egbisi gba otule na omuru ako	When an ant strikes a vagina, it learns craftiness
2	Ume nwa echugu ola na ulote	Miscarriage does not stop women from copulating with their husbands
3	Ewu maari nke uhu a dia, ya weri otule debe na azu	The she-goat knows the reason why her vagina is located at her backside
4	Umu nwaanyi bu ngwugwu	Women are like parcels
5	Nwaanyi bum manu Uburu	Women are like Uburu oil sold in gallons, when you buy the oil, you own the gallon also.

It is only five proverbs relating to women that have been sampled because they are in the minority in Afikpo. This scarcity reminds us of the gender patterns of underrepresentation and subalternity since proverbs are a man-friendly genre. For example, Proverb 2 can be classified as “epigrammatic proverb...in the form of a simple statement of fact” (Okoye, 2001, p.26). Without the feminist context and gender ideology that characterizes Afikpo oral traditions, this proverb appears as truism because miscarriage or barrenness does not prevent couples from having sexual intercourse. However, subjected to a feminist cultural hermeneutical context, the meaning becomes connotatively gendered. If the proverb makes an implied allusion to sex by the use of “ulote” (bedroom), it presumes that only Afikpo women are obsessed with sexual intercourse. It reverses the traditional sexual gender role in favor of men who are now ascribed the position of passivity, while the position of activity is associated with women. Proverbs demonstrate how language is used as a tool for sustaining hegemonic masculinity and for constructing feminine identities in African and Afikpo orality. This linguistic othering of womanhood continues in Proverbs 1 and 3; these proverbs are not only gendered but also erotic since “language offers them the opportunity to construct stereotypes of self and others” (Hussein, 2005, p.60).

Erotic proverbs are proverbs that refer explicitly to human or animal sexual organs. Like Akan proverbs (Dzaheve-Quarshie and Omari, 2021), Afikpo oral traditions equally have proverbs that can be categorized as erotic because they make unambiguous references to female genitalia such as “otule” (vagina) in proverbs 1 and 3. It is needful to problematize the keywords in the proverbs to illustrate the hermeneutics of patriarchy, focusing on three elements of “ant”, “strike” and “vagina” because as Ayodabo (2021) reaffirms, the “intersections of masculinity with culture add interesting layers of representation that warrant specific examination” (p.39). The choice of “vagina” is derogatory, discriminatory and patriarchal. The use of “ant” as an agential subject produces the intended derision because its “strike” is tantamount to an unforceful penetration enabled by the disadvantaged positionality of the female sexual organ in the first proverb. However, the ant can also be interpreted as a figure that stands for the masculine phallus which could have been used to replace the vagina if men were not the producer and benefactor of the gendered stereotyping through proverbial discourse. In Proverb 3, the term “vagina” is equally derogatorily employed as it is associated with “ewu” (she-goat), thereby giving birth to the objectification of the female other. Proverbs 4 and 5 objectify Afikpo women, compared to “ngwugwu” (parcel) and “manu” (oil). The use of the term “parcel” implies individualized ownership while “oil” as a consumable commodity symbolizes replicability and substitutability. It is the Afikpo gender ideology and its myths that support and legitimize domestic masculine hegemony, explaining why the offence of adultery does not attract cultural and social sanctions because an Afikpo man can acquire as many women as possible since they are explicitly compared to commodities by the proverbs that have been analyzed above. However, it is not only in Afikpo proverbs that antifeminist and patriarchal sensibilities are expressed or located, Cheng Chang (1980) points out that “in Afikpo, the prestigious activities such as masked rituals, age-set activities which maintain social sanctions and supernatural concerns are prohibited to women and are kept under the control of men” (p.75). Her affirmation points to the phallogocentric characteristic of Afikpo material culture.

Patriarchal Hegemony of Afikpo Material Culture

In Africa generally, gender ideology figures largely in proverbs that support and sustain the construction of masculinity and femininity (Hussein, 2005). However, it is imperative to use Afikpo material culture such as Ogo and its ritualistic activities and festivals to demonstrate the omnipresence of patriarchy and its hegemonic masculinity. Wells (2007) acknowledges that the study of material culture, with its origins in archaeology and anthropology, is already a study of everyday life. In Afikpo, Ogo culture, masquerades, and festivals constitute everyday experiences of every Afikpo man and woman and therefore a set of cultural practices that enhance



the material, personal and even spiritual welfare of the people beyond their utilitarian functions (Scarpaci, 2016). The study of Afikpo material culture will investigate the relationship between the people and their material entities, interrogating “how objects construct subjects” (Olsen, 2003, p.100) and illustrating how values, ideas, attitudes and assumptions are confined in the cultural artefacts of a given society (Prown, 1982).

Ogo is an example of Afikpo culture and material culture, a cultural space and cultural practice regarded as men's cult. There are different cultural functions of Ogo Ehugbo, depending on the locality, for example, Nkpoghoro is the first village to be mentioned in libation pouring because of its cultural significance in Afikpo mythology; before Mgba (traditional wrestling) commences in Afikpo, its Ogo Ibe must be weeded (Aja, 2005). Other social functions of Ogo will be handled later; in this section, the concern is to unveil its cultural practices that embody hegemonic masculinity and feminine subalternity. It is important to start with discussions touching on the sexist adherence to the Afikpo men cult. Ogo membership is socio-culturally gendered as it is reserved for men; it requires an initiation ceremony regarded as a masculine rite of passage to manhood. A non-initiate male is referred to as “ena”, disparagingly seen as a woman. This initiation is called “Isubu” which is “a sort of military training in which a man is made to undergo and bear series of hardships with fortitude, endurance and perseverance” (Mbey, 2004, p.15). The inductee is exposed to the secrets of Ogo and he enjoys all male-controlled privileges and opportunities including participating in Obu activities, Ogo activities, rituals and masquerading. Obu is a village public building, dedicated to the spirits of the people’s ancestors and a sacred structure used exclusively by male folks (Mbey, 2004). The difference between “Obu” and “Ogo” is social, cultural, ideological and mythical. While Obu is open to both initiate and non-initiate men and to some extent, to women who are allowed into the outer part of the building, Ogo house as the home of Afikpo masquerades only admits initiated males. Furthermore, the initiation of young boys culminates into and ends with masquerades called “Lughulu Isubu” (initiation masquerade) whose “faces were concealed with wooden carved masks and their whole frame down to the ankle with tender yellowish palm fronds called “ire nkwu” or “Omu” (Mbey, 2004, p.15). In essence, masquerading is one of the functions of Ogo only reserved for male initiates.

Ogo material culture is holistically masculine. Women are prohibited from its training, rituals, sacrifices, and masquerade activities because Afikpo mythology views female folks as impure and capable of defiling sacred things and places (Mbey, 2004). Among the masquerades, only Okpaa is deemed women-friendly. Ajah (2021) describes it as one of Afikpo's cultic masquerades “fond of women who sing and watch them perform in front of homes and open spaces in the village” (102). It

is a periodic masquerade like others as Ikegwu et al (2017) associate Okpaa with Iri Iko or Iko Okochi, a yearly festival that commemorates the beginning of the dry season in Afikpo cultural calendar and is seen as a friendship festival for maidens. The dedication of Okpaa to only Eke market days demonstrates its pro-feminine essence because women and girls are expected to go to the market and return on time before the night falls when the climax of Okpaa's masquerade dance is envisaged. Despite the playful characteristics of this masquerade, its relationship with the feminine gender is controlled with cultural taboos and sanctions at the slightest provocation adjudged as a desecration.

Although all Afikpo material culture is tied to formalistic ritualism, Ogo has the greatest gender ideology with its antifeminist stereotypes that control women's attitudes and allurements, actions and inactions, marriage and movements in Afikpo traditional society and to some extent its modern period. For Afikpo people, it produces what Hussein (2005, p.60) calls "a set of systems to censure and control the normative concepts of masculine and feminine behaviour". In essence, all gender roles are influenced by and attached to the Ogo tradition of the Afikpo people. The rituals of Ikeji (New Yam), Ebu Mbe and Okumkpo (traditional theatre), Mgba (wrestling), Ehoma (fishing) among others disenfranchise women because of their perceived uncleanness and sacrilegious potentialities, assigned passive minimal social roles of providing comic reliefs through renditions of songs and dances that accompany festivals like Ebu Mbe and Mgba. In the next section, consideration will be on how this patriarchal hegemony spatializes and temporizes feminine identities in Afikpo "culture sphere".

Sacred Temporalities and Spatialities

Many studies neglect the African gender ideology that characterizes Afikpo oral traditions and material culture; they gloss over the fact that "in gendered cultures, men and women are stratified along differential patterns of space. This spatial division of the sexes usually brings about difference in the structure of male and female power, access to property, and participation in social activities" (Hussein, 2005, p.69). The gendered stratification of spaces and times is supported by Afikpo mythology and cosmology, informed by her ethnoreligious worldview as religion has been "so interwoven with the social customs" (Aja, 2005, p.92). Afikpo's myriad of festivals and cultures originates from its mythology, thereby prescribing its cultural calendar and sustaining social cohesion through a "collection of norms, customs, beliefs, rules, conventions, regulations, taboos and sanctions" (Aja 2005, pp.95-96). It should be understood that "rituals and beliefs which hold in Igbo worldview receive their authoritative authentication and explanation in myths" (Ihejirika, 2017, p.199) because "Africans use myths to explain how things come to be through the efforts of a supernatural being" (Jaja, 2014, p.10).



Few scholars have examined the Igbo cultural calendar and cosmic time. Both concepts emerge from Igbo mythology and its worldviews, influencing socio-cultural events in Igbo societies. Myths are epistemological foundations for the understanding of the Igbo calendar that gives birth to its market days. The market days are Eke, Orié, Afo and Nkwo. Kanu (2022) posits that these market days are the names of four Chukwu messengers to Eze Nrijiófor (1300-1390 BCE) and represent the four cardinal points: Eke (East), Orié (West), Afo (North) and Nkwo (South). The same myth supports the explanation of the Igbo concept of time which is lunar time, unlike the Eurocentric idea of time. Ossai (2016) posits that time in Igbo cosmology is beyond clocks and watches with calibrations from 12:00 am to 11:59 pm, rather it is cyclic which influences and is influenced by visible and invisible beings, calculated in day and night, market days, moon, season and weather and are marked with rituals. This cultural background helps to interpret Afikpo material culture and its mythologized sacralization of time and space because as Kanu (2022) concurs, what makes days sacred in Igbo-African ontology is the spirit that is related to the particular days. Why are these spatial and temporal constructions gendered?

Afikpo-Igbo culture is male-driven. If the myth of the Igbo calendar is problematized and subjected to feminist cultural hermeneutic poetics, it can be said that the mythic narrative is highly gendered as the four Chukwu messengers are represented as masculine, giving no place for heterosexuality and femininity except for the instruction on the naming of female children of the people. Different myths prescribe ritualistic and ritualized processes of cultural activities which prohibit the presence of women. For example, on the third day (Nkwo market day) of the Iko Okochi festival, women are restrained from movements because Ogo spirits (Maa) pay visits to different compounds, singing “Egbele Ogo” (praise-singing to the Ogo gods). Mbey (2004) narrates it this way:

This spirit usually visits elderly women one after the other. In front of their houses, it wails over its misfortunes in a melodious tone that often rouses the sympathy of these women who ask the ‘spirit’ to go out of sight so as not to be seen while coming out to present gifts to it. The gifts which consist of money, pepper, mucuna seeds (*oruru ohe*), etc. are put on the ground outside when the spirit is out of sight. When the woman goes in and closes her door, the spirit reappears and collects its gifts [...] After visiting all the compounds concerned, the body of spirits including ‘Akirikponkpo’ retire to the playground (Ogo) for further activities (p.62).

The above scenario presents one of the sacred nights in Afikpo where intervillage pathways and roads are no longer accessible to women and non-initiates because of the appearance of the ‘Ogo spirits’ or during “ibuzo okochi” initiation or “izu ghari ghari” which takes place throughout the day; they are locked inside their houses and improvised containers for urination are provided for them. Before the sacred day which is “a momentous day on which only men of the same status move freely” (Mbey, 2004, p.92), women are meant to stock food and provision as movement is prohibited all through Afikpo. Let the issue of “maa Ogo” be revisited, only women are made to offer gifts as a means of appeasing the “spirits”. By the Afikpo calendar of the dry season, a certain time is culturally deemed sacred – the appearance of *Oke Maa* of the Ogo cult; some days or nights are socially gendered because access is only given to the initiates of Ogo while it is barred to the non-initiates including women. The presence of women invalidates and violates the sacredness of the Ogo spirit and its activities; it is taboo for Ogo spirits to be seen by women and there are sanctions and rituals for cleansing of the woman if she comes in contact with the spirit. In essence, the socialization and mobility of women are subjected to the whims and caprices of Ogo spirits (*maa*) as supernatural principalities of patriarchal hegemony. Ogo houses are not the only places forbidden to women, there are other sacred grounds.

Ogo Afikpo is hierarchized according to cultural values imposed by myths and legends. *Ogo Okpoota* is highly ranked because of the legends and myth of Igbo Ukwu connected to the sacred ground where ingredients used for the famous Peace Covenant were finally dumped into a special ritual pot (Aja, 2005, p.87). The land’s sacredness is mythologized as a place that abhors feminine presence and an epicentre of truth. Consequently, lies are mystically and mysteriously punishable by the gods. Mr. Samuel Inya (one of the interviewed elders) adds that *Ogo Okpoota* is a legislative ground where Afikpo laws are made and if women are to be involved in the making of the laws, the convocation will be held at *Ogo Amangballa*, the only ground for heterosexual discussion. Women are not allowed into the traditional meeting ground of Afikpo people like “Ogo Amizu” (public assembly ground) as it is also called. Other grounds are *Ulo Ubi Essa* (house for legislative elders), *Ulo Ubi Ekpoke Eto Ehugbo* (Youth age-grade house), etc. These cultural routines demonstrate how gender ideology produces predominant hegemonic masculinity in Afikpo oral traditions and material culture, based on a patriarchal structure that tends to privilege men while disadvantaging women (Sande and Chirongoma, 2021), portraying that spaces in traditional societies like Afikpo were equally conceived as processual, relationally ordered systems (Löw, 2006), though Eurocentric stereotypes had judged them as *tabula rasa*.



The Solution to Patriarchal Hegemony of Afikpo-Ibo Oral Traditions

Discourses on Afikpo oral traditions and material culture have revealed the patriarchal structure of Afikpo society. With the genderized spatialization and temporalization of cultural practices, Afikpo women find themselves in asymmetrical positionalities perceived as “second-class and subservient beings” (Udemmadu, 2019, p.92). Modernity and Christianity have been major sources of resistance to ritualized practices of Afikpo oral tradition and material culture. Afikpo Christians vehemently condemn the forceful initiation of young boys and the sacred spatialization that enforces “stay-at-home” orders for women at certain periods and seasons in Afikpo urban centres. A Christian woman had entered the Ulo Ogo because her son was compellingly taken from her for initiation purposes. This was considered a taboo and there are other similar cases in Afikpo, triggering intervallic Ogo-Christian conflicts since the eighties and nineties, leading “to the destruction of houses, economic trees, domestic animals and household properties” (Ani & Otu, 2015, p.148).

Though interreligious peace had been facilitated by the government producing a White Paper that prescribed the pathway for inter-faith co-existence, the inherent patriarchal structures of Afikpo oral traditions and material culture are still sources of hegemonic masculinity and feminine subalternity. All Afikpo cultural practices are now endangered by the forces of modernity and Christianity. If proactive measures are not taken, its extinction is imminent. Therefore, to open up Afikpo’s cultural spaces, there is a need to demythologize its cultural practices. This study recommends the deritualisation and degenderization of all cultural artefacts, ceremonies, festivals and performances in Afikpo, thereby giving more space to women and non-initiates in cultural performances.

Conclusion

These critical engagements with Afikpo oral tradition and material culture have enabled us to unlock the gender ideology, its consequential hegemonic masculinity and feminine subalternity that scholars have not fully given much attention to. From this analysis of studied data, it is understood that the source of the patriarchal structure of Afikpo cultural practices is localized in Ibo-Afikpo mythology and cosmology; it results in the genderizing of social privileges and positions, projecting an image of the sacrilegious feminine and the sacred masculine. The age-long masculine hegemony is traceable from canonized proverbs to cultural performances of masquerades (lugulu, okumkpo, okpaa, etc.) and spirits (oke maa, maa). These feminist cultural hermeneutical interpretations suggest that social spaces are polarized between ontologies that are ideological “feminine” and “masculine”, and mythic “sacrilegious” and “sacred”; they are culturally constructed through the mythologized temporalization and spatialization of cultural displays, festivities,

festivals and meetings. Therefore, Afikpo cultural calendar revolves around the four market days throughout the rainy and dry seasons when most of these festivals are scheduled to take place after sacrifices and rituals. It has equally been demonstrated that some sacred spaces are periodically gendered (periods of rituals, sacred nights, *Oke maa* days, etc.) as women do not access them during ritualistic practices, other spaces are permanently gendered (Ogo houses, Ogo Okpoota, Ulo Ogo Essa, etc.) because no access is granted to women at any time. Though the advent of modernity has influenced the operationality of the majority of these cultural practices, feminist engagements and advocacies have not been able to stamp out the patriarchal elements inherent in some of them in Afikpo society. Like other cultures, they are suffering from the threatening possibilities of ethnocide. Since rituals and performances are driven by gender ideology and patriarchal hegemony, demythologization and deritualisation should be processes of sustaining Afikpo oral traditions and material culture.

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