

Gender Studies

Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society

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Ifi Amaduime is Associate Professor of Religion at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, United States. Born on April 23, 1947 in Kaduna, Northern Nigeria, she received her education from the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies in the United Kingdom. Her research interest is expansive, crisscrossing the fields of Gender, Religion, Social Justice, Human Rights, etc. Her distinctive scholarship has made significant landmarks in Gender Studies and particularly in the writing of Igbo Women's History and Gender that continues to shape scholarship on Africa in general and Igbo history in particular. The book which I review here won Choice Outstanding Academic Book of the Year in 1989. Her scholarship has marked and mapped Africanist scholarship in significant ways (Magadla, Magoqwana and Motsemme, 2021).

Book Review

Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender, Sex in an African Society by Amaduime challenges the dominant narrative about the universal exploitation of women and a rigid Gender system that leads to the subjugation, dehumanization and powerlessness of women the world over. The 12-chapter book, which is divided into three parts, focuses on the nature of gender relations in three periods of Nigeria's history: (1) precolonial, (2) colonial, and (3) postcolonial. Amaduime explores the structure of traditional Igbo society, specifically among the Nnobi. She also examines the impact of colonialism on this structure and how postcolonial Nigerian society has exacerbated the status of women by following in the footsteps of the colonial state (Amaduime, 1987).

In the first chapter, Amaduime focuses on the intertwined relationships among ecological factors, sexual division of labor, and gender ideology in 19th Century traditional Nnobi society. The author reveals that contrary to the hegemonic Western narrative, women occupy a significant place in indigenous religion, culture, economic and social life among the Nnobi people because the myth of origin, division of labor and name of the town, etc. are tied to strong "matrifocality," female orientation, industriousness, and perseverance. More so, symbols of wealth for men and women were similar, albeit they differed in terms of control and ownership. Significantly, even though women did not own land yet, the flexible gender system allows "male daughters" to inherit their father's property if the appropriate ritual was done. Female industriousness and resourcefulness were encouraged and supported by the Nnobi matrilocal principle in domestic organization (Amaduime, 1987).

The second chapter examines the links among the accumulation of wives, the acquisition of wealth, and the exercise of power and authority. The highest title was the Ekwe opened only to women. It was not taken voluntarily but through certain supernatural indications symbolized by having a Midas touch that one has been chosen by the goddess of Idemili.

Amaduime argues that the flexible gender system meant that women benefited from the accumulation of wives in the same way as did men. Extremely powerful and assertive women were able to dominate their husbands without being stigmatized for it. Children could access material and capital resources from their mother's "patrilineage" (Amaduime, 1987).

The third chapter focuses on different social categories and political groupings in Nnobi and their roles and statuses in relations to one another, as well as the issues around which these groups are organized and the politics they make of the issues. Also, Amaduime broaches the flexibility in gender classification which allowed the "incorporation of certain categories of women into the male categories, thus giving them positions of authority in the power structure" (1987, p. 51).

More so, Amaduime examines descent structure, succession, political administration, judiciary, morality and how matrilocal ideas gave women primacy in social organization. In explaining the nature of social groupings, the author stresses that while each of the groupings (lineage daughters, wives, sons and daughters) has its meetings, only women crossed these lineage boundaries as daughters from a "we" group to wife in an "other" group (Amaduime, 1987).

The fourth chapter examines the politics of motherhood and the centrality and importance of women in and throughout all life cycle ceremonies. From birth to death and life after death, women, whether as daughters, wives, mothers, or goddesses, featured and occupied a significant position in beliefs, rituals, practices and institutions that guide all aspects of life circles, events and ceremonies (Amaduime, 1987).

In the fifth chapter, Amaduime examines the racist and gender biases of the English language for male superiority. Through a plethora of examples, the author argues that the Igbo language is gender neutral. Amaduime argues that Igbo non-distinctive subject pronouns allow a more flexible semantic system in which it is possible for men and women to share the same attributes. This system of linguistic distinction also allows women and men to play social roles which in other cultures, specifically those of the West, carry rigid sex and gender associations. Fundamentally, the author examines the contradictions and inconsistencies in gender ideologies in Nnobi culture (Amaduime, 1987).

The sixth chapter is about Gender ideologies as reflected in ritual beliefs and practices. Amaduime points out the contradictions inherent in Nnobi culture despite its flexible gender structure and practices. Importantly, despite the contradiction in gender relations, there are systems of checks and balances to guard against the excesses of male hegemony. Sex was not forced on women; hence, there was no marital rape. The sanctity of motherhood meant that women were treated with respect. Indigenous architecture and male/female polygyny made these choices possible (Amaduime, 1987).

In the seventh chapter, Amaduime explores the negative impact of colonialism and Christianity on marriage and social practices, particularly indigenous institutions (female husband, male daughter, widowhood inheritance) condemned by the churches as "pagan" and anti-Christian. She unveils the implication of the reinterpretations and misinterpretations of traditional institutions to fit individual objectives or colonial purposes (Amaduime, 1987).

The eighth chapter is where Amaduime expands on the implication of Christian ideology and Western education and practices on women's visibility in public and private life. Importantly, Western education is shown to discriminate against girls and gave boys early advantages in work places; hence, most of the significant positions in colonial public space were occupied by men (Amaduime, 1987).

In the ninth chapter, Amaduime focuses on the marginalization of women in the postcolonial political architecture and the nature of social organization of Nnobi society at various levels from local government and social union to church led organization. In addition, she stresses the divisive effects of Christian denomination on social organization, groups and

the Nnobi society at large (Amaduime, 1987).

The tenth chapter investigates the economic, social and cultural realities of women in postcolonial Nnobi. Economically, women were no longer wealthy and can no longer take titles in Nnobi as most of them were occupied by the sheer struggle of subsistence (Amaduime, 1987).

In the eleventh chapter, Amaduime expands her thesis of flexible gender beyond Nnobi to unveil elements of “matrifocality” in other Igbo societies. Her thesis confidently challenges the rigid classification of traditional Igbo societies on the basis of principles of succession and inheritance based on descent. She argues that there is a strong and predominant matrilineal element among the Cross River Igbo, Ohafia, Owweri, Onitsha and Nri societies (Amaduime, 1987).

In the twelfth and final chapter, Amaduime explores the intersection of Gender, class and female solidarity in Igbo society. The author argues that class is evident in the relationship between daughters and wives. More so, she insists that women’s control of the subsistence economy gives them the power to mobilize mass action and get their needs met in the absence of formal political authority. Their gestures of protest by knocking the pestles used for pounding food and their hands on the ground and other rituals of rebellion, as well as aggression and militancy, were tools of Igbo women’s strong commitment to female solidarity (Amaduime, 1987). This Igbo women’s acts of resistance and collective activism have been explored earlier by Judith Van Allen in her 1972 article titled “‘Sitting on a Man’: Colonialism and the Loss of Political Institutions of Igbo Women.” Also, in this final chapter, Amaduime affirms her earlier thesis about the flexible gender system of the traditional culture and language (Amaduime, 1987).

Book’s Greatness

This book is one of the most significant scholarly corpuses in Gender Studies. It fills a very important gap in Igbo Studies. It corrects the prevailing belief that all Igbo societies were patrilineal. Also, it challenges Western anthropologists’ theorizing of descent structure and inheritance, and offers new direction for studies that pay attention to lived experiences of Africans rather than using Western theories and logic to understand African societies.

Moreover, Amaduime offers new ways and insights to think about gender systems and structures beyond the rigid Western way of Gender as biology but rather to see Gender in many forms, complexities and contradictions. In terms of methodologies, the study enriches and refines oral methods and dignifies ethnography. The book offers significant insights into the impact of external influences on Africa’s knowledge production system, gender relations, language and social relations in general.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This review reveals innovative and provoking focus, sources and methodological contributions while proposing new ways for researching Gender in Africa. Amaduime examines the flexibility of gender structure and relationships among the Nnobi people of Eastern Nigeria to underscore that gender relations were fluid, thereby allowing both men and women to wield power in different realms, as well as the ability to checkmate the excesses of each other. Amaduime argues that the flexible gender system in Igbo land allowed females to become male daughters and female husbands without having to change their anatomy. Amaduime documents female power throughout the life cycle celebration from conception, birth, rites of passage, and marriage to death and burial. Furthermore, she argues that female power extends beyond politics and social life to spirituality and the world beyond.

It behooves me to state here that while Amaduime's book was selected for this review, there are other innovative and methodologically grounded books written by other prolific African authors on the subject. They include, but not limited to, Jacqueline Mougoué's *Gender, Separatist Politics, and Embodied Nationalism in Cameroon* (2019); Naminata Diabate's *Naked Agency: Genital Cursing and Biopolitics in Africa* (2020); Simidele Dosekun's *Fashioning Postfeminism: Spectacular Femininity and Transnational Culture* (2020); and Oyeronke Oyewùmí's *What Gender is Motherhood? Changing Yoruba Ideals of Power, Procreation, and Identity in the Age of Modernity* (2016).

Future scholarship in Gender Studies can borrow and expand on the methodologies of these authors and others to explore new topics. For instance, not much is known about how fame impacts, shapes and redefines Gender. As Popoola, Egbarevba and Fayomi (2021) argue, there is a need for more expansive research into the intersections of Gender and stardom, performativity, and Africa popular culture across multiple fields in the humanities and social sciences in ways that will open new frontiers beyond the existing scholarship. For instance, it would be great to see research that explores ways in which the celebrity statuses of males and females define their political, economic and social capital.

References

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