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### Feminist Aesthetics in African Theatre of the Colonial Period

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...women... armed and unarmed, afire with courage and enthusiasm, then flung themselves in successive waves of compact masses upon the districts where the settler, the soldier ...held sway. ...Villages and airports were frequently attacked...But it must be added that thousands...were mown down by colonialist machine guns.

- Frantz Fanon *The Wretched of the Earth*

Nobody can make you feel inferior except with your consent.

- Eleanor Roosevelt

You strike a Woman? You strike a Rock!

- Indigenous South African feminist slogan

The Vagina also has Teeth.

- An Igbo Proverb.

### Introduction

In the months of November and December, 1929, fifty women were shot dead in several towns in South-Eastern Nigeria by the British colonial administration. They were shot for protesting against a poll-tax about to be levied upon them all the way from London as part of the English imperial intelligence of making the natives pay for their own colonization (see Said, 1994, Rodney, 19, Young, 1990 and Fanon, 1967). My grandmother, Danne Akwarandu, was one of the forty thousand Igbo women who participated in this revolution. On the evening of November 29, 1929, she came home with the stains of the blood of some of the slaughtered women on her dress.

Before the fifty women were shot dead - and another fifty wounded - they had inflicted maximum damage on the economic and administrative infrastructures of the colonial administration. More than ten thousand strong, the women - known collectively as *oha ndom* - attacked government

roads built through forced labour; they attacked British-owned cars, trucks, railroad stations, fences surrounding public areas, mercantile buildings: GB Ollivant, African Trading Company, Niger Company, African & Eastern Company, Barclays Bank, United Africa Company, factories and warehouses that housed palm oil and other commodities for export, native court buildings, colonial administrative headquarters and jails. The women tore at the very fabric of buildings with their fingers and the weight of their bodies – in some cases breaking down not only the doors but whole walls. They blocked the roads and railways with their bodies (see Bastian in Allman, Geiger & Musisi, 2002). They lay on the rail road tracks ready to be killed for their political convictions. Here is an eye witness account which underscores the immense meta-theatricality of the revolution. It is by an English expatriate, Mr Logius, who worked for the G.B. Ollivant merchandise company in Aba. He had left his house at about 9 am in his car and suddenly near the level crossing gate he found a big crowd of women about two hundred in number. Some were actually lying on the iron railings on the level crossing of the railway:

I had to stop my car because the suburban train left that station to go down to Port Harcourt. The women would not clear the crossing. The driver [of the train] made many attempts to pass through, but they remained there. Then the train driver returned back to the station. The women then surrounded my car and danced about and they were very excited. They had heavy sticks and some were carrying bricks. I kept a smiling face and was pleasant to them. They wanted to shake hands with me, so I did so. Then one of them tried to knock my helmet off. Another woman broke the windscreen of the car. They became very wild. My driver asked me to leave the car as he said they would do me harm. I left the car and endeavored to return to the French Company's bungalow but the women would not let me pass. I went to the African & Eastern Company's bungalow and the women rushed to the bungalow. Afterwards I joined my car again and on the way *I met other women who mishandled me* (italics mine). Eventually I reached my shop. (PRO LO583/176/8:34-60)

The revolution which the British colonial administration labeled “riots” was widespread and very well organized. The “demonstrations” which involved thousands of women, stretched from Oloko, forty miles North of Aba to Opobo fifteen miles south of Aba, a radius of about sixty miles. They were so well-planned and orchestrated that even the British colonial officers attest not only to their efficient organization but more significantly their economic and political imperative. For example, Mr Ferguson, an English District Officer stationed at Owerri, a town forty miles, north-west of Aba, was two or three miles away [to] the Okpala Native Court – about twenty miles north of Aba - when he noticed, on 9<sup>th</sup> December, a crowd of women walking along the road and singing. Most of

them were each carrying a young palm frond either in their hands or about their persons. On inquiry, he learnt that they were going to Owerrinta to hold a meeting of protest against the taxing of women. "They were perfectly orderly and he managed to turn some of them back" (34-60). Ferguson, then, narrates that by about 2 pm, the women had returned from Owerrinta and this time they had managed to get hold of sticks. They rushed into the {Okpala} Native Court compound and proceeded to batter various buildings. With the aid of a few Court Messengers and an odd labourer or two, Mr Ferguson succeeded in driving them out of the compound but, as he puts it,

it was impossible to keep them out...it was obvious that they were *not* going to listen to what I said. They went round beating buildings, and having done their little piece they retired and danced about.... This went on all afternoon. At about 5:30 pm the last band of women appeared....they started throwing sticks about. They tried to pull down the [Okpala] Native Court and I endeavoured to stop them, but they made a rush and pulled down the one small building. That was all the damage done. They quietened down after that ...but their demands were impossible...*The first demand was that women should not be taxed. The second was that the price of [palm] produce should go up at once and the price of imported articles should go down. The third was that the tax on men should be reduced and they gave reasons why these things should be done. Obviously I could not promise them any reduction on male tax....they only asked for reduction at first. Two days later they changed that to the abolition of all tax (emphasis mine)....Some of them may have mentioned it but I cannot recall any definite statement that they wanted to drive away the Warrant Chiefs....They all kept saying they were 'Ohandun', (sic) that is to say 'women of all towns'(34-60).*

This tradition of African women enforcing political change, en masse, and by any means necessary, is not peculiar to Igbo women. In fact, it is a widespread practice in most African societies and continues till date. For example, in July, 2002, thousands of Ogoni, Izon, Itsekiri, and Kalabari women in the oil-producing delta region of Nigeria confronted Chevron, Texaco, Shell BP and other American and British oil companies and demanded jobs as compensation for drilling crude oil from their land and damaging their ecology thereby making it impossible for the women to farm or fish and feed their families. These women took over the premises of the oil companies and refused to leave until their demands had been met by the foreign oil companies. When things came to a head, the women stripped naked and cursed the oil companies with the potency of their motherhood.

Several scholars have studied these revolutions, particularly the Igbo women's revolution of 1929 and 1930, from historical, sociological, anthropological, political perspectives focusing on the social and

dialectical impetus to the revolutions. Some, mainly women, have adopted the events as important historical and theoretical reference points for the advancement of contemporary feminist discourse (Wangari et al in Rocheleau, 1996: 287-308; see also Calloway, 1987, Mba, 1982). What I want to do in this study is to extend or flesh out their theoretical discourses by looking at the revolution from the perspective of performance studies as a “theatrical event”, a form of political theatre in which we can see a clear performance of the Igbo notion of “Oha Ndom!” i.e. the female, collective, political, force *in motion and action!* In contemporary terms “Oha Ndom” can be defined as a kind of all female political pressure group or autonomous female oppositional political party, thoroughly organized, partially hierarchic, and set in place within the Igbo indigenous system and definition of democracy to watch, critique, and where necessary, veto the excesses of the patriarchal status quo through transformative and efficacious political action.

My intention in this undertaking is to highlight how this incandescent event was made possible by a fusion of indigenous Igbo theatre/performance aesthetics and the politics that gender ideology provoked in a colonial African society at the turn of the twentieth century. I also want to use the incident to theorize African female subjectivity by allowing the women to speak in their own voices, hence the quoted narratives taken from the women’s testimonies at the trials conducted by the British colonial administration after the insurrections. But before I do this let us re-examine the scholarship on the subject for greater clarity as to the historical factors that provoked the revolution.

In his book, *The Warrant Chiefs: indirect rule in Southern Nigeria* (1972), Afigbo provides a rich backdrop to the Igbo Women’s revolution. He examines how the British settled down in Igbo land and ignorant of how the pre-colonial society was structured and the place and the power of women in it, rendered women invisible based on the parallel of their own country where Emily Davidson, a suffragette, had to throw herself against the King’s horse or try to stop it at the Derby in 1913 – an act of martyrdom - before English women were allowed participation in English democracy, a democracy in which women had no say and could not vote until 1918 .

The British, discovering that the Igbo had no centralized system of government but actually ran small scale, village-based, face-to-face, democratic polities in which collective participation – including women – was mandatory, decided to appoint Warrant Chiefs as intercessors or administrative intermediaries between the European District Officers and the Igbo communities. These Warrant Chiefs were, of course, chosen, not on the basis of their leadership qualities, intelligence or integrity, but on the basis of how much they could suck up to the white District Officers. The women detested this. Once in office, these local symbols of his majesty’s foreign tyranny colluded with court interpreters/court

messengers to exploit their own people in every sphere of life: judgment in the native courts, the taking of titles, tolls, levies, education of children (Afigbo, 1972: 249-295). Since the women bore the brunt of the greater portion of the extortions, discriminations and marginalization, the entire colonial system also annoyed the women. Here is a testimony by Rosanah Ogwe of Azumini as to the economic reasons why they planned the revolution:

The Chairman (an Englishman): What do you want to say about markets?  
Rosanah Azumini: As regards markets, we had five markets from time immemorial and they were going well but to-day none of those markets are functioning. If articles are taken to the market for sale, Court Messengers would only throw 4 pence on the ground for an article which should fetch say, three shillings and go away with that article. If the woman resists or talks in any way about the matter she is assaulted by the Court messengers (PRO LO583/176/8: 34-60).

At this point Rachel Nenenta, a radical, articulate, hot-headed and political accomplice of Rosanah's, forced her way into the witness box of the Commission of Inquiry and corroborated the information about the widespread exploitation:

I agree in the main with what the last witness said...Market is our main strength. It is the only trade we have. When market is spoiled, we are useless.... If you have property – it may be property you acquired yourself or property given to you by your parents or husband – and you take it to the market for sale, it is seized by Court Messengers and taken away without payment....If a woman is strong enough to catch hold of the Court messengers and say “ Let us go to the Chief in order that I may report to him what you are doing, all that the Chief will say when they go to him is “Go away , I cannot do anything in the matter.” You return home crying. You cannot get redress even if you take out a summons against the Court Messengers. If your case is heard in the Court and you are not satisfied with the judgment and you ask for review or appeal, the case is left for the District Officer to review. When the District Officer {British} comes to review the case, he will not ask you what you have to say in the matter but he will simply say, “Let the judgment of the Chiefs stand” (34-60).

As Nina Mba (1982) points out the colonial administration also discriminated against women in their employment of the “natives” in the colonial civil service, and even in education. Apparently, the British were more interested in training girls for the roles of mothers and wives than anything else and so the educational system privileged men who were needed to run the colony as clerks, secretaries, cooks, house servants, teachers and policemen. By 1932 when the Lagos Women's League appealed for women to be employed in the civil service, the Chief Secretary replied:

It is doubtful whether the time has arrived when women could be employed generally in the clerical service in substitution for men. In future they may be employed as telephone operators, counter clerks or book binders (quoted in Mba, 1982: 64).

It was only by 1941 that women could be employed in the Statistics section of the Custom's Department. By 1944 there were only seven African women in the clerical and technical services in Nigeria. The highest paid, as Assistant Inspector of Prices, earned ninety pounds per annum. Women were admitted into the police force only by 1955. This continued invisibility of women was not out of oversight. It was a permanent aspect of the British colonial policy. Their resistance to the inclusion of women in the colonial political family is vividly captured in a circular A16/1951 in which it is clearly indicated that "only in exceptional circumstances should a woman be considered for appointment to senior grade posts in scales F and G" (65).

Equally, Christianity, the bible-wielding, smiling branch of the colonial enterprise, via the church, had erased much of an entire culture of women's priesthoods, ritual activities and indigenous performances which gave women avenues to express their discontent with unprogressive patrilineal political policies. This erasure of their religious privileges perhaps irritated the women the most. They had lost their place and say in the running of their society in a way never before experienced and coupled with this, came the threat of a community poll tax in which the women would possibly pay the same amount of money as the men who were benefiting more from the patrilineal colonial and indigenous political system. The women decided that the excesses of tyranny was often made possible and supported by the patience of the oppressed. They decided to go to war. And they used indigenous, extremely theatrical structures, as well as songs taken from pre-colonial indigenous performance to express their outrage. Before we examine the theatrical aspect of this event, let us first hear the political testimony of a woman called Ahudi who was summoned to articulate the grievances of the women at the "Commission of Inquiry" after the women's revolution or what the British called "the riots", but which the women themselves explicitly named "ogu umunwany!" i.e. the women's revolution or the women's war:

All the chiefs whom we ask to be deposed should be deposed, otherwise the trouble will go on. New Chiefs whom the women say are good men, such are the people we want. Chiefs take all [our] money. ... You may take evidence for many days, but unless you come to a conclusion which will satisfy the women, we will follow you everywhere. Formerly we never made demonstrations in this manner, but we do so now in order to show you that women are annoyed. If you come to a satisfactory conclusion

which will satisfy the women, then peace will be restored. If not, then, we will create trouble again. No doubt, women like ourselves are in your own country. If need be we shall write to them to help us. We shall continue fighting until all the Chiefs have been got rid of, but until then the matter will not be settled. If a new man be appointed, then all the women should be present, and all the men should be present, and both should approve his appointment. (Pro Lo583/176/8: 34-60)

Here we see another often unrecorded and unacknowledged dimension to the revolution: the yearning by the women to be part of the decision-making process of their new, albeit colonized society.

There were other remote causes to the revolution and the dragon tail of terror that it produced for the British colonial administration. The taxation of men had been introduced by the British at a time of economic instability, the early 1900s. A slump in the prices of palm kernel and palm oil due to the fluctuations in the world market meant that the prices of imported goods rose. The Igbo women who were middle-women in buying palm produce locally and selling them to foreign companies at major commercial towns, Aba Owerri, Opobo, Onitsha, Okigwi, and using the money they were paid to buy imported goods such as cloth, tobacco, cigarettes, sardines, margarine, beverages, kerosene, wine and spirits from wholesale British companies - in order to retail these European goods for a little profit - were hard hit and experienced a drop in their fiscal income and their standards of living. Interestingly, the key influential women who masterminded the revolution came from this economically upscale class. Part of the agenda they put forward, which was never heeded by the colonial administration, was that the prices of palm produce should be permanently fixed just as the prices of the European goods that they bought from overseas were fixed. The less well-off women were already feeling the burden of the taxation on men since the women, being housewives, had to contribute or sometimes had to pay the taxes on behalf of their husbands, thereby depleting their already meager financial resources.

### **Colonial Administration and Sexual Politics**

Finally, another historical factor that led to the upheaval was that some of the British District officers, as well as male Christian missionaries, were sleeping with African/Igbo men's wives and when information got round the communities, the colonialists became more tactful and discrete, preferring to have native women who lived in outhouses behind their own colonial houses and who only came in at night to teach them the Igbo language and culture. These women were called "Sleeping Dictionaries" and they were the women who, because they could read and write and could speak passable English actually gave the women all the information

as to when or how to attack the European colonial institutions of oppression. Distrusting the male interpreters who often changed what the white man was saying to suit their own greedy financial needs, the "Sleeping Dictionaries" and a few other self-educated women, who attended local adult education night schools - also spoke to the white men as well as read out the women's grievances to the District Officers, point by point, before the fences came crashing down. This is how Charles Allen, a former British colonial officer, narrates this interface between power, sex and insurrection in his book, *Tales from the Dark Continent*:

...in the outposts most people [Europeans]...had an African girl living with them...sometimes referred to as sleeping dictionaries.... She would not have her meals with the officer, and she would not be seen in the house. She would merely have her own house behind, along with his servants and his servant's wives, and she'd only come into the house after dark. That was the life of most lonely men in the lonely stations and of course, they did learn to speak the native language far better than us who lived a life of abstinence (1979: 79).

It is interesting to note that when a secret circular admonishing colonial officers who were living in a state of concubinage with native women was issued round the colonies with accompanying threats of punishments from London, all sorts of unpleasantness befell the whole of the government service until a hurried circular B was sent round saying that the office of the Secretary of State for the Colonies will no longer take a very serious view of people living under such circumstances anymore (18). So, in thinking about the factors that led to the women's revolution we need to include the illegal colonial traffic in the sexual currency of the colonized, another layer of exploitation which had to be confronted by the women.

I will now use this historical event in Nigeria which has not been given the detailed international scholarly i.e. performance studies analysis that it deserves to foreground the centrality of women to both 'theatrical' and 'political' resistance to British imperialism in Africa from 1885-1995. I will argue that one way to avoid the postcolonial tendency of silencing subaltern subjects in the field of theatre and performance studies is to find rhetorical and representational strategies that will allow the so-called "unlettered", "uneducated," "illiterate," "subaltern," and "historically-silenced" characters to articulate their experiences and the inherent agency in their political and theatrical actions which create history in the first place.

### **The Role of Women in Indigenous Igbo Theatre**

Unlike the USA and UK where there are no clear or easily identifiable

traditions of performance created in totality by women, Igbo society flourishes with such women-created and women-centred ritual and artistic forms of expression. Igbo women have child naming ceremonies called *Onu Nwa* that they practice. At the age of ten, in my mother's compound at Owo Ahiafor, I witnessed an extremely ribald dance done at midnight in which the married women ridiculed all men, including their husbands and celebrated the superiority of their sexuality and femininity through songs, mime and sexually-ecstatic choreography. The women also play important roles in communal funeral ceremonies which are highly theatrical and are responsible for providing newly bereaved widows with entertainment and humor during their period of *igba nkpe* or mourning for their husbands. In particular, women cleanse the community of ills and clean or 'kill' the old year symbolically so that the new year can be born. They also create and choreograph dances that are uniquely theirs and which are seen publicly at great occasions within the community. These include *Nkwa Umuagbogho*, *Anyantolukwu*, *Edere*, *Kperembu* and many others. In the Ngwa community, women had elaborate theatrical performances such as *Owu*, *Mgbede*, *Aguumunne*, *Mmuolama* and participated as actual actors/characters, on equal footing with men, evident in the *Umuimo* and *Ikoru* dramatic performances.

While it is true that the masquerade form excludes women in many parts of the Igbo nation, this cannot be said with conclusive and total finality as Chinua Achebe does when he says in the foreword to the book, *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos* that "if the masquerade were not limited to the male sex alone, one would have called it the Igbo art form per excellence" (in Aniakor and Cole, 1984: ix). As a matter of fact, there is a tradition of women's masking in the Izzi community of North East Igboland. This masking tradition is significant in the sense that it reminds us of *functionality* as a crucial element in the creation, practice and sustenance of indigenous Igbo theatre traditions. This is the way Chike Aniakor describes the origins of *Ogbodo Enyi*:

In 1975 children of the Izzi village group, Nkaliki, began to die from illnesses attributed to unspecified "evil spirits." Petitions presented to the community oracle, Uke, succeeded in dispelling these spirits; order between the human and supernatural realms was restored and the deaths stopped. However, in return for its intercession and patronage, the oracle, in a dream to its priestess, made an extraordinary and unique request. Uke asked Nkaliki women to organize and dance *Ogbodo enyi* in its honor. Now well-established through out Nkaliki, the women's masquerade represents a complete departure from all known Igbo (and other Nigerian) masking traditions ...that dictate all such activities as exclusively male prerogatives (ix).

It is interesting to note that this rare and unique female masking tradition mirrors or parallels the male counterparts in iconographic, sonic,

proxemic, sartorial and other literacies. There is little or no difference in their semiologies. The women commission the elephant masks from a sculptor who also makes the male masks. They ask a weaver to produce a bell-shaped raffia costume. They then select leaders and learn *Ogbodo Enyi* songs, dances, and music. They make their outings at the same time as the males. As an institution, the masquerade unites women under its aegis; it is a public symbol and a celebration of their social identity and contributions to the society. Women, however, as Aniakor observes, are collectively represented by a single mask whereas the males are differentiated by hierarchical age grades which are more in number in the community.

Finally, in the Igbo nation, storytelling, practiced under the branches of the moonlight or by the fireside as evening food is being prepared in the *usekwu* (kitchen) was, until the invention of satellite television, the primary process whereby the children learnt through their mothers, the arts of public speaking, rhetoric, verbal wit, and indigenous styles of acting through the craft of re-enacting the characters in the folktales. Other moonlight verbal games such as *nkee nkaaa*, conundrums, tongue twisters, which most Igbo children learn also through their mothers reinforce that impression I have that in the Igbo nation, and perhaps across the world, women are actually the primary carriers of culture. The segment of the oral arts that children learn from their fathers is predominantly the proverbs. But the accent put on motherhood and what mothers contribute through domestic education into developing the artistic and political consciousness of the young in Igbo society is perhaps best captured in the name given to female children: Nneka, mother is supreme, reminding us all that nobody, except through DNA test in contemporary times, can tell exactly who his father is. But mother is constant. Hence the immunity Igbo society gives women within their political system as a group that sits in perpetual, watchful opposition for political excesses from the male ruling hierarchy and who have the power collectively to correct these excesses by dethroning any male ruler or leader who deviates from the moral peg or who maltreats the women as the Warrant Chiefs and District Officers came to learn to their own grief.

### **Theatre and Politics in Igbo Society of the Colonial Period**

I will now make a connection between the ritual and performance aesthetics of indigenous Igbo theatre and the fire and force they gave to the women's revolution. I will begin by presenting a few accounts of the activities of the women during the *ogu umunwanyị* which were incontestably not just theatrical but theatre itself since they involved role playing. Here is a description of what happened at Umuaro after the women had seized Okugo's cap and were waiting for his full trial by the colonial government. (Okugo is the Chief of Oloko who started the

hysteria by counting women in his constituency during a census which prompted the meetings, plans, strategies to demolish the Warrant-Chief system and the tax.):

At Umuaro, the women were comparatively mild...On the afternoon of the 11<sup>th</sup> December some women came to the Native Court with palm leaves and gave some to the Native Court clerk and the Chiefs as a notice that the court must be closed until their case with Okugo was finished, a proof that they still believed that the danger of the taxation of women had not passed. The following morning, hundreds of women rushed into the Native Court yard, dressed in rags with leaves tied round their heads but without sticks, and said that all the chiefs must leave or there will be trouble. *Some sat on the benches and imitated the chiefs while others pretended to be Court Messengers. Eventually they drove the chiefs out and danced and sang round the Native Court till evening* (emphasis mine). The burden of their song was that the Court clerk and messengers and all strangers should leave town. No damage was done to any building (PRO LO583/176/8: 34-60).

Here we see the efficacy of satire and parody as Hommi Bhabha suggests in his brilliant essay, "Mimicry and Man" and as Michael Taussig and Paul Stoller have expatiated in several books which deal with discourses of the colonial encounter in Africa and other parts of the world (see Bhabha, 1994). It is crucial to point out that every performative element described in this scenario above was extracted from metalanguages in Igbo rituals, ceremonies, masquerade performance and indigenous festival and ritual theatre. The palm leaves in the semiotic vocabulary of Igbo culture and theatrical sign systems are symbolic of the sacred. To put palm fronds round an object or space in Igbo culture means that the object or space has been sacralized and therefore has become sacrosanct and therefore should not be touched. Whatever has been circumscribed by the palm fronds belongs to the gods. So, by giving the clerks the palm fronds, it meant that the courts had been turned into shrines and remain, until further notice, areas where no trespass can be allowed unless the clerks and colonial administration wanted war as result of their willful violation of territory made spiritual and symbolic by the women. When the men violated the sanctity of the space, the punitive repercussions implied by the symbol of the palm frond became manifest and was translated by the women from ritual symbolism via theatrical performance into violent political action.

### **Dance as a Metalanguage in Igbo Theatrical and Political Performance**

In virtually all eyewitness accounts of the women's revolution that we have read, we notice that dance, mime and movement were the primary vehicles for expressing the inarticulatable depths of anger and agitation

that the women were feeling, motivating them to go onto the war path and to celebrate their victories. In other words they used dance, a kinesthetic literacy in Igbo theatrical semiology, for choreographing their grief, their political resolve, their triumph as well as their gender and sexuality. This means that unlike the predictable and almost banal routines on Broadway, The West End or on the BBC's *Legs and Co*, dance in Igbo culture is a weapon of terrifying political and artistic power. As we saw in numerous instances, the dances were signifiers of what and how the women were feeling about their oppression. They found their release, not merely of emotion, but of political intent and action through the power of dance. In many instances, dance, because it is comprised of physical movement - the body does not lie - became the semiotic signifier and the emotional graph of the political and ideological convictions of the women. In its polyvocality, it expressed both their spiritual role in Igbo society as well as their traditional responsibility as agents of political change in the most lucid way, but one totally undecipherable to the district officers who could not understand why the police at Imo River, for example, refused to shoot at the marauding women. The native policemen, being Igbo, could decode the dance as a politically transformative message, one to be interfered with only at the risk of death. Meanwhile all the dances looked the same to the Europeans whether the women were stamping their feet on the ground or bending and mooning the white men with their buttocks.

In his book, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (2003), Richard Schechner points out very insightfully that the spiritual and mythopoetic meta-texts encoded in dances by Africans is *realistic* to them. By this he is suggesting that the values, ideas and thoughts encoded in this gestural and limbic lexicon of physical but choreographed expressivity do not constitute some symbolic unattainable dream of faith that is beyond the realms of everyday "pepper and salt" reality i.e., some abstract thing disconnected from the business of daily living. Schechner is trying to say that the fusion of the functionality of dance with political performance and efficacy during the Aba Women's Revolution is the equivalent of what theatre goes in the West would consider psychologically realistic and believable, not an idiom that belongs to the realm of abstruse ritual.

### **Sitting on a Man as Indigenous Igbo Comic and Satiric Theatre**

Let us now look at the theatrical styles and structures used by the women to prosecute their political agenda. The idea of "sitting on a man or a chief" is one of the most theatrical scenarios any playwright or screen play writer can scoop in his or research for a play or a film. In fact, it is the quintessence of what Bakhtin(1965) meant by the carnivalesque where by the masses use laughter, irony, humour, elements of self-parody and finally indeterminacy to lampoon the status quo or reverse the equation of who really has control of real power with a given unpredictable moment in the

political and social life of a society. Women, largely of a lower social status and gender stratification, bonded by grievance, enter like a troop of actors to rehearse a very funny play that may end in the political “beheading” of the chief as in Peter Weiss’ *Marat Sade*. In the context of the Aba women’s revolution, sitting on a man incorporates all the elements one can imagine in a Dionysiac festival in Greece in 4 BC, plus what happens in New Orleans during Mardi Gras and the para-theatrical activities that accompany carnival in the Caribbean, especially Trinidad and Tobago. One can even argue that stick-fighting, processions, masking, and a lot of the other political symbology in African Diasporic carnival performance have their origins in African theatrical practices such as “sitting on a man” (see Okpewho et al, 2001).

The women having arrived in a corrupt chief’s or man’s compound may bring out a blackboard and begin to play the role of the man’s wives by scoring his sexual performance on the blackboard with a piece of chalk, then simulating the position the man likes the best, how he heaves and sweats like a he-goat on heat and how he falls over and begins to snore after orgasm. Each little skit will be accompanied by a song. Then other aspects of his life will be parodied through mime, costumes, props and other theatrical artifacts. Every tiny mistake he’s made or offence he has committed in the past will be recalled and rendered in song thereby preserving it indelibly in the community’s memory and political consciousness. Meanwhile, the women will be helping themselves generously to any fruits on the trees in the man’s compound, palm wine or food available, as penalty for their time that the man is wasting, by not responding quickly enough to their demands. It is usually a bawdy and ribald occasion. Speech is also used, for example, if the man stammers this is incorporated into the performance, for realistic characterization. Numerous lewd jokes are told. But in the end the comedy may end with burning down the man’s house, if for example, he refuses to surrender his warrant cap to the women as a trophy of victory in their war of the sexes. Therefore, “sitting on a man” means keeping the person under house arrest and amusing themselves at that person’s expense and detriment until the person meets the women’s demand which will always involve some measure of indignity and reduction of the man’s esteem and political power within the community. It incorporates female drag, dis-identifications, role-playing, costuming, parody, dance, mime, proverbs, witticisms, rhetoric, improvisation, processions, and comic acting of a high order. In most Igbo societies, songs are used as performative catalysts for firing up soldiers for war. Sometimes this is accompanied with dance and music. The women adopted this martial aesthetic extensively in their revolution. And so gluing it all together is the meta-language of song which I have categorized as a form of linguistic/sonic literacy which requires decoding and which most unfortunately the non-Igbo speakers or colonial officers/expatriates could not decipher. The weight or burden

or implications of such songs as ‘Nzogbu enyimba enyi,’ “What is that smell? Death is the smell?” (usually used in burial or funeral rites), “Iwe na ewe anyi Iwe, iwееееее iwe. “ (used in war) were lost on the colonial officers.

### **Songs as Metatexts**

Perhaps, the song of the women during the Aba women's tax riots as they marched towards the colonial headquarters to strip the resident colonial officer naked, measure his penis with a wooden ruler, drag him out before burning down the building is highly representative of what I have described above as linguistic and sonic literacies from the indigenous Igbo theatre traditions.

Olegi nwoke turu ukaaaa  
Agbawaa ya onu amu  
Agbawa ya onu amu nike  
Agbawa ya onu amu

Olegi nwoke turu ukaaa  
Osikwa nime ohu  
Osikwa nime ohu putaaa  
Osikwa nime ohu.

This is an extremely rude song conveying the women's outrage through sarcastic sexual metaphors. It is still sung by women today when they want to get their way with the men during political disputes in some parts of Igbo land, particularly Umuahia area. A very tame translation would read:

Where is the man who made this law?  
Let's slice open his penis  
Let's slice open his penis by force  
Let's slice open his penis!

Where is the man who made this law?  
Did he not come out of the vagina?  
Did he not emerge from the vaginal passage?  
Did he not come out of the vagina?

### **Crime, Punishment, and the Colonial Quest for the Truth**

It is important to note that despite the occasional looting that accompanied the revolution, the Commission of Inquiry exonerated the women from any accusations of premeditated violence or stealing. In an impassioned reservation by V.R. Osborne, Chairman of the Commission of

Inquiry, clearly stated his understanding of the political, instead of destructive, motive behind the insurrection when he catalogued that the general intention of the women can best be gauged by briefly reviewing what had taken place immediately before the accident which occurred [at Aba] at about 10 am [on the] 11<sup>th</sup> December, 1929. In his summary he points out that two days previously, at Owerinta (only fourteen miles from Aba) the mobs of women invaded the Native Court; the judicial caps of the Chiefs were demanded ; the Chiefs were chased into the bush; and the houses of the Court Clerk and the Court Messengers were looted. On the day prior to the accident the Assistant Commissioner of Police (Mr Matthews) travelling in a Native Administration lorry, had stones, sticks, and yams thrown at him and a six foot log of wood was placed across the road. On the same day, in an adjoining district, the Native Courts at Nguru and Ngor were destroyed; the lock ups at both places forced [open] and the prisoners released. At Ngor they pulled down and looted every building in the Court compound. At Nguru they destroyed all the buildings except the Rest-House:

In Aba itself, on the day prior to the accident, the women had begun to parade and demonstrate in the mainstreet of the township in front of the factories. ...That evening (10<sup>th</sup> December) there was general disorder in Aba native town . ...[The] women said, "There will be more women coming along in the morning, and they would come to fight." A local chief was reported to have been flogged and Okwandu, clerk of the Native Administration gave evidence that the women in Aba that evening did say they were coming to destroy the offices and factories next day PRO LO583/176/8: 34-60).

Osborne also mentions that the sudden rush of the women to the District Office which occurred a few minutes after the accident by Dr Hunter was due to the fact of,

the Resident's arrival... The women were most anxious to see the Resident. *As long previously as 27<sup>th</sup> November, they had sent a big deputation to Port Harcourt to present their grievances, but unfortunately he [the Resident] had not been able to see them (34-60). (emphasis mine)*

The first demand of the women at the district office in Aba, Osborne reinforced in his report, was to see the Resident and "the women in front, when he appeared, tried to quieten the remainder that they might listen to him" (34-60). With the evidence above, Osborne comes to the conclusion that the vast majority did come with the idea of doing damage as an expression of their grievances and that the damage might have been much greater had the women joined at Ekeakpara and returned with other

women to Aba. In his own words: “ It was absurd... to suggest that several thousand women had suddenly armed themselves with sticks, and arrayed themselves as they had done , within a few seconds, as the result of the motor accident” (34-60). As regards the destruction and looting of factories along Factory Road in Aba, Osborne states:

Between the motor accident [Doctor Hunter’s] and the looting of the factories there was in my opinion, no direct connection whatever, and *the false importance now attached to that minor incident wrongly belittles the real grievances felt by the women, and the unprecedented extent to which they were moved by them throughout so great an area* (34-60). (emphasis mine)

The political efficacy of Igbo Women’s Revolution can be gauged by the radical response it provoked from the British colonial administration. The Europeans sent district officers, anthropologists, ethnographers, historians and annotators like Margery Perham and Sylvia Leith-Ross to study the Igbo political system in detail with particular attention to the role that women played in it as different from what obtained in England in the 1920s. As a result of these investigations and the books that came out of them the entire British colonial system was partially rethought and overhauled and women were given a more prominent role within the system though risible by today’s standards. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that the colonial administration took more seriously the education of girls. As John Oriji, an Igbo historian puts it:

The first Womens’ revolts of 1929 was organized by rural women, while a second wave was organized from 1950- 1960 was associated with educated urban women. The revolts served as an inspiration to those who organized subsequent revolts and women’s movements. Its {the revolution’s} achievement include that it helped women to mobilize themselves and change the existing political order during colonialism. It enabled some of their leaders who emerged as heroines to attain a privileged status in Igbo society comparable to those of titled men and warriors. The revolt contributed to the emergence of the modern Igbo women who are currently engaged in diverse occupations. It ranks as one of the most outstanding primary resistance movement in Nigeria [Africa and the World] (1994: 19)

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion , the presentational strategy I have adopted in this essay, namely of allowing the rebel in the subordinated to speak out for themselves is, for me, a form of interventionist discourse, what Foucault calls the silent but dangerous ‘unsaid’ against the great meta-narratives of imperial history. It reverses the common notion we have of colonialism as

a discourse of domination, subjugation and acquiescence to that of stubborn resistance and confrontation. It also problematizes further the difference between official, recorded history and the truth of history. According to Foucault:

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraints. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics of truth': that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanism and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned ; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; *the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true* (1977: 131). (emphasis mine)

Critical studies of the Igbo Women's Revolution of 1929 and 1930, remains an unfinished business. In my thinking, it still poses a lot of questions to scholars of Political Science, Women's Studies and Performance studies world wide. The questions include: How come that the so-called illiterate and uneducated women in a so-called "Third World" were able to stop a colonial law asking them to pay an abominable poll tax in 1929 i.e. at the height of the British imperial powers? What kind of organizational acumen did these women possess. What was the political structure of indigenous, pre-colonial, Igbo society that made it possible for the women to plan, organize and execute this well-orchestrated revolt without a single man knowing about their subterfuge? How did colonialism erode the rights, privileges and political immunities that African women had before the arrival of the British? What did the church and Christian religion contribute to these exercises in cultural vandalism and the political disempowerment of women on the African continent? What was there on the continent as theatre before the arrival of the Europeans and why did theatre and performance play such a pivotal role in the efficacy of this revolution? What insight does this give us when we compare Igbo women's forms of indigenous theatre with what exists in the West today? How does the political status of Igbo women in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as evident from the historical incident analyzed above, compare with the disenfranchised status of women in England and the USA at the same time in history? Why couldn't women in these democratic and civilized societies vote in their own countries? Since it is true that women in many parts of Igbo land could dethrone a ruler or chief (until recent more "democratic" times) by sitting in on him, what is the significance and relevance of the Igbo women's revolt to the struggle of women all over the world in their bid to gain stronger positions in the political/economic structures and decision-making processes of their societies? Why is it that India, Pakistan, Philipines, and even conservative Britain have produced female political leaders while the USA, the so –

called leader of the free world is yet to produce a female president or vice president? Is it possible that, in the light of what has been discussed above, women in Nigeria in 1929 had more power in the political running of their society and the decision-making processes of their communities, i.e. that they fared better as political free agents than women in England and the USA at this point in history and perhaps even today. How much power, for example, had Emily Wilding Davidson and the Suffragettes at this point in history?

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