“And She Became a Man”: King Ahebi Ugbabe in the History of Enugu-Ezike, Northern Igboland, 1880–1948

Nwando Achebe

INTRODUCTION

African women have been known to occupy a variety of leadership roles in their societies. In ancient Egypt, Hatshepsut ruled as Pharaoh. The Luena queen, NyaKarolo of Angola, was famed for her warrior instincts and for instituting a system of female chieftoms in all of the countries she conquered; and the Lovedu rain-queens controlled the fertility of the crops. In some societies, a system of joint sovereignty existed whereby leadership responsibilities were shared between a king and a female counterpart. In these systems, women held power because of their relationship to the ruler in question, especially as mother, daughter, or sister. The mother of the Fon (male ruler) of the Kingdom of Kom, West Cameroon, advised him and watched over the children of the palace. The Asante had an office called the Ohemaa, which translates into the “chief’s female counterpart.” In the Mossi Kingdom, the eldest daughter of the Mossi king dressed in the king’s attire and held royal power until the next ruler was installed. Some small-scale African societies had a dual-sex political system, in which each sex managed its own affairs. Among the noncentralized Igbo, the region which is the focus of this chapter, a joint system of male (udi oha) and female (udele) government typically obtained.

The tortoise, on setting out for a long journey, said to his people: if usual things happen, do not send for me; if the unheard-of happens, call me. This Igbo proverb serves as a warning to summon the public when extraordinary events occur. Popular wisdom has it that the Igbo have no kings. This chapter focuses on an area in Igboland where, contrary to this belief, Igbo not only have kings, but female kings. A 1930 government report on the social and political organization of Nsukka Division, northern Igboland, presents a short yet interesting example of female power and gender transformation. Enugu-Ezike is identified as a group that is distinguished by having a female Eze who is saluted as the Agamega or female leopard (Meek 1930). Eze is an Igbo word that means “king.” This female king, Ahebi Ugbabe, is described by Assistant District Officer V.K. Johnson in a separate report as the “‘chiefness’... [who]... ‘became a man,’ and as such she has been regarded ever since” (Johnson 1934).

The account of Ahebi Ugbabe is eloquent yet perplexing. The challenge is to provide an explanation for this peculiarity. Two features of the foregoing commentary present an unusual opportunity to probe northern Igbo attitudes surrounding gender construction and negotiation. First, a woman is saluted as a leopard and is crowned King—qualities as well as structures that epitomize maleness and manhood—and second, we are informed that the same woman has effectively “become a man.” Ifi Amadiume argues that sex and gender did not coincide in pre-colonial Igboland, but, instead, gender was flexible and fluid, allowing women to become men, thus creating unique Igbo categories such as female husband and female son (Amadiume 1987). In this chapter, I adopt, reshape, and expand upon Amadiume’s theoretical framework in my assessment of how “traditional” notions of manhood and masculinity were constructed, negotiated, and challenged by women and men in colonial Enugu-Ezike.

While Amadiume’s findings are useful to my discussion, her argument that colonialism undermined Igbo pre-colonial ideals of gender flexibility presents serious limitations that are challenged by Ahebi Ugbabe’s life and consequently reexamined in this chapter. Instead, I propose that Nsukka Igbo gender transformations not only coexisted with British colonialism, but that colonialism created conditions that sometimes supported, reinforced, and extended the contours of acceptable gender transformations, allowing would-be female men to carry their quests for manhood further than would have been acceptable in the pre-colonial order. Conversely, I also argue that Nsukka society maintained the right to monitor, limit, and/or control the
extent to which gendered transformations could take root. This inquiry therefore assesses the sort of circumstance that would evoke society’s resolve to institute exclusionary rather than inclusionary clauses that would negate otherwise convivial gender transformations from woman to man and reveals what would become of the (wo)men at the receiving end of this sanction.

Constituted primarily through oral history, Ahebi Ugbabe’s story illuminates the changing foundations of gendered power under British indirect rule and highlights the ways in which individual Igbo women and men negotiated and shaped their colonial environment. During the course of her life, Ahebi was able to remap the terrain of “traditional” and colonial gendered politics in her district. Her story therefore contributes to scholarship that has sought to deconstruct the category “man” by situating multiple gendered female masculinities such as female headman, female warrant chief, female king, female husband, female masked spirit, as well as the biologically determined male category of full man. It also reveals the retributions society imposes on individuals who carry gender transformations too far.

AHEBI UGBABE—BIRTH, CHILDHOOD, AND DISAPPEARANCE

Ahebi Ugbabe was born sometime during the latter part of the nineteenth century in Umuida, Enugu-Ezike. She was the daughter of Ugbabe Ayibi, a farmer and palm wine tapper. Her mother, Anekwu Ameh, was a farmer and trader from Unadu, at the outskirts of Enugu-Ezike. Ahebi Ugbabe had two brothers and no sisters. When Ahebi was a young girl, she lived with her mother’s relatives in Unadu for a brief period. From every indication, she was happy there. She later returned to her father’s village, and, within the space of a few years, she had escaped to Igala land. Only after I had spent several months asking questions and gaining the trust and confidence of individual collaborators did I begin to get a sense of what really happened. Apparently, when Ahebi Ugbabe was young (probably about thirteen or fourteen years old), her family experienced a lot of misfortune. Their farms yielded little, their trading did not flourish, and illness plagued various members of their household. Ahebi’s father, in an attempt to trace the origins of these ill fortunes, sought out the expertise of a diviner, oje gba afa. Diviners were believed to be endowed with the skill to unearth secrets, perceive the unknown—the present and the future—and discern the will of the gods. Igba afa thus became a common and accepted way for individuals in society to find out why certain misfortunes surrounded them and whether these could be attributed to invisible powers.

Ani ona dibiu, bu ani qeoo mmadu: a good time for the diviner is a bad time for the people. After consulting his beads, the diviner delivered their revelation. Ahebi’s father had committed a grave crime against a kinsman, and, consequently, the goddess Ohe, whom he had offended, was exacting her punishment on his entire family. Ohe was the goddess of creation, fertility, and protection. She was known to punish individuals for inappropriate and offensive behavior, like murder, thievery, and adultery. Her attama, or chief priest, acted on her behalf by collecting the debts owed her, placing taboos on disagreeable behavior, and administering her oaths (Meeke 1930).

One of the great injustices of history was unleashed when the seer revealed the mysteries of his divination: for things to get better, Ahebi would have to be offered as a living sacrifice to appease the great goddess, Ohe. The historical record remains clouded on what Ahebi’s father’s reaction to this news was. What we do know, however, is that in due course Ahebi was informed of this impending dedication. Her reaction to this news was anything but predictable. Ahebi Ugbabe—nvatakili walu anya, “the difficult and conceited girl who did not listen to reason”—did something that was extraordinary: she refused to be dedicated. Her actions were a symbolic expression of overt resistance. Her defiance was twofold: first, she was revolting against the domestic institution of “slavery” and all of its oppressions and subjugations; second, she was rejecting gerontocratic patriarchal authority and the tenets of her culture that allowed guiltless individuals, especially women, to become victimized by such dedications. Her actions pit her against her society, and, as a result, she was forced to bear the consequence of her decision—she could no longer live in Enugu-Ezike. Her only alternative was to remove herself from that community.

The young and confused Ahebi was thus driven into exile to Igala land, just to the north of Nsukka. Once there, she was thrown into a harsh reality. She knew no one in Igala land and therefore was forced to wander the unfamiliar environment. Few options were open to this young, unskilled, and uneducated girl. “Prostitution” therefore became a true reality—a means of survival—a means to an end. Ahebi Ugbabe, resilient as always, became a “prostitute” and used this form of “work” to her advantage. She traveled widely and learnt to speak many languages, including Igala, Nupe, Igbo, and Pidgin English. She became an astute businesswoman, directing monies made from her sex work into trading. She first traded in okamwu (potash), then palm oil, and, within a short space of time, horses. In fact, at the height of her trading career, Ahebi Ugbabe would become one of the most affluent traders in the Igala-Igbo borderland area. Her meticulousness in trade allowed her to acquire economic power and political clout, hitherto inconceivable for individual women to attain. Her profession as a sex worker also put her in touch with a number of very prominent citizens, including some British colonialists and the Attah (King) of Igala land, whose power extended into northern Igboland.
AHEBI UGBABE AND THE BRITISH: CHANCE MEETING OR COLLABORATION?

All of this mayhem was happening against the backdrop of an overwhelming colonial invasion. In January 1909 the British first patrolled the Enugu-Ezike area, which from that year until 1920 remained the scene of constant military and police attacks that were aimed at subjugating its peoples and bringing them under European rule (Johnson 1934). The British justified these actions under the guise of a noble motivation—the abolition of the domestic slave trade. We know that Ahebi Ugbabe accompanied the British invaders into Umuida; however, what is not so clear is whether this was a chance meeting or possibly a calculated effort on Ahebi’s part to punish her people and right a wrong done her many years before.

Perhaps the clearest confirmation of Ahebi’s agency can be gleaned from archival evidence. In his eloquent report on the peoples of Enugu-Ezike, V.K. Johnson verifies that Ahebi Ugbabe did in fact collaborate with the British by revealing to them the routes to take to conquer her people (Johnson 1934). As for her motivation, Abraham O. Eya of Amufie, Enugu-Ezike, provides a plausible explanation for Ahebi’s actions. He suggests that Ahebi accompanied the British back to Enugu-Ezike with the understanding and assurance that they would stamp out domestic slavery in her town. It is certainly conceivable that Ahebi Ugbabe, who herself was a candidate for cult dedication, would wish to see domestic slavery eradicated. Ahebi’s act of betrayal could also be interpreted as a cold rejection of a culture that not only attempted to punish her for the crimes of her father, but also forced her into exile and a life of “prostitution.”

AHEBI UGBABE’S TRANSFORMATION INTO A FEMALE HEADMAN AND WARRANT CHIEF

Whether Ahebi collaborated with the British to assist them in subjugating her people or for the more noble cause of suppressing the trade in slaves, by the mid-1910s, she had returned home to her people. Immediately following her return to Nsukka, Ahebi Ugbabe allied herself with the political elite. Her linguistic skills gave her access to the leading Igala and Nupe people, who dominated most parts of Nsukka, as well as the British colonial officers. Ahebi Ugbabe, who was versed in Pidgin English, was the only person in her village who could communicate with the British. She consequently wasted no time in cultivating a relationship with them and acted as an intermediary between her people and the new colonial masters.

Ever ambitious and talented, Ahebi recognized in the British new opportunities for political power as well as gendered transformations that had not previously existed in the pre-colonial Nsukka order. Within a few months of her return to Enugu-Ezike, Ahebi Ugbabe was able to expel Ugwu Okegwu, the aged and increasingly incompetent government-recognized headman who could not speak English, Pidgin English, or Igala and consequently had very limited political influence. This was the first in a series of gendered transformations that Ahebi Ugbabe realized in her ultimate quest to attain full manhood within the context of competing indigenous and alien (British and Igala) orders.

The government headman was a male elder appointed by the British to be the “head” of the community. In Nsukka political culture, the symbolic “heads” of the community were the Onyishi Umunwane (i.e., the oldest man in the village) and the Onyishi Umunwanyi (i.e., the oldest woman in the village). However, British colonialists often did not see eye to eye with the community-recognized Onyishi Umunwone and as a general rule excluded Igbo women altogether from government matters and leadership positions (Van Allen 1972; Mba 1982). They consequently commonly appointed agreeable male elders whom they could not only mold into their stooges, but whom would easily conform to their instruction. As a result, traditional Igbo ideals of respectability such as title taking and honor did not feature as factors in these government appointments. What was more, these so-called indigenous headmen would come to realize powers that were much too individualized and autocratic for indigenous sensibilities.

In October 1918, the Native Court of Enugu-Ezike was formed. The British chose four principal court members. As government headman, Ahebi Ugbabe had served the British well. It was therefore hardly surprising that Ahebi Ugbabe was to become the only woman in all of colonial Nigeria to be chosen to sit in the British Native Court as warrant chief (Meek 1930; Johnson 1934). She was described by V.K. Johnson in his intelligence report as “a female of strong Igala tendencies” who was allowed to sit as member of the council in recognition of her past services” (Johnson 1934).

THE ORIGINS OF A CONFLICT

Once Ahebi Ugbabe was made warrant chief a divide developed between her and the recognized leadership of male elders. A nodding acquaintance with the political system that was in place in Enugu-Ezike before Ahebi’s return will help explain the root of these hostilities. The Enugu-Ezike group of Nsukka Division was made up of 33 villages. There was no central authority. Its system of government was rule by elders. Enugu-Ezike was divided into units, which included the biological family, the extended family, the kindred, and the quarter. The nucleus of the government was the male and female council, ndi oha and udele, which were composed of the male and female heads of kindreds or grades of titled officials who had executive powers. Political authority lay in the hands of the oldest person in each unit, namely
the Oyishii Umunwko and the Oyishii Umunwanyi, who were assisted by other elders and titled officials (Johnson 1934; Omeje 1978; Agbodo 1979).

This pre-colonial system was therefore a gerontocratic as well as community-based mandate, which recognized and upheld the views of the group, rather than the individual. The male ruling elite did not want to have any part in Ahebi’s autocratic cross-gender political ascent. However, they found that they really did not have a choice in the matter because the British stood firmly behind Ahebi, and in so doing, excluded them from the day-to-day running and decision-making of the state.

THE CORONATION OF A FEMALE KING: PHASE THREE OF AHEBI’S GENDERED TRANSFORMATION

This European support, however, was not enough for the ambitious Ahebi Ugabae. In the next year or so, she mounted a vigorous campaign to become Eze to further cement her position in government and society. It was only an exceptional person who could strive to become king. In fact, no other woman (or man, for that matter) before her in Enugu-Ezike had attempted this feat. Ahebi was therefore breaking new ground by introducing and imposing an autocratic form of individualized as well as masculinized authority—the office of king. What was more, Ahebi’s title would be bestowed on her, not because of a relationship with a man (i.e., as queen, the wife of a king), but in her own right as a woman, who had effectively transformed herself into a man. Astute as always, Ahebi was able to draw on her Igala connections, which inadvertently provided the basis and support for her third gendered transformation. She ingeniously engineered, redefined, and transformed the male political institution of attah (i.e., Igala paramount king) into a supreme female masculinized and Igonbowed sovereign that espoused British and Igala ideals of rank and hierarchy, rather than the Igala Igbo standards of gerontocracy, merit, and respectability.

In the early to mid-1920s Ahebi Ugabae returned to Igala land for her coronation as king. After her coronation, Ahebi came back from Idah, okah (the staff of male kingship) in hand, riding on horseback, accompanied by a huge entourage of musicians and dancers who played and sang songs that affirmed and celebrated her kingship. Great feasting and celebrating were said to have gone on for days.

The songs performed by her musicians were called ikorodo. In pre-colonial Igala, ikorodo music was only performed during sacred occasions to accompany masked spirits and their male initiates. The ikorodo songs performed to celebrate Ahebi’s kingship situated her gendered transformation in extra-human and spiritual terms. One song proclaimed Ahebi to be onleh oto nelue anyu! (“a pit that swallowed the axe”) and further charged that onyenye eyigi onwuruchi ma abugu Ahebi nwa Onu (“No woman wears onwuruchi except Ahebi, daughter of Onu”). These lyrics clearly situates Ahebi Ugabae’s power in non-human proportions, by claiming that she has been endowed with a physical strength that is greater than an axe—for only that which is greater than an axe can swallow the axe! Furthermore, the song’s reference to onwuruchi—a beautiful and expensive Igala robe, which was patterned after the Igala Ekwe masquerade (an exclusive and secret male society) and worn exclusively by affluent men and men of distinction—introduces a spiritual element to her transformation.

Another song with the lyrics Ahebi Ugbabe onu, Odo neji mmadu, onye neli mmadu, ologi ologi agbo, (“Ahebi Ugabae is a pit, an Odo masquerade that catches men, a pit that swallows men, a pit that swallows men totally”) professed a symbolic gendered transformation into a female masquerade. It also defined Ahebi’s female masculinity in spiritual terms, thereby setting her aside from mere male mortals, whom, we are told, she “catches and swallows totally.” This lyric takes on added meaning when one understands that Igbo men traditionally used the Odo masked spirit as an instrument to control female behavior. Therefore, Ahebi locates her gendered transformation in terms of a preexisting Igbo male institution, which she has effectively negotiated into a masculinized but uniquely biologically female mechanism and threatens to use it to control male behavior.

Not everyone in Enugu-Ezike was pleased by these events. The Igbo have a saying, Idi otu bu ugwu eze—“A King has added strength and honor when his subjects are many.” They also believe that Ora nwe eze—“The community owns the king.” None of these sentiments were realized, however, as it became painfully obvious that a visible group of Ahebi detractors had surfaced. A song composed by one of Ahebi’s official musicians confirmed this fact. The song Onye si na Ahebi ama bu eze, nya bia ka o jia naa Idaah—a catchy tune with explicit lyrics—challenged, “Anyone who insisted that Ahebi not be king to go and have it out with the Attah of Idah who made her king.”

THE BIRTH OF A MYTHICAL AHEBI UGBABE

Ahebi Ugabae went out of her way to acquire a reputation as an all-powerful, no-nonsense, and fearsome ruler. She did this to guarantee her place as warrant chief and king. She had medicine men concoct potions designed to keep her powerful and mysterious. Three times a year, a well-known medicine man from Igala land would visit her, and he was said to prepare a bad medicine, which had the ability to seize people’s souls. These were used to keep Ahebi supernaturally powerful and extend her fortunes.

The villagers also alleged that Ahebi had a live cock buried on her grounds. From time to time, they would hear haunted sounds of drumming followed immediately by the chilling sounds of a cock crowing from underneath the earth. Enough people claimed to have heard this terrible crowing to put fear into the hearts of her subjects. It was also rumored that Ahebi could have no
lovers—that any man who spent a night with her would have to be killed. In fact, people claimed to know of an unfortunate man or two who had suffered this fate. Though probably exaggerated, Ahebi’s sexual restriction raises questions of wider significance: what, if any kind of sexuality, would be appropriate for a female king such as herself? I can only hazard a guess here. It seems plausible that Ahebi’s sexual restriction might have been imposed to guard against the possible birth of heirs who might be moved to attempt to usurp her position. A closer examination into the sexual ideologies of female kingship is needed to determine the validity of this thesis.

Ahebi’s constructed mysticism worked ingeniously. She soon developed a reputation as a greatly feared ruler, the Agamega, the “female leopard.” It is noteworthy that Ahebi Ugbabe chose Agamega as one of her titles and praise names. In its original Igala context, Agamega was a title confined to male kings and chieftains. What was more, an Igala king was believed to be transformed into a lion or leopard after he died (Meek 1930; Boston 1968).

DAY-TO-DAY GOVERNMENT: THE WORKINGS OF A FEMALE WARRANT CHIEF AND KING

Let us now turn our attention to the actual day-to-day operation of government under Ahebi. Ahebi Ugbabe, like the warrant chiefs of her time, turned her palace into a court (Afigbo 1972; Agbedo 1979). She settled cases between individuals and obtained money for these services. Ahebi’s palace also served as a sanctuary for runaway women whose husbands abused them. King Ahebi Ugbabe married some of the women who decided to stay and consequently became their female husband. Another way that Ahebi would acquire wives was through the unscrupulous services of some of her servants—ndi iboyi—who were famed for harassing and kidnapping men’s wives for themselves and their master.

The majority of the wives and concubines bore children for Ahebi, thus extending the Ahebi name to a new generation of descendants. Some wives, especially the beautiful ones, were encouraged to service the physical needs of Ahebi’s important male visitors like the Attah of Idah and the British colonial officers who were known to visit Ahebi’s palace frequently. In addition to her numerous wives and concubines, King Ahebi Ugbabe had a host of female attendants, cooks, and bath maids. She also bought and kept “slaves.” She did this in part as a prestige booster and to acquire workers for her fields and for heavy manual labor.

THE CULMINATION OF A VILLAGE CONFLICT

In 1930, roughly ten years after the British administration was instituted, the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) arrived in Enugu-Ezike (Kalu 1996). Mr.

Helbert, the District Officer, a staunch Catholic himself, encouraged all of his warrant chiefs to embrace this denomination of Christianity and establish schools where reading, writing, and arithmetic would be taught (Agbedo 1979). In the beginning, mission schools were established in the homes of the warrant chiefs. Ahebi Ugbabe set up such a school in her palace. Jacob Elam from neighboring Aku was its first teacher.

School attendance was extremely poor. After a month of instruction, the teacher, in an attempt to boost enrollment, introduced himself to the elders of Umuida. The elders informed Jacob that if he came to teach the whole of Umuida his school should not be in Ahebi’s palace, but at the house of the oldest man in Ogurte, Abugu Aina, according to tradition. The teacher, therefore, moved into Abugu Aina’s house. A slighted Ahebi called in the police, who rounded up all the elders involved and threw them in the Nsukka prison for three days. She then sent word to the District Officer’s interpreter, Ishmael, who found a replacement teacher, Samuel Nwume, for the palace school.

EKPE AHEBI MASQUERADE: THE FINAL INSULT

The underlying reason that the elders encouraged the first teacher, Jacob Elam, to move out of Ahebi’s palace was that they had had enough of her antics and abuses. It was not simply that Ahebi had eroded the traditional leadership of the male elders by transforming herself first into a British-imposed headman, then warrant chief, and subsequently into an Igala-imposed king; she had also abused her political power. Particularly troubling to the traditional political elite were Ahebi Ugbabe’s autocratic methods in which she committed unthinkable taboos against society, like refusing to consult with elders, utilizing forced labor to build her Ahebi Ugbabe Road, receiving bribes, and forcibly taking away men’s wives.

The final straw was when the ambitious Ahebi, perhaps in her quest to achieve full manhood in Nsukka terms, pushed the limits of its gender system and invaded the last and ultimate sanctuary of Igbo full men: she created and brought out a masked spirit. This masquerade was called Ekpe Ahebi. It was the most beautiful masquerade the villagers had ever seen.

In his book, The Dead Among the Living, A.O. Onyeneke describes the significance of the masked spirit in Igboland: “The masquerade serves the special function of differentiating male[s] and female[s] in Igbo society. It is the exclusive function of the [full men], while the [women] are always excluded even where a female character is portrayed in the masking . . . . The social definition of [full] man therefore is the ability to control a masquerade” (Onyeneke 1987: 78).

The Igbo expectation about the relationship of women to masked spirits is clear. They distinguish, however, between categories of male associations
with masquerades as well. In Igbo sensibilities, the masquerade secret society is the institution that separates full men (i.e., initiated biological men) from uninitiated men and women. It is forbidden for any individual who is born female (i.e., a biological woman) or a gender transformed/masculinized (wo)man (including female husbands, female fathers, and female sons, etc.) to control a masked spirit in Igboland. What is more, it is also forbidden for uninitiated biological men to control masked spirits. Biological women (again, including gender transformed (wo)men) and uninitiated biological men were supposed to run away at the sight of a mask, for to claim knowledge of what is behind the mask would mean that a crime has been committed against that mask. Therefore, while Ahebi Ugabue had effectively transformed herself into a headman, warrant chief, and king (British and Igala instituted female masculinities), as far as Igbo culture was concerned she could neither create nor control a masked spirit, because she was biologically female. Therefore, Ahebi’s attempt to realize and humanize the aspiration of her symbolic kinship praise song (“Ahebi Ugabue is the Odo masquerade”) would meet with severe opposition from Omu full men. What was more, her unspeakable actions caused the total desecration of her masked spirit, since no woman nor uninitiated man could ever invoke an ancestral spirit. This was in essence the gravity of Ahebi’s crime.

ENUGU-EZIKE TAKES ACTION: THE CONFISCATION OF EKPE ABHEBI

In Enugu-Ezike it was customary for a masked spirit to be “brought out.” This presentation epitomized the introduction of the masked spirit to the community and normally took place during a festive ceremony held at the Onyishi Umunwwoke’s obu, or house. The highlight of the ceremony was when each masquerade in attendance paid tribute to the male Onyishi and his council of elders, ndi oha. At this time Apeh Azegba, the same elder who orchestrated the departure of Ahebi Ugabue’s first palace teacher, was the Onyishi and therefore was the luminary who received the masquerades.

On the day in question, sometime in 1939, all of the masked spirits in Oguere congregated at the Onyishi’s obu. Separately, they rose and took center stage. Each masquerade first performed a short opening sequence, then danced up to the Onyishi and bowed before him as a mark of respect. This process was repeated many times over by each of the masked spirits in attendance, to the sheer delight of the people present. Soon it was the turn of Ahebi’s masked spirit, Ekpe, to pay tribute to Apeh Azegba. Amos Abugu describes what happened next:

Ahebi Ugabue brought out kola nuts and offered them to Azegba, explaining that her masquerade had come to pay its respects. Azegba remained silent for a time, shook his head, and then beseeched his ancestors to pretend not to have heard the abomination that was uttered from Ahebi’s lips—after all, women were NEVER allowed to own masquerades in Igboland. He then spoke directly to Ahebi. “Do you not know our culture?” He did not even wait for her to respond, but instead asked his cronies to escort Ahebi’s Ekpe to the back yard—and there it remained, never to be seen again. (Amos Abugu interview)

The “traditional” leadership of male elders and full men had finally acted, and the message was clear. Ahebi Ugabue’s impertinence and exaggerated female masculinities would no longer be tolerated!

AHEBI UGBABE VERSUS OGU RUTE: THE COURT TRIAL AND BETRAYAL OF THE BRITISH

Ahebi Ugabue, spoiling for a fight, immediately ordered Apeh Azegba and his council of male elders to court. The case was so extraordinary and unprecedented that it had to be taken to the Resident’s Office in Onitsha. After he heard the case, the resident pronounced his ruling: Ahebi Ugabue did not have the right to create or “bring out” a masked spirit since she was a woman. He then instructed the villagers to repay Ahebi whatever money she had used to acquire the masked spirit, and then keep the masquerade. This decision revealed the duplicity of the British colonialists. They had used Ahebi’s knowledge of the geography of Enugu-Ezike to conquer and subjugate her people and then patted her on the back by presenting her with a headman and warrant chief position. They had also superficially supported her during squabbles with individual members of her community. But when it really counted, the British betrayed her in the worst possible way. For all intents and purposes, the British no longer needed Ahebi’s services and loyalty, as they had already gained a foothold in Enugu-Ezike. In fact the action of the male elders had shown that Ahebi was not as invincible as she once seemed. What was more, she seemed to have lost the loyalty of a good fraction of her subjects, which could prove disastrous for the continued success of British indirect rule in Enugu-Ezike. Therefore, it could be argued that the British court decision represented a superficial endorsement of “community values,” in an attempt to connect with a group of male elders whose influence they had previously underestimated. It also appears that the British resident viewed Ahebi’s action as overstepping her “native” authority as warrant chief, thus alienating her subjects.

No sooner had the resident instructed that Ahebi relinquish her Ekpe masquerade to her community than her influence lessened, and her image as superhuman and untouchable unraveled. Thus, after many years the community represented by the traditional leadership of male elders triumphed in their
battle against the autocratic rule of King Ahebi Ugubae. Detractors immediately composed songs that were aimed at humiliating and ridiculing her. One such song, “Ahebi akpogo ifi mma wulu obodo,” submitted that “Ahebi Ugubae [the gendered transformed (wo)man] had been initiated into the masquerade cult only to be stripped of all the rights and privileges due initiates, and had accordingly become an ordinary woman.”

Although she remained powerful until she died in 1948, King Ahebi did not fully recover from the ruling. Moreover, her perceived abuse of power led the elders of Enugu-Ezike to vow that no single individual would ever rule them again. They were never going to allow another woman, female man, or man, for that matter, to assume the kind of absolute power that Ahebi had exercised. King Ahebi Ugubae was indeed the first female and last king ever to rule in Enugu-Ezike.

CONCLUSION

Ahebi Ugubae’s story presents an unrivaled portrait of one (wo)man’s power and agency in the face of a rapidly changing British colonial landscape, during an era when women were marginalized politically across Africa. It contributes much to our understanding of continuity and change in Nsukka gendered politics, as well as our knowledge about competing and overlapping definitions/constructions of female masculinities and manhood in colonial Nsukka Division.

In the course of her life, Ahebi Ugubae asserted her fundamental right as a gendered Igbo actor to transform herself into a multiplicity of female masculinities. She was able to negotiate her life first within the historical context of British colonialism and subsequently, Igala ascendancy, so as to extend, alter and attempt to fundamentally challenge preexisting Nsukka gender ideals that governed the extent to which a woman could become a man. However, when this extraordinary woman attempted to achieve acceptance and full manhood in the ultimate sanctuary of full Igbo men, she was immediately reined in by indigenous gerontocratic male authority, revealing at once Igbo society’s resolve to limit the extent to which female gendered transformations can materialize.

Let us examine in greater detail the historical conditions/context that unintentionally allowed Ahebi the space to alter and extend her gendered identity. In colonial Igbo country, the British invaders initially sought to create conditions that would recognize and celebrate the so-called native authority of Igbo male elders. They thus instituted the office of headman, superficially patterned after the indigenous Onyishi Umuwoc, so that the appointed Igbo elders soon became junior partners in the colonial political processes of their districts. However, by the 1920s, during a time when colonial rule was consolidating its hold in Igboland, the British switched their loyalties and began to give privileges to male youth. It is valuable to visualize this modification in broader terms. It would appear that the British sought out male youth whom they believed would be much more amenable and energetic than their aged predecessors and consequently be better suited to undertake their instruction. Once selected, the young Igbo men were empowered with warrants of office, which served to elevate and celebrate youth while pushing aside age and respectability, “traditional” Nsukka determinants of power and authority.

Although Ahebi Ugubae was born a woman, she was able to tap into this British obsession with youth. She was young, beautiful, loyal, and dependable, and, most importantly, she had proved herself to be an invaluable asset to the consolidation of British rule in Enugu-Ezike. Evidence suggests that Ahebi not only worked to satisfy the sexual appetites of the British colonials, but she also revealed the routes by which to conquer their people. Her linguistic skills further cemented her connection with the British, since she was the only person in Umuida who could communicate with and relay British objectives to the colonized Enugu-Ezike citizens.

It could be argued that by embracing a highly masculinized form of colonial leadership (i.e., headman), Ahebi Ugubae had sought to redefine a preexisting indigenous Nsukka female masculinity of Onyishi Umuwoc—a dignitary who existed side by side with the Onyishi Umuwoc and who was already constructed as male in Nsukka consciousness. However, in this indigenous gendered system, age, respectability, and achievement were prerequisites for this type of gendered transformation into an “honorary man.” Ahebi Ugubae, who did not possess any of the determinants of Nsukka leadership, was nevertheless quick to tap into British colonial privileging of youth and transform herself into a young female headman. This ingenious gender and age negotiation would set the stage for Ahebi’s supreme British-sustained transformation into a female warrant chief.

Ahebi’s triumph in transforming herself into a warrant chief in 1918 revealed not only her extraordinary abilities, but also her exceptional ability to invent and reinvent herself within the new and viable context of British colonial rule. Like the headman position, which she had so ingeniously modified to fit her needs, Ahebi Ugubae was again able to streamline British ideals of male youthfulness in leadership and assume the warrant chief office as an already transformed female man. In fact, Ahebi Ugubae would become the only (wo)man to hold this office in all of colonial Nigeria. In becoming a female headman and warrant chief, Ahebi Ugubae had therefore essentially redefined, expanded upon, and evolved a preexisting Nsukka female masculinity (Onyishi Umuwoc) while adapting individualized and youth-based British masculinities within the context of indirect rule. She would subsequently turn to the Igala constitution to uphold her third in a series of supreme gendered transformations—a successful quest to become a female king.
When Ahebi created and brought out a masked spirit in her attempt to realize full manhood within the Nsukka indigenous context, full men as well as members of the Nsukka male gerontocratic elite immediately reined her in. They confiscated her Ekpe Ahebi masquerade, revealing at once that Ahebi had overextended the limits of acceptable female behavior. In confiscating Ahebi’s Ekpe masked spirit, the male elders had in essence taken away Ahebi’s spiritual-based masculinized powers, thus symbolically forcing her to retransform into a woman. Moreover, the British government decision to stand behind the Nsukka male elders established that they, too, were unwilling to defend such unprecedented behavior on the part of a (female) “junior partner” in “native” government.

Ultimately, Nsukka full men as well as its male gerontocratic elite had succeeded in stripping King Ahebi Ugbabe of most of her political clout. In the end, she was forced to perform her burial rites while she was still alive (ikwa owe ya na uhu) because she did not trust that her society would accord her a befitting burial. The Omenani (fixed laws that guide and order group relationships in Igbo society) had therefore proved victorious in their conflict against excessive and inordinate female ambition.

NOTES

1. In northern Igboland, after a man died, his first daughter “became” her father. She dressed in her father’s attire, sat in his obi (traditional male residence in which only men congregate), and was saluted and addressed as her father by his close associates. She continued in this role until her father’s true heir was identified. This practice of masculinizing oneself by donning male clothing is also a theme that presents itself in the life of Ahebi Ugbabe, who was known to have dressed in male garb during a number of public appearances.

2. Amadumie refers to this category as “male daughters.” However, I have adopted the term “female son” for my own discussions, because I feel that this term captures more adequately the transformation from a daughter (i.e., female sex) to a son (i.e., male gender).

3. I use the concept of “man” in this essay to refer to the biological and physical characteristics that determine maleness; as well as the beliefs, attitudes, behavior, and actions that differentiate men from women. A “biological man” in this positioning has not been initiated into the masquerade cult (i.e., ikpu Anyi), and therefore cannot create or control a masked spirit. Furthermore, a woman can transform herself into a “man,” or, stated differently, a female man or (wo)man. I consequently use the terms “female man,” and “(wo)man” interchangeably as the foregoing are in fact female masculinities. A “full man,” on the other hand, must first be biologically male and, second, have undergone the Igbo ritual of ikpu Anyi. Therefore, the determinant of “full manhood” is not only biology, but also the ability to create and control a masked spirit.

4. This chapter represents months of archival and field research on Ahebi Ugbabe that I conducted during two separate research trips to Nigeria, a Ford Foundation Pre-Dissertation Fieldwork trip in 1996, and a Fulbright-Hays Dissertation Fieldwork trip in 1998. My vast fountain of information gathering was oral and provides the basis for the reconstruction of the history of this prominent female king and warrant chief. I conducted interviews primarily in Igbo with numerous Nsukka and Igala collaborators who shared with me individual and group memories of this remarkable (wo)man. For want of space, I will not reference individual collaborators in the text, but rather provide a list of the collaborators interviewed in my bibliography.

5. Agbede (1979: 63) and Agashi (1986: 17). I use the term “prostitution” advisedly and rather reluctantly, since this categorization is Eurocentric in its implication and does not, in my view, speak to the signification of the institution in northern Igboland. For more about this Nsukka institution, see Nwobi Achebe (2000: Chap. VI).

6. It is interesting to note, however, that European initial concern centered on the amelioration of the treatment of “slaves,” rather than an immediate eradication of slavery. In fact there is evidence to suggest that some missionaries purchased “slaves” to use as domestic servants, and others trained them as missionary workers and interpreters. See C. Ejizu (1986: 143-48) and Don Ogbude (1986: 443-50).

7. The Odo masquerade was the most powerful masked spirit and, by extension, indicator of manhood in Nsukka Division.

8. The biological “fathers” of Ahebi Ugbabe’s children were not important; they did not pay the traditional bridewealth and therefore did not have rights to Ahebi’s children. In a manner of speaking, they were simply sperm donors.

9. The events leading up to the seizure of Ekpe Ahebi were also corroborated by Bonnie Abwuo, Abodo Nwa Idoko, Wilfred Ogara, Samuel Ezzeja, Fabian Azeba, and Uroko Nwa Iyi Oku (Raymond Iyi).

REFERENCES


**Interviews and Personal Communications**

Unless otherwise noted, all interviews were conducted and tape recorded by the author and took place in Enugu-Ezike, Enugu State.


Abunu, Boniface. Ex-councilor and retired headmaster, now farmer. 4 October 1998.


Agashi, Ogbu. Olu Oha. 26 September 1996.


