

Theorizing *omumu* as an Indigenous African Concept of Power

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Abstract

This research presents *omumu* as an Igbo concept of female power that connects mother, child (male, female, others), and the conceptual Earth Mother. This principle that propelled women to heights in pre-colonial times was grounded in the biologicality of a female body that was not Othered or defective, but normative in Igbo communities that centered on Mother Earth culture. The *omumu* principle empowered pre-colonial Igbo women to participate in arenas of public authority in religion, economy, and politics. Female power is often invoked today through women achievers, but the ideology that created and maintained such influence not only among women leaders, but also among ordinary women, needs to be studied in greater depth. Deconstructing the concept of *omumu* as the basis of human power in pre-colonial Igbo society is important for decolonizing people's minds, and it has the potential to dispatch its regenerative power for African peoples with similar cultural agency as the Igbo. What exactly is *omumu*? Is it a relevant discursive constitution for liberating the African mind, opening new ways of thinking about the past, future, and gender inclusivity? This paper addresses these questions while clarifying the theory of *omumu*.

Keywords: Igbo Culture, *omumu*, Feminism, African Women, Earth Goddess, Post-colonial, Decolonization.

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Introduction

Africana scholars tend to acknowledge the power of pre-colonial African women but largely overlook the ideology that created and maintained such power. African oral tradition, chronicles, and articles speak of the political influence of pre-colonial women such as Princess Amina who expanded the principality of Zazzau to become the city-state of Zaria that dominated Northern Nigeria in the 15th century. Similarly, Queen Mothers of Ghana wielded tremendous authority exemplified by Yaa Asantewaa's leadership of the Ashanti army that fought British colonialists in the early 19th century, and Nzingha, the 17th century ruler of Ndongo and Matamba Kingdoms of Angola who defended her people from Portuguese slavery (Achebe 2020). Other political figures include the early colonial women fighters such as Lozikeyi Dlodlo of Matabeleland in Zimbabwe (Faber Clarke 2018), Beatriz Kimpa Vita of Kongo (Leslie/ Rucker 2010: 119-121), and the Agojie woman battalions of Dahomey (Solly 2022). These leaders had ancient predecessors such as the *kandakes* (rulers) of the ancient Kingdom of Kush in East Africa.¹ The intelligence and diplomacy of the Ethiopian *kandake* (ruler), Sheba, is well documented in the Bible, especially her encounter with King Solomon.

Expressions of female power are not limited to individual royal and political women because female power was culturally embedded in many African societies in ways that surprised early European colonialists and researchers from unambiguous patriarchal cultures. Female power was expressed by Igbo women, Ibibio women and women from other ethnic groups who organized and executed a war against British colonialists in Eastern Nigeria (Akpan/ Ekpo 1988), as well as women soldiers of the Zimbabwean liberation army and ordinary Algerian women fighters numbering about 11,000 in Algerian post-war veterans' register. The legacy of resilience and resistance has remained inspirational for younger generations of African women and has been a topic of scholarly curiosity and colonial wonderment, but the basis of that power needs sustained scholarly investigation.

This article contributes to filling this gap in African feminist theory by engaging the idea of *omumu* as the Indigenous basis of power in Igbo culture. This connects with Claude Ake's idea of "building on the indigenous" (1990), which refers to the notion of creating blueprints for development from what works or has worked in Africa. Understanding *omumu* as a theory of inclusivity and dignity will be an epistemological foundation for creating the gender equity that

¹ Information about the *kandakes* can be found in Ethiopian chronicles, archeological records of Nubian pyramids, and Roman records of the exploits of Alexander the Great (Achebe 2020).

will promote gender relations and development of women and their children including men. This study's exploratory reference for *omumu* will be the "birthing power," which intersects with the radical feminist emphasis on the womb. It, however, lacks feminist fixation on dismantling male superiority exacerbated by the Western enlightenment construction of female subordination. The tenacity of women rulers, battalions of women-soldiers, and ordinary women challenging the colonialists was rooted in the cultural bedrock of their birthing power that was inclusive of all. *Omumu* is not the physical mother or woman *per se*, or the domineering posture of mothers and daughters described in Catherine Acholonu's pioneering Igbo-based feminist book, *Motherism* (1995). *Omumu* is an ideological frame of inclusive power for men and women, and since it was primarily based on the female perceived as mother of all, its inclusion of all mother's children was *sine qua non*, even though the nodal point was female power. *Omumu* was nondiscriminatory in its roots and included males and females with or without child because all were implicated in the basin of birthing power and enjoyed *omumu* ambience through ceremonies that validated *omumu* influence.

Omumu is a container of cultural power invested in all human beings through birthing and nurtured in all through cultural practices. Consequently, all genders, with or without womb, capable or incapable of birthing, are involved. This essay, however, focuses on the female frame of *omumu* in the Igbo cultural context of the research through a discussion of the genesis of the research in the rural Igbo setting of Ajalli (Anambra State, Nigeria), which still partially reflects *omumu* in traditional mindset and practice. *Omumu's* continued existence, even partially, obfuscates the normative subordination of women that resulted from the reinforced patriarchy of post-colonial times. The gulf between the elevation of women in *omumu* culture of the past and their subordination in the contemporary period may appear illogical. It, therefore, necessitates an explanation, which is provided in the section "Reinforced Patriarchy" that also demonstrates a need for the social education that *omumu* knowledge brings. The meaning of *omumu* and its systemic involvement in Igbo life are clarified in the section "*Omumu* Principle," followed by a discussion of pre-colonial gender power with goddess influence in "Earth Precept." The implication of the *omumu* narrative in traditional architecture and community operation is delineated in "Omumu Shrine". The import of these sections helps us to conclude that the knowledge of *omumu* is indispensable for social re-education on gender equity in contemporary society. This conclusion is buttressed by the existence of *omumu* that has not completely

faded in Igbo contemporary psyche as illustrated in the following description of my research context.

Research Context, Interest and Methods

My interest in *omumu* was first awakened in a situation where post-colonial male privilege and remnants of ancient African female power collided. This happened in the rural Igbo town of Ajalli, Anambra State, Nigeria, while I was conducting graduate research on Igbo festivals in 1984 with Chike Aniakor, a notable scholar of African art history. The sun was going down, and people were on their way to watch the Ikoro performance, a dance-dramatic performance of the *Ikeji* festival. I was walking with my hostess, Madam Ufelle, and in front of us was a pregnant woman balancing a basket of yams and a bunch of plantains on her head while holding a bag in one hand. Her husband had a keg of wine in one hand, and a walking stick in the other.

The road was busy with people hurrying towards the sound of the talking drum announcing the festival. We could see an elderly woman coming from the opposite direction of our crowd. We stopped in our tracks when she began to berate the couple in front of us for not having respect for *omumu*. I was amazed by her outrage and the passive reaction of the couple. The man, with a hurried *ka-a nne* (apologies mother) to the old woman, took the big bunch from his wife. What I saw as unfairness in load distribution was explained as lack of respect for *omumu*, and unkindness to the unborn baby. The old woman was cordial with us; answered our greeting and went on her way, grumbling about the disrespect of *umuaka kita* (children of nowadays). Ufelle said that she was a priestess. I was in awe of her audacity and authority. I became curious about *omumu* and began the project from which this article is drawn.

My research on the *omumu* concept intersects with my research on mask festival performance. I had done a good part of the literature review of the mask performance culture in various archives and library special collections and was at the stage of fieldwork in various villages when I added the research goal to explore the meaning of *omumu*. The research methods used included participant-observation of festival events, interviews of selected elders and community leaders, and distribution of questionnaires in Arochukwu in Abia State, Amokwe, Eke and Uvuru-Nsukka in Enugu State, Igrita and Isiokpo in Rivers State, Ajalli in Anambra State, Arondizuogu in Imo State, and Izzi in Ebonyi State. These field locations are in the Igbo area in federal states of southeastern Nigeria.

Interviews corroborated data from Afigbo and Nwabara (1976) as well as Basden (1912) that projected *omumu* as fertility and goddess principles. Additionally, the interviews shed new light on *omumu* by placing women at the center of its practice. Mazi Aniebo of Ndi-ejezie gave an in-depth clarification of Earth as mother and overseer of everything including the hills, rivers, animals, forests and vegetation, as he emphasized that he was “old and unhappy about the way young people are abandoning *ome na ana* (ways of the land, culture).”² In-between his narration, he sipped *akpeteshi* (local gin) from a small glass and insisted on telling me more than I asked for, because he wanted his knowledge to be preserved in the *mahadum* (university) where I came from. He demanded evidence that I recorded everything, so I rewound the tape and played the recorded interview.

The devotee of the earth goddess, Anezi Okocha,³ first exclaimed, *obunu omumu ka anyi kwo biri n’uwa* (It is because of *omumu* that we are living on this earth) before she explained *omumu* as an element of Ani (Earth Spirit). *Omumu* is the principle that enables Ani to give food and shelter to humans, expect good behavior from them, and welcome them at death. She described Ani as not merely the physical ground we stand on but the spirit that endows, nourishes, and rules the earth. She emphasized that Ani and human females have similar characteristics, which place them on high pedestal in the community because of their important role in the continuity of the society through birthing and nurturing of life. This situation was disrupted and damaged during colonial imposition of Western patriarchal culture supported by Christianity, a patriarchal religion that has become the major religion and culture of the Igbo, strengthening Indigenous patriarchy, and contributing to the reinforced patriarchy.

Reinforced Patriarchy and Female Aspirations

An understanding of post-colonial reinforced patriarchy begins from the translation of the English word, woman, with its etymological connotations of subordination, to Igbo *nwanyi* that was not dependent on the Igbo word for man. In Igbo language, *nwa-oke* (male child) was the gender equal and opposite of *nwa-anyi* (female child), and child was the common base of the compound words that indicated equality. Translating the Igbo *nwa-anyi* as “woman”, with “man” as the base on which the “wo” depended, brought the weak and dependent connotations of the word to post-colonial literature, and psyche. This faulty

² Aniebo, Mazi. Interview by Chinyere Okafor. March 1996.

³ Okocha, Anezi. Interview by Chinyere Okafor. March 1995.

translation contributed to the change from relative gender equity to superiority of *nwoke* (man) to *nwanyị* (woman). Traditional patriarchy was reinforced with this faulty translation and Igbo women have internalized the subordinate status implied by the word, woman.

Like the Igbo language examples, *obìnrin* (female/woman) and *òkùnrin* (male/man) in the Yoruba language have neutral roots that accord equality to both sexes. In her book, *The Invention of Women*, Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí (1997: 32-34) sees the term 'woman' as a foreign imposition on Oyo people of Yoruba (Nigeria). An etymological deconstruction of the Hausa word *mutun* (male) and *mata* (female) would lead to similar conclusions about Indigenous gender equity before foreign influence.

I use the term, 'reinforced patriarchy' to describe the strengthened male privileging and subordination of women created by the combined patriarchal cultures of the colonizers, Christian religion, and traditional male dominance that was previously mediated by traditional female power. The combined effort of these patriarchies greatly marginalized or erased structures of female power and diminished the dignity of woman in Igboland. Reinforced patriarchy intersects with the Kenyan political scientist, Ali Mazrui's concept of triple heritage, which refers to traditional African, Islamic, and Western cultures in African experience (1987), but also differs grossly in that Mazrui's concept did not focus on the negative impact of this heritage on women's power. The triple heritage exacerbated traditional patriarchy, and contemporary patriarchy.

In Igboland, Christianity was introduced in the 19th century and became the major religion of the people, and it aimed at destroying traditional religion that was the stronghold of the *omumu* concept. Remnants of the concept can still be discerned in some Igbo communities such as the town of Ajalli referenced in the story narrated in the previous section on "Research Interest and Context." In that story, the pregnant woman burdened with a heavy load represents the multiple jeopardy of women under reinforced patriarchy, while her husband's light load and the walking stick of authority represent male control. This unbalanced gender situation did not evince any reaction from the contemporary post-colonial people who were probably familiar with the post-colonial gender system it represented, but it greatly offended the old woman who was more attuned to the old tradition of *omumu*. Her reaction shows that *omumu* influence has not completely disappeared despite the reinforced patriarchy, but the seeming acquiescence of the crowd shows the high level of patriarchy that began with colonization, and Christianization.

During the colonial period, Christianity gave women access to the English education necessary for upward mobility, but it subjected them to patriarchal conditioning, and an uneasy acceptance of subordination to men. This was in contrast to their situation in Igbo religious life, which allowed women leadership and authority, unlike Christianity, which excluded them from priestly authority. In addition to women's loss of spiritual power, they also experienced economic, social, and political loss through the colonial structure of indirect rule that made men warrant chiefs and ignored female leadership. Women lost their right to land ownership in their natal homes except in few Igbo communities such as Afikpo and Ohafia, where children belonged to the mother's lineage and women owned land, but often left it to the custody of their brothers. Women's ownership of land and labor (children – people) was a source of power resulting from a complex system of *omumu* that lacked gender dominance even though it allowed female control.

Omumu was the gem of Igbo women's audacity to confront the British colonial administration. They fought the British administration through various sit-ins, strikes, rebellions, and wars including the 1925 demonstration in Owerri, and the 1929 rebellion in Warri and Opobo. Another example is the 1929 *Ogu Umunwanye* or Women's War that began in Owerri Province and spread to Calabar. One of the main complaints of the women communicated by a veteran, Mary Onwumaere, in an interview with colonial investigators concerned the erosion of women's pre-colonial power: "We women are the mothers of Europeans and Chiefs, and we don't wish women to be oppressed."⁴ This statement clearly implies women's superior self-identification based on motherhood, which is an *omumu* principle. It recalls South African women's insistence that the driver of their agency, during the 1913 and 1915 public demonstrations against the apartheid government, was motherhood (Gaitskell 1996: 192). Assault on their motherhood was portrayed as apartheid oppression of all, including men whom they regarded collectively as their children.

This defiance of Igbo women to colonial authority was shocking to the British colonialists and led to anthropological study, which revealed Igbo womanhood as different from British construction of femininity. Lord Frederick Lugard, the British colonial governor-general of Nigeria (1914-1919) articulated his surprise at Igbo women in his Foreword to the book, *African Women* by Leith-Ross, where he referred to them as "ambitious, courageous, self-reliant, hard-working and independent," women who claimed, "full equality with the opposite sex and

⁴ CE/K5A. "Proceedings before the Commission of Inquiry into the Disturbances in the Calabar and Owerri Provinces," March 25, 1930, 707 (Akpan/ Ekpo 1988: 27).

would indeed seem to be dominant” (1965: n.p.). Colonial men were not the only ones shocked by the caliber of Igbo women. The traditional mind-set and mode of operation of ordinary women in the society were so above the expectations of the anthropologist Sylvia Leith-Ross that she described them as emancipated, at a time that feminist struggle was in its infancy in Britain. Like Lugard, she prejudged the place of Igbo women to be with “cooking-pots and babies,” but the reality compelled her to reject her mistaken views: “When I sat with them in the Women’s Council, I knew I had been mistaken. There would be no confining these women within the conventional bounds of home life, not unless we wished to atrophy them, to waste their vigor” (1965: 352). These comments by Leith-Ross allude to the impossibility of confining Igbo women to the domestic sphere as the British wanted based on Victorian culture.

While considering Igbo women’s struggle to reclaim their pre-colonial power, one cannot but recall numerous remnants of female power that existed in varied forms across post-colonial African societies and what they could have been without colonial intervention. The Yoruba people of Oyo in Nigeria illustrate a society where according to Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997), seniority trumped gender in social categorization. Women and men could achieve in all spheres of endeavor including religion and the military that were then taboo to women in many patriarchal societies. The introduction of colonialism had an impact on social categorization as seniority began to lose its primary position to gender categorization. Perlman’s description of the political structure of the Toro (Uganda) indicates a patriarchal order which despite the wars of slavery still retained considerable female power in the early colonial period exemplified by the authority of the Queen Mother’s and King’s sister’s courts that coexisted with the king’s court (Perlman 1966: 567). Among the Zulu and Eswatini, in Southern Africa, political power resided with the Gogo of the homestead who at death bequeathed her power on “her son’s *indlunkhulu*, the head wife, who thereby becomes more powerful than her husband,”⁵ the patriarch. In noncentralized political organizations such as in Senegal and Gambia of the pre-Atlantic slave trade era, power was not “exclusively the domain of men,” because “some groups of women also achieved and held positions of authority and power through their familial roots, wealth, specialized knowledge, and social networks” (Fourshey 2019: 3). Women exerted great spiritual influence among the Balobedu people in northern Limpopo area of South Africa where the Modjadji (rain monarch) maintained control through her astrological knowledge and spiritual power (Achebe 2020: 54-58). These examples illustrate the intricate

⁵ Dlamini, Betty Sibongile. “Comments on Omumu.” Received by Chinyere Okafor, Nov 11, 2020.

ways that African societies managed gender and contained potential gender conflicts in traditional structures.

These structures might have continued, but the insecurity of the slave trades, and superimposition of Arab and European patriarchal orders in the communities, created disruptions that energized male dominance. Confusion and lack of security during the slavery period constituted a conducive environment for the emergence of warlords and slave lords whose activities adversely effected social adherence to *omumu* principles. The commodification and exportation of Africans during the trans-Saharan, Indian Ocean, and trans-Atlantic slave trades entrenched violent masculinity that gnawed at female power by fostering aggression, and female dependence on male protection. This notwithstanding, the *omumu* system persisted, but had yet to experience further damage through the process of colonization, and postcolonization.

This insight into pre-colonial traditional social arrangements should not suggest complete absence of gender-related difficulties. Analysis of men's proverbs by Opata (1992) shows that Igbo orature depicts the relegation of women (1992), and effort to valorize masculinity. Ohale (1992) as well as Ezeifeke and Ogbazi (2016) corroborate the relegation of women in songs of lineage wives that portray women's struggle with marginalization. In Igbo language, these proverbs and songs are regarded as *akuko ifo* (fiction) contrary to *akuko ala* (true stories) such as origin stories and histories, but they nevertheless reflect and envision life from the perspective of the artists. Azuonye's study of selected Igbo oral histories shows men and women with elevated stature (1992: 40), which indicate the existence of both male and female power, but his data assessment reveals a threat from an uncompromising patriarchy intent on dismantling female power. This resonates with stories of some Igbo festivals and mask cults that originated through women but were usurped by men such as the *mmonwu* of Arondizuogu in Imo State (Okafor 2015: 223) and Ojiyi festival of Aku in Enugu State (Echeruo 1975: 59), as well as with the Kikuyu (Kenya) history of a matriarchal society that was overthrown by a "patrilineal and a patrilocal social and political organization" (Muriuki 1974: 42).

Igbo land had gender trouble, but it also had the *omumu* system that mediated the trouble through the internalized acceptance of the principles of *omumu* by the cultural indigenes. The acceptance and mechanism of *omumu* gradually altered through the colonial process with its imposition of European standards. The colonialists came from acute patriarchal societies like Victorian England, and France of the Third Republic, characterized by male supremacy, dominance of the bourgeoisie, and female subordination. Colonial education, among other

things, aimed at producing an African elite that would uphold European norms such as white supremacy and male superiority. Glamorized European masculine standards were part of the colonial culture introduced to Africa during the 19th and 20th centuries. Colonial education gave African women access to Western education, but this education was based on Victorian gender ideals that discriminated against women. Most of the girls' secondary schools in Igboland had courses such as domestic science and typing which emphasized domestic and service sector jobs, while boys' secondary schools emphasized science and other courses that prepared them for public life, control of society, and superior status in the public sphere.

The European gender-discriminatory education of women was the type that Mary Wollstonecraft (2014 [1792]) argued against in eighteenth-century England. During that period, European women did not hold positions of authority in the public sphere such as in religious, educational, commercial, and political enterprises because of an education that bolstered their low status. This situation was contrary to the position of women in many African communities of the period. The introduction of colonial and Christian education greatly undermined *omumu* power because it not only produced an elite that upheld male power and female subordination, but it also enforced doctrines that rationalized female domination by men as the norm. Colonial education, Christian indoctrination, constitutional and legal policies combined to validate the kind of male privileging that reinforces misogyny, and the marginalization of *omumu* in the post-colonial society.

Although remnants of female power still exist in post-colonial times, the reinforced patriarchy has labelled and turned many *umu-nwanyi* (female persons) to women perceived as incomplete beings to be made whole by male support. The labelling of female persons as women with its subordinate connotations creates low self-esteem and inadequacy that enable male patronage. Attaching or belonging to males gives a female the confidence to operate within the ambience of a man not as the independent *nwanyi* (female person) who was the equivalent of *nwoke* (male person) in the *omumu* system. There are women who submit to the kind of patriarchal stupor that typifies Simone de Beauvoir's definition of immanence as the closed-off space of female bondage and passivity (2015). Unlike their predecessors in pre-slavery and pre-colonial times rooted in *omumu* with its unlimited possibilities for power, modern African women need emancipation from the yoke of reinforced patriarchy. Understanding *omumu*, adopting it, and working with its principle will enhance female personality and help it to attain the Indigenous status of *nwanyi* that stands equal to and beside *nwoke*.

African Feminist Frameworks and *Omumu*

The diminished personality and status of women have been issues of great concern and African feminists have theorized frameworks for empowering and developing African women and gender. Chikwenye Ogunyemi (1995) explores a new way of looking at women's oppression through womanism that goes beyond a sole focus on gender to include racial, economic, and cultural considerations. This is reminiscent of the wife's engagement of her husband in womanist terms by questioning the trio of gender, race, and patriarchal pornography in Alice Walker's story, "Coming Apart" (1990). Walker's explanation of womanism in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1993) as filling the gap of color excluded from mainstream feminist thought is a repudiation of second wave feminist focus on the issues of privileged white women and marginalization of issues of color and race. Womanism is an analogue of feminism that is relevant to African women and women of color in general. Ogunyemi and Walker intersect in their presentation of a feminism that includes specificities of African and African American women's experience. The specificities of race and culture explored by these scholars are largely rooted in or polluted by European colonization. Woman as a term is pejorative because of its etymological dependence on the root, man, which according to Simone de Beauvoir is standard and normative (2015). Indigenous words that do not connote the dependence evoked by the word, woman, may work better for engaging male domination. In Igbo, the gender inclusiveness of the *omumu* concept with its cultural connotations of equity is more conducive to freedom than the word womanism, with man as the standard and 'wo-' as the dependent prefix that implies female subordination to the normative man.

Molara Ogunjide-Leslie (1994) also takes the woman question beyond gender as she theorizes *stiwanism*, which signifies women's transformation through gender intersection with class and economic structures in Marxist feminist terms that link gender oppression to women's labor and reproduction of labor. Obioma Nnaemeka (2003) uses the African focus on negotiation and compromise to theorize nego-feminism that expunges ego from feminist theorizing. Negofeminism seeks a fruitful border-crossing between stakeholders (Western and non-Western feminists, African men and women) in a feminist pursuit that includes both theory and practice. She emphasizes African women's political action through negotiation and compromise in dealing with the seemingly indomitable authority figures who are mostly men with overblown egos.

These feminist concepts focus on strategies for patriarchal engagement and what women should do to overcome obstacles and thrive in the patriarchal society. To

seek solutions solely through women's action in the face of mounting layers of male privilege and control, widening class and gender gaps, and systemic corruption, has not initiated much change, yet we have continued to burden women with more coping strategies. Akachi Ezeigbo's (2012) concept of snail-sense feminism has been received with mixed feelings because of its seeming approval of sluggish change in women's style of engagement. Her theory highlights the snail's use of delicate lubrication to deal with obstacles, and advocates for women's use of subtlety in engaging insurmountable impediments to women's development in post-colonial Nigeria. She proposes education and negotiation as useful tools for women dealing with patriarchal domination. Ada Azodo's di-feminism (2019: 32) sharply contrasts with snail-sense feminism as it foregrounds the often-suppressed female power castigated as "unfeminine" by the male-dominated society. Female strength exists and contradicts the fictional meek feminine woman depicted in orature, particularly men's proverbs and masquerades. Azodo draws from the image of *agu nwanyi* (lioness), which is common in Igbo women's expressions of *uwa umu-nwanyi* (women's world) (Okafor 2003: 320), especially in praise poetry. She uses the image to expound female capacity that can decenter male expectation of female compliance. Azodo's approach connects with Nkiru Nzegwu's notion of transforming patriarchies to female-affirming societies (2022). Nzegwu uses the power maneuvers of Ikporo-Onitsha (Onitsha, Nigeria), a traditional consortium of adult daughters, to engage *omumu* as a creative, life-regenerative force capable of decentering patriarchy and reinstalling female power.

I subscribe to historical research that looks inwards to unearth home-grown ideas and practices for engaging oppression. My research on *omumu* philosophy speaks to the rights of people to equal dignity as persons in the community regardless of their gender, economic status, or ability. Decades of theorizing and application of feminist strategies have not yielded the expected change because of the feminization of the problem by describing gender trouble as a women's problem. From this basis, feminists map out actions for women to perform. This survivalist approach is faulty because institutionalized male dominance and privilege remain the standard to be navigated and circumvented by women. Women's relegation is a society's problem involving everybody. It should involve every gender and other stakeholders in pursuing gender parity. Women alone cannot solve this problem as demonstrated by the slow pace of change in the reinforced patriarchy of contemporary society. Despite efforts by individuals, groups, and organizations to lessen gender oppression, female relegation is still ingrained as normal practice in the system from family through education to the workplace. Societies need re-education of all stakeholders, not just women, to

address gender and other intersecting inequities such as ability, class, ethnicity, race, and sexuality. This kind of re-education can begin from an appreciation of the historical antecedent, *omumu*, with an Indigenous bio-cultural base, which created gender balance and propelled Africans of diverse ability, gender, and calling, to great heights in the past.

***Omumu* Principle and Female Praxis**

I tried to explain *omumu* through the semiotics of the English language, but Obioma Nnaemeka demanded an exact definition of *omumu*, “What exactly is it?”⁶ There is no English word that is its equivalent, so its meaning can be approached through translations and cultural representations. Afigbo and Nwabara regard it as “the spirit of fertility” (1976: 23), and G. T. Basden explains it as “the goddess who is invoked to secure the gift of children” (1966 [1912]: 109). It is realistic to see it through the notion of fertility because of its evocation of the womb, woman’s body, and earth principles, but the framework has to do with more than fertility because it includes other notions and principles in its theoretical system. Similarly, Ogbalu’s translation of the concept as “the birth of a child” (1974: 16), Okuma’s sense of the term as “children” (2009: 123), and Nnabuihe’s explanation as “gift of childbearing”⁷ aptly refer to the vital birthing characteristic, but like the translations by Basden, Afigbo, and Nwabara, they do not encapsulate the whole concept of *omumu*.

Coined from the verb, *i mu* denoting “to give birth,” the translation of *omumu* by Christiana Okechukwu, as “possessing the gift of childbearing,”⁸ includes female ownership, which intersects with Nnabuihe’s since both endorse *omumu* as a conceptual basis rather than just the event of childbearing. This essay, however, is not so much about childbearing but about the reasoning developed from it as well as its use to theorize meaning envisioned by childbearing potentiality gleaned in feminine appearances and manifest in cultural practices. I use the term “theory” to encapsulate the substantiated explanations of *omumu* influence in attitudes, customs, and sensibilities associated with Igbo people in the past and contemporaneous individuals with an Igbo psyche like the old woman who was irritated by gender unfairness in the story narrated under “Research Context.” Understanding of this theory is a fundamental episteme for contemporary engagement of gender and other oppressions, as an engagement that

⁶ Nnaemeka, Obioma “Comments on Omumu.” Received by Chinyere Okafor, June 20, 2015.

⁷ Nnabuihe, Chigozie B. Interview by Chinyere Okafor. May 5, 2015. Telephone Interview.

⁸ Okechukwu, Christiana. Interview by Chinyere Okafor May 10, 2015. Telephone interview.

embodies the idea of the Adinkra-African term, *sankofa* (Felder 2019), which refers to the notion of looking backwards from the present in order to move forward.

Omumu is a conceptual stream of birthing power through which everyone came to life and can draw power from notwithstanding differences such as sex, gender, ability, color, height, or any other mode of difference. It was abstracted from notions of birthing and continuity that connect with females, males, or any other category. While acknowledging the implication of all human beings in *omumu*, the body, and actions of female beings were culturally eulogized in ceremonies, and connected to the omnipresent Earth Goddess, Ani. This cultural recognition promoted the self-esteem and dignity of females in the society, but did not negate the worth of any other kind of child because each had a place in birthing as well as continuity of the society.

Literature on *omumu* tends to focus on its connection with motherhood. In his book, *Omumu – The Igbo Life-Value*, Peter Okuma sees *omumu* as a concept that hermeneutically interlocks sexuality, marriage, and family, and accounts for Igbo marriage, “not the sacramental marriage as it is today in the Church” (2009: 122), but as procreation and unity of bride and bridegroom families that would prop the newly formed union. Unlike my focus in this essay, he is not concerned with the philosophical basis of *omumu* and its systemic use to empower individuals in their pursuits according to their individual predilections. However, his discussion of Igbo marriage in terms of the expectation of children intersects with my explanation of the basis of *omumu* in fecundity. In my article, “Womanhood in Igbo Cosmology” (Okafor 2012), I used Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* to engage Igbo womanhood, and delineated *omumu* as “the principle of fecundity, begetting, and creativity” which derived from “gynecology and connects with diverse ideas evoked by the presence, being, sexuality, performance and function of a female-person and motherbeing” (Okafor 2012: 13). Womanhood is the subject of the article and *omumu* is explained as the power that energizes women and centers them in the tradition. It is the gem of self-esteem that boosted them for achievement.

In another article, “*Omumu* Concept of Begetting: A Pro-Feminist Lesson from Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*” (2013), I examined the main character of Achebe’s novel, Okonkwo, who is noted for his abuse of women, derision of femininity, and other acts of violent masculinity. Ironically, this character has been represented in contemporary theater and film videos as the ideal Igbo man and role model for youths, but I analyzed him as a tragic hero whose flaw was rooted in his denigration of *omumu*, a concept upheld by his male peers and the

priest and priestess of the Earth Goddess. As in my earlier article, I explained *omumu* as “the principle of fecundity, begetting, and creativity,” and focused my argument on the consequence of dishonoring *omumu* (Okafor 2013). In “Omumu Matriarchal Center,” a chapter of my book, *Ikeji Festival Theater of the Aro and Diaspora*, I defined *omumu* as the “concept of fecundity, creativity and begetting” (Okafor 2015: 23), and used its lens to study the place of women in Igbo masking, which was believed to exclude women. The *omumu* lens enabled me to identify a complex female influence in men’s masking tied to men’s place in *omumu* legacy.

Notions of *omumu* in my earlier texts in terms of begetting and creativity are still tenable but this article is an in-depth epistemological exploration of *omumu*, not in its connection with marriage and family *per se* as Okuma does in his book, but as a theory of female esteem and influence that connects mother, child (all genders, appearance, and abilities), and the conceptual earth mother in the past. In this sense, *omumu* can be conceptualized as a philosophical framework of ideas and principles used for understanding the meaning and nature of power as well as the goal of power in nurturance and continuity, not for individual glorification, but for the communal good. This was the basis of female power in the traditional society as well as the basis of male power because the male had a place in birthing, nurturance, and continuity. This framework is the epistemological basis of *omumu* theory.

Theorizing *omumu* starts from the use of its framework of ideas and principles to engage the reinforced patriarchy of the postcolonial contemporary society. The marginalized woman can begin a journey that will center her as *nwanyi* (independent female) beside *nwoke* (man) in the *omumu* psyche. The centering of woman should not be confused with the Mother Africa trope described by Florence Stratton (1994), which critiqued African men’s writing and the idolization of Africa as a woman to be controlled. The trope resulted from Western patriarchal dualistic pairing of ideas on an unequal basis – man versus woman, culture versus nature, with man and culture being the active subjects while woman and nature are inactive. With *omumu*, neither woman nor nature is docile or inactive for all have capabilities for action and achievement. The equity written into *omumu* is why I theorize it as an appropriate epistemological approach for social transformation in the contemporary society.

As a theory of power, *omumu* is a compendium of notions often denoted by one of its components such as birthing idea, fertility concept, or principle of continuity, all rooted in the mystery of the female body, fecundity, birthing, gestation,

and continuity. As such, *omumu* is not about a woman's ability or inability, choice to have or not have children, but the unity of all human beings in that mystery and the perception of human capabilities regardless of differences. Its inclusive stance would connect with post-colonial concerns for colorism and race as well as transwomen, and other genders outside the prevailing norms.

Omumu is not one idea, but a basin of conceptual information whose use in understanding something else, such as life or power, enables it to function as a rubric and a theory. It rationalizes women's capabilities believed to be from ownership or projection of female personhood. It helps to rationalize the capabilities of all humans nurtured in *omumu* ambience from the womb, through birthing, and rituals of continuity by justifying or providing reason for the ability of any category of persons. *Omumu* has led to ideas, beliefs, principles, and premises which set standards of behavior reflected in people's reverence, honor, and acceptance of the rule of the physical and abstract mother. These are rules of respect and appreciation of the significance of all living things created and nurtured by the mother. *Omumu* then is a conceptual field from which people generated thinking that encoded female-centeredness that did not jeopardize male-centricity, but in fact complemented it. Male-inclusivity is a major divergence from Nkiru Nzegwu's delineation of *omumu* as power that is exclusive to women. She rightly represents *omumu* as a force of creativity (Nzegwu 2022: 53), but my research does not corroborate her definition of that creative force as essentially singular and belonging to mothers only. *Omumu* power is ontologically united with human extensions including sons, daughters, and all that spiritually stem from the conceptual stream tied with the physical mother through birthing, and earth mother through the umbilical cord ritually buried in the body of the earth. This link encoded respect for the dignity of all human beings, regardless of differences.

Women were joyful because of their connection to *omumu* in a society that valued them, and this boosted their self-esteem and confidence. It enabled them to aspire to achieve in religion, economy, and other aspects of life. As earlier mentioned, the colonial administration weakened this high status of women by treating African men and women as inferior, and women as the lowest grade. Gloria Chuku (2009) explains how the colonial administration imposed Western ideas of state, family, and gender on women. Igbo men were used as agents of the political system of indirect rule that left women out of the political structure to not only carry out orders, but to deal with the ego of their menfolk wounded by colonial deprecation. This contributed to the enhanced masculine ego of contemporary post-colonial society, the kind of ego shown in the encounter

between the couple and the old woman that I recounted earlier. In that situation, the husband had a light load while his wife was burdened, which contradicted the equity, dignity, and empathy of *omumu*. Once challenged by the old woman, the husband conceded to *omumu* power. This shows the capability of *omumu* in guiding behavior inimical to unfairness, and this capability is ideologically tied to the earth mother.

Dialectics of the Earth Precept

Western feminists tend to reject the association of women with notions of earth (Smith 2005: 55–78; Rountree 1999: 138), because earth connotes nature seen as passive; a notion rooted in Western enlightenment thinking on biological essentialism, which was used to validate female reductionism, and confinement to the private sphere. In this mode of Western thinking, culture was seen as male and active, contrary to nature. Val Plumwood theorized this bifurcation as the master model (Plumwood 1993) whereby concepts are viewed in pairs with the female being weak, negative, or ineffective as opposed to the male seen as normative and positive. The division of nature versus culture has impoverished the knowledge practices of the West (Lloyd 2007), and much of the modern world influenced by colonial and global systems.

The bifurcation was minimized in the pre-Western, pre-colonial, and pre-modern Igbo contexts of this study with varied political structures that supported both male and female powers. Nature, earth, and fertility did not connote passivity, but were included in the *omumu* ideological stream that allowed male and female performance in all spheres. This context is not akin to the feminist politics of the goddess movement (Eller 1999) popularized in the West but may intersect with it through referencing of female spiritual power, which enabled women to operate in all spheres because there were overlapping areas in the domestic and public domains. For example, men and women operated in the public domain of farming and markets, but women were largely in control of the markets.

In Igbo and many pre-colonial African societies, femaleness was not negative or inferior. In Igbo culture, it was elevated through association with the earth, which was invested with creative and spiritual essences. The culture that developed from that association was the driving force of women's access to leadership and achievement in the spiritual, social, economic, and political life of society. An assessment of the earth principle among the Igbo shows earth as the basis of a powerful spirituality, and an empowering concept that engendered

female agency, and therefore, would contradict the logic of conflating nature with female denigration.

An etymological explanation of the Igbo name for the earth deity is important in appreciating notions of female agency and pre-eminence rooted in the culture of the earth as a deity. The earth deity is called Ani, Ana, or Ala (earth, land, and ground) in different parts of Igboland (Nigeria). People conceptualized her as mother (*nne*), and a deity of fertility, morality, and after-life (Udoye 2010). Earth mother was the omnipresent principle in human life, guiding daily human conduct with rules that had been converted to sacerdotal jurisdiction, and internalized through parental nurturing as well as social and religious controls. In this way, the earth was more than nature that was predetermined because it was conceptualized as the one that controlled the affairs of human beings. It was both nature and culture, and supported masculinity and femininity.

Traditional events and ceremonies often linked the goddess with women as exemplified by the umbilical cord ceremony that affiliated the goddess with mother and child. After birth, the child's family preserved the cord that linked the child with the mother, and ceremonially buried it in the ground, which represented the body of mother earth. The family usually planted an emblem of the goddess, *ogirisi*⁹ tree, on the burial spot. *Ogirisi* (*Newbouldia laevis*) is known as the tree "of life or fertility" (Bafor/ Sanni 2009: 127). People usually placed its leaves beside the new baby and the mother for metaphysical purposes that connoted the oneness of the child, mother, and spiritual mother, as well as the agency of earth in human affairs. Postnatal routine often involved the use of white clay, as the sacred substance of the earth goddess, to sanctify the environment of the mother and child. The use of this substance was a validation of the earth's involvement in the cultural affair of welcoming a new community member. An excerpt from an Igbo birth song recorded by Helen Chukwuma illustrates this practice:

Igbo	Translation
<i>Onye nwa na agu</i>	Whoever desires a child
<i>Bia manye aka na ite omumu</i>	Come and dip hand into the pot of childbirth (1994: 1)

⁹ *Ogirinsi* is a sacred tree protected by taboos such as prohibition against the use of its stem for firewood. It has different names in parts of Nigeria such as *Akoko* (Yoruba), *Aduruku* (Hausa), *Kontor* (Tiv), *Ikhimi* (Bini), *Ogirisi* (Igbo), and *Ogiriki* (Urhobo). For more information, see Bafor/ Sanni 2009.

It is easy to recognize this song's connection to *omumu* through the notion of "childbirth" from which the idea of *omumu* originated and which implicates all through events and ceremonies of birth, but the action of "dipping hand" into the pot requires some clarification. The white clay in the pot was a ritual substance and symbol of the earth deity obtained from the bowel of the earth. Its use in the ritual was for sanctifying the environment of the mother and the child who was being welcomed into society through an *omumu* ceremony. The experience was a blessing to everyone so "dipping hand" was an invitation to touch the clay in the pot and reclaim oneness with Mother Earth. Persons of any gender, ability, class, marital status, or any other status could attend the welcoming and renewal ceremony of *omumu*.

Another song that illustrates the unity and renewal of *omumu* connection of the Earth Goddess is "Abu *Omumu* Nwa", recorded by F. C. Ogbalu (1974: 16):

Igbo	Translation ¹⁰
Nwata nwoke kuru omumu.	Young man, carry <i>omumu</i> in your arms.
Omumu ka mma-o-o.	<i>Omumu</i> is better.
I kuru omumu, imuta omumu.	If you carry <i>omumu</i> in your arms, You will give birth to <i>omumu</i> .
Omumu ka mma-o-o.	<i>Omumu</i> is better.
Unu bisa aka n'ala, Biri ihe oma ...	If you people place your hand on the earth, You get good things ...

The song celebrates *omumu* and its connectedness to all beings. Due to her role in childbearing, birthing, and nurturing, the woman—not as an appendage to man, but the independent human being encoded in the Igbo term *nwanyị* — is at the core of *omumu*. This independent personality coexisted with man (*nwoke*) and they were stronger as a team. This was the reason for directing the male persona to carry the infant of the woman and to touch the earth in a powerful connection; a gesture that the song refers to as *ihe oma* (good thing). Why was it important that a man should carry the infant and touch the earth? It illustrates inclusion of the male principle in an event that celebrates female heroism. It acknowledges the role of men in the synergy of *omumu*. The action confers blessings on all genders because of the spiritual connection of the earth with life-giving forces.

¹⁰ This is my translation of the Igbo song recorded by Ogbalu 1974: 16.

Omumu—connoting woman, mother, and female-related powers—is largely gynocentric, but non-exclusive, since male involvement is acknowledged. The power of *omumu* is not about the development of women only, but the progress of all mothers’ children regardless of gender or any other difference. The mother, whether human or spiritual as Ani, is the fundamental unifying element of a kin group or community descended from a common forebear. She was ever active in the home, market, and farm or anywhere, for the world was her sphere, and she was not confined just as her spiritual mother, Earth, was not.

Earth Mother (*Ani* or *Ala*) was the bastion of morality and an ever-present trajectory in human life. People invoked her to affirm morality such as their trustworthiness illustrated by verbalizing truth, while using bare hands to touch the earth as a sign of honoring the spirit. Another act of sacerdotal importance was removing one’s shoes so that the feet can touch the earth before affirming truth. In traditional Igbo communities, these actions were as convincing as the use of holy books to affirm truth in major world religions. Research shows that Earth Mother was the foremost legal sanctioning power among the Igbo and her laws governed human actions extending from homicide and incest to theft and violation of sacred days or locations (Agbasiere 2000: 54). In Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart* (1998 [1958]), which has an Igbo setting, the author draws on the *omumu* tradition in his portrayal of the priest and priestess of Ani, both of whom disapproved of the main character, Okonkwo, for his disrespect of *omumu*. He broke the laws of Ani through his disregard of the sacred week when people were bound to maintain peace. He hit his wife, killed his foster son, and inadvertently killed his friend’s son. These acts were against the laws of Ani, and they combined to illustrate his denigration of *omumu*, which I argued in an earlier paper was “at the center of his personal tragedy” (2013: 12).

Just as the spiritual prominence of Earth Mother helps to give meaning to the notion of *omumu*, it also facilitates appreciation for the earth’s contours such as hills and streams that reference the continuous effect of the culture based on the earth principle. Reverence for Earth Mother and all her children—humans and earth’s extensions such as streams, animals, and vegetation—was easy for people who lived on the land. This was because they were nurtured to respect the laws of the land in ways that preserved ecological integrity. Many Igbo communities maintained a healthy relationship with their environment typified in their respectful use of hills, forests, and streams. They had specific areas of the stream for bathing, washing clothes, collecting purified water, and preserving life in the fish haven. These actions had sacred importance since they were ascribed to the Earth Mother of which the stream was an extension. Respect for the goddess,

stream and *omumu*, has been internalized as part of the collective memory of the Igbo society that has become extremely patriarchal, but still retains vestiges of *omumu* tradition.

The Place of *Omumu* Shrine

Omumu shrine, with its spherical shape like pregnancy, was the physical symbol of female spirituality and power. The power enabled women to perform roles across the boundaries of gender, age, and politics. In western-Igbo communities with a dual-sex political system, the *obi* (male ruler) oversaw security, while the *omu* (female ruler) had the task of ensuring the health of the community, yet the female performed a military leadership role in some cases because of the *omumu* spirituality. Ekejiuba's study of Omu Okwei, the female ruler of Osomari (western Igbo) in the early nineteenth century, indicates that she was the field marshal whose war canoe must lead others in military expeditions because she was believed to have *utata su onaa* power derived from the goddess (Ekejiuba 1967: 645).

The Igbo perceived mystery in the biological power of the female body, such as the ability to menstruate and "grow babies" (pregnancy). The similarity in the shape of pregnancy and earth as well as the connection with the goddess influenced Igbo society's belief in female spirituality and led it to entrust the health of communities to women. Acceptance of female action due to female spirituality visually perceived through the mystery of the mound (pregnancy, breasts) survived centuries of slave trade and colonialism, and was able to initiate social change in post-colonial Izzi Igbo (Ebonyi State, Nigeria) when women's spirituality empowered their entry into the tabooed culture of masking. In my article, "From the Heart of Masculinity," I explained how Izzi women inaugurated the female mask-performance to protect their sons in the war front during the Nigeria-Biafra war (Okafor 1994: 10-11). This gender breakthrough in a patriarchal society that reserved masking for privileged men only was achieved through *omumu*.

Female spirituality also influenced the centrality of *omumu* in Igbo architecture as illustrated by the position of *omumu* shrine in Igbo compounds. *Omumu* shrine is an oval mound that rises from the earth expressing the mound's spiritual oneness with Earth Mother. Its oval shape simulates the roundness of pregnancy and female breasts, which symbolize nurturing and continuity in traditional Igbo philosophy. In northern Igbo areas, the shrine was typically in front of the compound before the *obi* that served as reception hall of the household head,

usually a man. *Omumu* shrine was in this vanguard position as the spiritual overseer and face of the compound. A visitor would see the *omumu* shrine before entering the *obi* that symbolized patriarchal leadership. The premiere position of *omumu* in traditional architecture is difficult for the post-colonial mind to comprehend, because Christian and Muslim patriarchs project male supremacy in religions that do not allow women the spiritual authority of priesthood contrary to the situation in the Igbo traditional society grounded in *omumu*.

Women's leadership has drastically changed in contemporary post-colonial times, largely due to the decline of belief in *omumu* spiritual power. In contemporary times, most families either destroy the *omumu* shrine or relegate it to a shed near the entrance of the compound. During my field trip to Alor town in Anambra State (Nigeria) in 1996, I was privy to arguments about an *omumu* shrine still dignifying the front of the Okeke-Ezeigbo traditional compound. There were arguments in the community about the shrine being perceived as a denunciation of Christianity. In an interview, the patriarch of the compound explained that it was not just a mound but a sacred monument that was built by his "forefathers in their ancient wisdom" and that he had "no justification to destroy it."¹¹

That ancient wisdom relates to the continuity of the community, which Chioma Opara and Marie Pauline Eboh delineate as African men's primary motivation for acquiring wealth to use in training "children who will perpetuate" the family line (Opara/ Eboh 2006: 245). In pre-colonial times, the training would have centered on *omumu*, but post-colonial experience has shifted the *omumu* base of that ancient wisdom from the Earth Goddess to Christianity, which has become the spiritual bastion of many Igbos. Opposition to *omumu* was part of a wider opposition of Igbo religion and culture that began during the colonial period through a movement which Igbo people termed *Igbu mmuo* (killing of the spirits) (Amankolor/ Okafor 1988). Opposition to African traditional culture and religion has continued to the contemporary times. The Christians who opposed the *omumu* shrine blamed their economic ineptitude on the shrine and later destroyed it.

Ignorance of the significance of *omumu*, and loyalty to Christianity, greatly contributed to the relegation of *omumu* in post-colonial times. Opara (2016) intones *omumu* relegation in her use of the concept of femalism to explicate the

¹¹ When I later asked the house-owner, Felix Okeke-Ezeigbo, why he strongly stood against those advocating for the destruction of the *omumu* shrine, he said that there was a reason why the old tradition survived the numerous turbulences that his community encountered in the past, and that people should go and ask the elders questions about "*Ala*", which we saw was one of the names of the Earth Goddess. He was then a professor at the University of Benin, and later migrated to the United States.

denigration of women. Femalism foregrounds the battered female body and its association with the earth mother as syllogistic parallel of the economic exploitation of African nations, and patriarchal abuse of the female. She argues that Africa must empower women so that the society can have the full complement of its power necessary for contemporary engagement. Opara's missive sounds utopian in the context of the heightened patriarchy of post-colonial Africa, but its referencing of *omumu* ideology shows the capability of femalism for social engineering in contemporary times. That capability lies in adherence to *omumu* principles by contemporary Africans.

Another Igbo pre-colonial structure that communicates the principles of *omumu* is the *mbari* still found in parts of southern Igbo, especially Owerri and Mbise areas. *Mbari* is a sacred gallery periodically constructed as a propitiatory rite for the Earth Goddess, Ala. From its conception through selection of artists and its creation, *mbari* represents principles of equity, creativity, community, fertility, survival, and continuity. Through divination, the community selects members to construct the gallery, and sculptures. According to Nwachukwu (2009), the selection includes "men and women, old and young, at least one from each compound" to create different representatives of the universe. The artists usually create many sculptures that represent all aspects of life such as humans, ancestors/spirits, animals, implements, symbols, and innovations, which they house in a gallery built for exhibition. Prominent in the gallery is the archetypal icon of continuity and quintessence of *omumu* – man, woman, and child. *Mbari* represents a microcosm of the traditional universe, the epitome of communal creative imagination and wonderment (Cole 1992). It is all inclusive in the selection of artists, wards, display of art, and audience participation.

The *mbari* house and *omumu* shrine are different structures, but they represent the same principles of fecundity, continuity, creativity, and nurturing. They are both in honor of the Earth Goddess and are used to venerate her in different ways: *mbari* as a communal propitiatory act representing birth and decay, *omumu* shrine as a permanent reference to continuous spiritual protection. The theory of art as a metaphysical mirror propounded by Ayn Rand in 1975 (Torres/ Kamhi 2000: 25), helps us to appreciate the positionality of these architectural cum artistic pieces. Rand's view of art as the recreation of reality in accordance with metaphysical value judgments is also important in appreciating the earlier cited comment by the priestess, Anezi Okocha, when she explained *omumu* as the pivot of life, "*obunu omumu ka anyi kwo biri n'uwa*" (It is because of *omumu* that we are living on this earth). The physical position of the shrine is a constant reminder of *omumu*'s principal place in the social psyche. Whether the *omumu*

shrine is erected at the entrance of the compound or not in contemporary times, its principle is deep-rooted in the psyche of tradition-minded people who are nurtured to appreciate its meaning through socialization in songs, tales, and the trajectory of the Earth Goddess.

Conclusion

This study of *omumu* theory of power from birthing, unity, creativity, and continuity in the Igbo - African cultural context has shown how the concept functioned as a cultural idea derived from the biological power of woman and connected to everyone in the ambience of the Earth Goddess, which was central in pre-colonial social engagement. It was epistemologically significant as a concept of unity that broke barriers of gender, class, and other debilitating hierarchies. Just as the mother of the lame boy, blind girl, and rich person loves and treats them with equity, *omumu* power is respectful and unprejudiced. In all cultures and societies, even in the animal kingdom, the female tends to distribute privileges equitably among her children without bias of gender, color, or ability. Ideas and principles surrounding the concept of *omumu* form a basin of ideas that interface with and contradict paradigms of domination such as racism, classism, and sexuality. Its epistemological importance as an approach to a *contemporary* theory of power is obvious due its potential for positive change.

Omumu is a cultural schema that encodes gender inclusivity through its multiple intersecting centers of subjectivity and positionality, with different epistemological implications as a theory, philosophy, and rubric for knowledge production and dissemination through cultural practices. *Omumu* theory, therefore, has the potential to inspire positive changes in gendered and/or racialized societies where the orthodox episteme is one of privileged white male production. With its intersectional positioning of gender, power, and accommodation of all constituencies (people of every gender, leaning, and ability), the *omumu* episteme would be the appropriate schema for inclusivity, intersectionality, and respect.

Men and women in many traditional African societies accepted *omumu* or cultural equivalents because all groups had their place in it and accepted the strategic gender role management of the concept. It was reflected in women's cultures as well as men's, in the ambience of *omumu* largesse through association and social engineering, but this study has focused on its female principle because of the heightened female relegation in contemporary African societies. The concept has a long history of decline resulting from gender power dynamics within Africa, the slave trades, colonization of Africa and post-colonial ignorant

mentality that has continued to sabotage the positive in traditional culture, while projecting the negative for ridicule.

Cultural examination of *omumu* shows that in contrast to Western-inspired feminisms that focus on what women should do, *omumu* was positioned within the context of gender equity that these feminisms aspire to. We recall from the section on “Reinforced Patriarchy” that *omumu* operated fully in a pre-patriarchal society before the trans-Saharan, Indian, and Atlantic Oceans’ slave trades that created the violent dynamics on which the patriarchy of the colonial period was built. It is important that this contemporary postcolonial period should look back and draw inspiration from the *omumu* period to create equity. African societies of the pre-patriarchal *omumu* era were more advanced in gender arrangement and management at a time when European countries were highly patriarchal. The Igbo developed *omumu* as a reference for human agency, power, authority, and societal participation. The irony is that European countries that colonized African societies and enforced rules that helped to reduce *omumu* influence, entrench patriarchal dominance, and normalize the relegation of women now vigorously pursue positive gender engagement. Most European powers have reorganized and been able to support women’s empowerment and leadership in ways that are currently alien to Igboland, which has largely lost the *omumu* preeminence just as other Nigerian and African societies have lost its cultural equivalents. This has led to the paradoxical situation where Western institutions, powers and organizations are ‘helping’ Africans towards gender inclusiveness, and parity.

African scholars have acknowledged the power of pre-colonial women represented in oral tradition and have shown concern for the oppression of women in contemporary post-colonial times. Many of them are prominent in national discourses on gender development and have advanced theories for ending women’s oppression. Their theories mostly focus on what women should do and their style of action. It is time to look inwards at the power of pre-colonial women, the power of Sheba and other *kandakes*, the power that drove women to fight the colonialists, the power that propelled Igbo women to break the tabooed boundary of the sacred mask and wear it. It was *omumu* power, that ancient unifying principle that enabled power in all regardless of differences.

Viewing a society through the lens of *omumu* reveals that gender relegation is not a women’s but a society’s problem. In the contemporary post-colonial patriarchal society led by those who have lost their grip on the precepts of *omumu* power – nonrestrictive ability, inclusion, and equity – it becomes a task for all to re-educate people about *omumu* philosophy and appreciate this pre-colonial

ideology that was crucial to gender and society's development. Engaging an Indigenous philosophy such as *omumu* and understanding the need for its unencumbered inclusive power and authority is imperative for unlocking the power of not just women, but Igbo and African minds in general, and for decolonizing and liberating their generative potential.

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