

Feminist Undercurrents in Selected Traditional Igbo Songs: Contemporary Igbo Women's Voice

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Abstract

The paper investigates selected traditional Igbo songs and argues that they provide a good niche for gender construction, negotiation and contestation. These songs, got through participant observation during traditional ceremonies touch the domains of lineage perpetuation/inheritance rights, family life, marriage and leadership roles/allocation of social privileges. More of women's genres, the songs provide a medium for their voice in the prevailing patriarchal social arrangement constructed by men's songs drawn from pop music, folk songs and texts. Insights from various feminisms, womanism and Searle's indirect speech acts were applied to explain the different ways women resist, accommodate, adapt and contest the patriarchal social order and assert their agency in these songs. It was found that whereas men's songs emphasize hegemonic masculinity, striving to hold tenaciously to the reins of social and political control; women's portray various attitudes to the masculinised social order as compliant, ambivalent, didactic and resistant. The first category tend to emphasize the womanist ideals and values that confer agency to the African/Igbo woman, the second adopts indirectness in this self-assertion, the third educates both sexes on the essence of accommodation and acceptance of these ideals while the last shows outright rejection of women self and imposed subordination. These songs thus become veritable genres for women to talk back at patriarchy and call for compromise, equity and complementarity of both sexes. The paper concludes that

these songs speak for what can best be called "compromise feminism" in Igbo gender performance.

Key words: Igbo songs; Compromise feminism; Patriarchy; Women subordination; Gender equity; Contemporary Igbo woman's voice

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INTRODUCTION

Songs are intricately tied to cultural expression. In Igbo culture, they provide powerful means of communication through humour and conviviality. Group songs bring people together and by so doing, create conducive forum for transmission of serious cultural issues. Writing about the importance of songs as a means of social cohesion, Achebe (2012, p.298) comments that

...songs were engaged... for the purposes of indoctrination and as a medium of political education. ... Nations often turn to songs to stir the spirit of patriotism and evoke emotions of nationhood and dreams of prosperity and liberty... Songs improve the public spirit ... exciting the courage of the defenders of state.

Although Achebe was illustrating the efficacy of songs in boosting the morale of the weaponless and famished Biafran soldiers during the Nigerian-Biafran civil war, the assertion also point to the power of songs as effective means of communicating traditional values and social practices including gender performance.

Furthermore, in the traditional Igbo society, it is observed that women indulge in folk songs and dancing more than men. This is as a result of their affinity to group solidarity; women have more groups than men such as *umuokpu/umuada* (daughters of the lineage), *inyomdi/inynomona* (wives/mothers of the lineage). Whereas the

former provides affiliations of sisterhood, the latter affords wives and mothers group solidarity. This common front accords profound power to women in traditional Igbo society to address societal ills with almost immediate solutions. It is usually uncommon during funerals, festivals and traditional marriages to find the only one men group (*umunna*) engaging in singing and dancing. Fronting a facade of entertainment and humour, women groups usually utilize this medium to critique societal ills especially in negotiating their place in the gendered social order and proffer solutions for redress. It could rightly be said that gender power relations are skewed more in women's favour when the song genre is the medium of its construction, negotiation and contestation. The indirectness of allusion to the objects of the songs reduces the impact of the meanings conveyed which otherwise could not have been effectively communicated in plain language.

This study is motivated by observed gender constructions in the selected songs, the power structures addressed by the songs and how they contribute to strengthening or deconstructing the existing gender relations. Four research questions are thus posed in the work: How is gender constructed in the selected songs, that is, what strategies have been adopted to negotiate the gendered social order? What are the attitudes of women and men in these constructions as reflected in the selected songs? How do these attitudes speak to the type of feminism proposed by the women voices in the songs? How does this level of awareness depart from or align with existing feminist models?

Igbo refers to the language as well as the people of the South East Nigeria with population estimate of 32 million (18% of Nigeria's 177 million (CIA World Factbook, Wikipedia). Core Igbo areas are Anambra, Imo, Enugu, Ebonyi and Abia, with peripheral speakers in Delta, Rivers, Bayelsa and Akwa Ibom States. The language is genderless, strictly speaking, with no morphologically-marked gender in the language as in English *hero-heroine*, no gender-marked pronouns as in *he/she/it*. Only one pronoun *O* serves for these. The only gender distinction can be found in nominal pairs like *oke* (male) and *nwunye* (female), *nwoke* (man) and *nwanyni* (woman), *di* (husband) and *nwunye* (wife), *okoro* (young man) and *agbogho* (maiden), *ada* (first daughter) and *okpala* (first son). However, *oke nwanyni* (male woman) can be used for a woman in situations where she performs unique feats or accomplishes tasks that are extraordinary. Similarly, a man earns the tag *okoro ada* (feminine man) when he behaves like a woman.

It thus becomes clear that while there is not much distinction between the linguistic representation of male and female in the Igbo language, gender distinctions are still very much evident in certain discourses like the song genre as well as in other folk expressions and social

practices, for instance, the study of gender stereotypes in Igbo proverbs (Ezeifeke, forthcoming). The Igbo culture is heteronormatively gendered, generally patriarchal, and classless (*Igbo enwe eze*). Leadership is vested on heads of individual families, mostly men, thus reinforcing the patriarchal culture, with women playing supportive roles. Patrilineage inheritance culture is the norm. Women groups solidarity *umuada* (sisters/daughters) and *inyomdi/inyomona* (wives/mothers) accord them power and voice in the songs more than *umunna* (men's kindred). It is against this historical and sociocultural background that the song genre is placed to determine the gender ideologies and feminist undercurrents encoded and how these are negotiated and contested. In the next section, we look at the different perspectives of feminism and other theoretical perspectives that have impact on the present study.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND EMPIRICAL STUDIES

Feminism is a western initiative which came into prominence in the 1960s as a movement to question the hitherto prevailing male dominance and female subordination (Lorber, 1998). As a reaction against gender inequality and inequity, it challenges the various ideologies of women subordination such as patriarchy, androcentrism, sexism and phallocentrism (Cameron, 1998; Mills & Mullany, 2011). Perspectives of western feminism has been fully elucidated by Lorber (1998, p.8) who argues that it is better to talk of "feminisms" because of the various facets of feminist theories on gender inequality. She identified a number of feminisms which have contested women subordination since the inception of feminist awareness. These include gender reform feminism (liberal, Marxist/socialist and development), which calls for a change in the division of labour between women and men, the goal being equal participation of the sexes in all spheres, public or domestic; gender resistance feminism (radical, lesbian, psychoanalytic and standpoint) with focus on violence and sexual oppression of women in addition to making women experiences central to knowledge and culture through sisterhood; and finally gender rebellion feminism (multiracial, men's, social construction, postmodern and queer theory) which challenges the structure of the dual, oppositional and fixed gendered social order by questioning the basis for heteronormative gender divisions (Lorber, 1998, p.174). The last queries the assumption of a social order built on two sexes, two sexualities and two genders. (For a detailed discussion of these facets of feminisms, see Lorber, 1998).

Feminist perspectives in Africa seem to be found mostly in literary works and critiques where African writers especially females have come up with multiple ideas and epistemological positions about gender relations

particularly as it affects the African woman in both the pre-colonial and postcolonial era. These different positions have led some African writers like Buchi Emecheta and Mariama Ba to dissociate from being identified as feminists (Ogunyemi, 1996; Nadaswaran online). Perspectives of feminism in Africa have gone by different terminologies such as Ogunyemi's womanism, Ogundipe-Leslie's stiwanism (from STIWA – Social Transformation Including Women in Africa), Hudson-Weems African feminism, Acholonu's motherism, Nnaemeka's nego-feminism ("no-ego feminism"), Opara's femalism, black feminism and Adimorah-Ezeigbo's snail-sense feminism (Oguejiofor, 2015). These in their different ways depart from what has been called "white feminism" because of how the latter has failed to accommodate the experiences of African women and men. Because womanism seems to encompass the tenets of these other forms and aligns with the objectives of this study, it is pertinent to discuss it further.

Womanist theory, first developed by Alice Walker (1979) and imported into Africa by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1996), sees the incompatibility of western feminism to that of Africa as both experience differences in what gives them agency. Womanism is a social theory focussing on the classist, racial and gender oppression of not only black women but also all other women and men that have, as it were, been "othered" by white feminism (Wikipedia). These "others" who find themselves alienated by the tenets of feminism affirm their identity and agency in womanism which is more African in orientation. In the words of Clenora Hudson Weems and Alicia Boisnier, (Wikipedia), Black women struggle to identify with traditional feminism because they do not identify with the issues that are typically advocated by (western) feminism. Atanga (2013, pp.301-314) would subscribe to what she calls "Feminism(s) in Africa" rather than "African feminism" to avoid, according to her "essentialising Africa and suggesting all women living there have the same problems" (p.301).

Oguejiofor (2015, p.32) in his lead paper at the Colloquium of the Ezenwa Ohaeto Resource Centre has called the different perspectives "a confusing cacophony" perhaps because of the seemingly discordant voices addressing the same phenomenon, but as the Igbo adage says, "different nation's hawks cry in different voices" (*Okwa mba na-achi n'onu n'onu*). Supporting the caution against unnecessary fragmentation of a noble agenda, Atanga (2013, p.301) has averred that "feminism is feminism, full stop; no buts, no ifs, no however's", thus recognising the tremendous contribution of (western) feminism as the springboard and pivot of current awareness of gender discrimination and oppression. Mills and Mullany (2011) have also expressed the fear of fragmented paradigms and emphasise critical self-reflexivity in pursuing feminist research in line with the unique characteristics of particular locations and cultures

in which such researches are situated. These views have given credence to the different perspectives and voices of feminism in different cultures and the need to address the different concerns in their appropriate contexts.

In the light of the foregoing discussion, it is evident that the different feminisms have some bearing on the present work. The eclectic stance taken here is in recognition of the fact that no single paradigm has all the answers. Thus, I have adopted insights from mainstream feminism, womanism and Searle's indirect speech acts to illustrate that gender discrimination, oppression; repression and violence instituted by patriarchy inform the overall subject matter of the selected songs. How the voices in the songs have reacted to the status quo reflects the African/Igbo concepts of the family, childbearing and nurturance, enduring marital relations, equity, compromise, complementarity and dialogue in gender relations, issues foregrounded by womanism, particularly the perspectives of Ogunyemi's "African Wo/man Palava" and Adimorah-Ezeigbo's "snail sense feminism".

Searle's (1969) indirect speech acts comes as a handy tool to explain how single locutions in the songs can perform multiple actions: to question, request, assert agency, appreciate, promise, resist and generally react to the positive and negative gender construction in the culture. These subtle, undercurrents of feminist awareness, it is argued here, may constitute better agents of change of the normative sometimes oppressive patriarchal order than would a coercive and confrontational approach. Indirect speech acts make use of implicit performatives to enact illocutionary acts of advising, admonishing, directing, rebuking, questioning, promising and others. As are evident in the songs, these actions seem to achieve the expected perlocutionary effect as people seem to internalize the inherent humour, use the message as the basis for action and hence help to sustain feminist contestations of cultural institutions that propagate gender asymmetries.

Ifi Amadiume's (1987, p.69) exhaustive exploration of the sex-gender system in traditional Nnobi society, an Igbo town in the South East Nigeria, employs the womanist model in her work, *Male daughters, female husbands*. She recognises the enduring nature of songs and their roles in the life-cycle ceremonies even in the present so-called post-modern Igbo society. The cultural continuity of these songs and their emphasis on the complementary gender roles, expectations and sexual division of labour show that gender inequality is somehow alien in the Igbo traditional milieu. Amadiume implicates colonialism for the enthronement of patriarchy that complicates the precolonial symbiotic existence where there existed "male daughters and female husbands".

A different scenario is reported in the works of Ellece (2013) and Nhlekisana (2013). Nhlekisana's work centred on how men and women are positioned in selected popular music in Botswana where women's bodies are

depicted as controlled by men and a wife's infidelity is not the woman's indiscretion but man's shame and disgrace. On the other hand, the songs in Ellece's (2013) collection construct masculinities that detract from the stereotypical male chauvinism to become alter egos of hegemonic masculinity, thus making a case that some masculinities are inferiorised just like women. These studies show gender construction at the crossroads of culture, race and communities of practice.

On the basis of the above views, this paper is a contribution to feminist awareness from the Igbo cultural perspective. Many researchers have come up with conclusions that complementarity in gender relations is the answer to women and men relations in Nigeria/Igbo context although how far that obtains in social practice remains to be debated. Ukagba, Nwankwo and Des-Obi (2010) have argued that the structural and physiological differences in men and women, rather than being the basis for assigning superior-inferior identity, should be seen as the complementarity of roles and functions for sustainable coexistence. The precarious, incompatible and damaging effects on both the family and society of the superiority/inferiority stereotypes in men and women respectively are captured in their position that,

... living one's life around a close relationship with someone of inferior 'ability and cultivation' is detrimental to the superior party. Yet many men found themselves in just this situation, married to women whose limitations are no less real just because they are an enforced artificial product of a thoroughly pernicious system. Those men may think they are winning but the truth is that everyone is a loser. (p.17, emphasis in the original)

In the same vein, Des-Obi (2010) regards as artificial all ideologies that stultify the African/Igbo woman's position as role model for the family, community and the nation at large. The author argues for "natural existential feminism" (p.173), where men and women relate "as complements in one necessary and symmetric whole" (p.182).

The different perspectives of feminist research especially in the African and Igbo contexts may be quite expedient particularly on some issues regarding cultural and religious values. For instance, sexualities that depart from the mainstream of male-female, man-woman binaries especially homosexuality and lesbianism advocated by gender resistance and rebellion feminisms mentioned above have not been acceptable in many sectors of Africa and especially Igbo environment. This is evident in the legislation against same-sex marriages in legal and canonical pronouncements of the state and religion. Such sexuality practices have been viewed by some scholars like Ukagba (2010) as the extreme backlash of feminism and its accompanied unmitigated liberation. This, rather than liberating Nigerian and Igbo women, is gradually eroding their dignity, debasing them to the extent of mutilating their bodies in the name of fashion so as to become copies of their white counterparts (cites

Stella Obasanjo's plastic surgery), exchanging their bodies sexually for money and other gratifications, engaging in pornography and other such pervasions that are anti-motherhood, anti-family and anti-children which, far from helping the cause of feminism, have promoted male chauvinism.

Ogunyemi (1996) in her incisive critique of feminist "palava" that marginalises African and Nigerian women experiences, proposed womanism to account for these women engagements with historical, social, racial, classist, political and cultural issues affecting them including gender. Women songs seem to encode the Igbo definition of feminism which is womanist in nature and echoes Ogunyemi's (1996) image of "African woman's palava" (resistance) dipped in the "palava sauce" (literary writings) in the form of "palaver" (dialogue). These songs, just like literary writings, seem to provide a similar medium for dialogue, enabling women to call on their men to acknowledge the essence of complementarity and compromise. The feminist undercurrents in these songs convey unique but familiar messages about the Igbo culture and its concept of feminism. Oraegbunam (2015, pp.63-79) posits that what should preoccupy feminists of Igbo extraction is "gender equity rather than gender equality", how to handle gender differences for more equitable and harmonious gender relations. There is the question of whether men and women should be treated equally because they are essentially the same; or equitably because they are essentially different.

Some scholars like Judith Butler (1990) have equated gender relations to performance, using the "wardrobe" analogy, where different clothes are worn to suit different occasions. Gender is thus said to be "performed" as different contexts allow, as an action that is fluid, not a fixed entity ascribed to an individual for all times. Gender performativity has been linked with performativity in speech acts theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Both see action as the hallmark of social relations and utterances; the former disputes all arguments about the fixity of gender roles, the "essentialist" view. Gender, in the performativity view is seen not as a being but an action, what we do or perform, a "dependent existence which ceases to exist once the one who performs it ceases to perform it" (Umeogu, 2011, p.3). Searle's indirect speech acts show how a single locution can be indirectly deployed in performing multiple actions (advising, accepting, rejecting, admonishing, etc.). The songs under study use this indirect means to achieve consensus in gender negotiation. Tannen (in Cameron, 1998) has attested to the profound power inherent in indirectness and its attendant rapport in achieving solidarity and interactional goals.

Indirectness is also echoed in Akachi Adimorah-Ezeigbo's "snail-sense feminism, a form of womanism" (Isiguzo, 2015). Akachi Adimorah-Ezeigbo, after studying the incompatibility of western feminism with the Nigerian

situation advocated for an eco-feminist approach to dealing with gender differences analogous to the snail's cautious movements over rough and thorny surfaces as encoded in an Igbo proverb *Ire oma ka ejuna ji aga n'ogwu* translated to "Good tongue is the snail's strategy for crawling through thorns". Akachi's idea is that women could use their soft natures, intuition and other expedient (at times bordering on the extreme; see for instance, her play *Hands that Crush Stone* (2010), see also Ifeoma Okoye's collection of stories in *The Trial and Other Stories* (2005)) survival strategies to subvert patriarchy without necessarily engaging in overt resistance strategies. On the strength of such an idea, traditional and even educated and enlightened Igbo women have resorted to songs which have provided them with subtle and non-provocative means to subvert and contest the gendered system. Songs, just as literary writing, thus create a valuable media for gender contestation and negotiation.

2. METHODOLOGY

Songs were collected through participant observation and interviews with local soloists, dancers and folklorists who claim knowledge of the songs. A total of twenty five songs were studied, categorized on the basis of how they construe gender relations. Three levels of analysis were used: the linguistic, semantic and pragmatic analysis. The linguistic level translates the songs, concentrating on the lexical and grammatical choices; the semantic

level considers the meaning relations conveyed by the songs while the pragmatic dimension looks at how these meanings cohere with the values and belief systems and their implications in the larger macrostructure, how they relate to gender construction, the perspectives the songs represent and how they contest, accommodate or resist the prevailing gender relations.

3. DATA ANALYSIS

I have presented the songs associated with men first to illustrate the patriarchal ideologies that women's songs speak to. The data is organized on the basis of how the songs are didactic, accommodative, ambivalent or resistant to the prevailing patriarchal arrangement of the Igbo culture. The last song is a song accompaniment of a folktale about a king looking for an heir to his throne who must be a boy. It is placed last because it is song by both men and women alike.

3.1 Men's Songs Constructing Hegemonic Masculinity and Patriarchy

Unlike women's songs that talk back at patriarchy, men's aim to maintain and legitimize women subordination. In such songs, women are construed as subordinate to the men and their behaviours are most often subjected to societal control and scrutiny. The song in (1) is a satire by a night masquerade cajoling church goers for allowing a woman convert to eat a kidney, a delicacy which is solely reserved for males and a taboo for women.

(1)	
<i>Nwanyi ataa akuru anu</i>	Woman has eaten kidney
<i>Ndi uka na-achichigha anya</i>	Church goers look on foolishly
<i>O o ka o bu uuu</i>	That's how it is
<i>Huum uu huuu</i>	Huum uu huuu
<i>Kamgbe nwanyi jiri taba akuru anu</i>	Ever since women started eating kidney
<i>Ka ala jiri gha - o o o (2ice)</i>	The land has been desecrated - o o o (2ice)
<i>Huum uu huuu</i>	Huum uu huuu

The following song claims that a man is never ugly as long as he has his "thing" (wealth). Economic status is thus another instrument for enforcing patriarchy

(2)	
<i>Nwoke o na-adi njo?</i>	Is a man ever ugly?
<i>Ref: Nwoke o na-adi njo ebe m ji ife m?</i>	How can a man be ugly when I have my thing? (money)
<i>Nwoke o na-adi njo</i>	How can he?
<i>Ebe m ji ija m.</i>	When I have my money
<i>Ebe m na-ewete oku</i>	When I bring enough current
<i>A na-emere nwanyi,</i>	When you try to appease a woman
<i>O na-emere onye di ya mma.</i>	She will be giving her favours to another

This wealth is aimed at enticing women to either marry them or become their mistresses. A man can never be ugly to a woman when he has his wealth to throw on her.

The famous Oriental Brothers' band had a song where a wife is counted among the man's property. The song was entitled "*Odighi onye ihe oma so nso*" (who doesn't like a

good thing; in pidgin "who no like better thing"). The song recounts the things a person (a man definitely) cherishes most as Toyota car, Mercedes Benz, Honda 175 and "better Mrs", meaning "a good wife" among other personal possessions. It is also evident that the priority scale of these possessions places the wife below the others.

(3)

O dighi onye oma so nso
Aziza: O di onye o so nso ee
Toyota Motor
Mercedes Benz
Honda 175
Na my Dad bu eze
Beta Misisi
A si na nwanne m abaala
O di onye o so nso ee

There's no one who doesn't like good things
 Refrain: Who doesn't like good things
 Toyota car
 Mercedes Benz
 Honda 175
 My Dad is a king
 A good wife (Mrs)
 My brother is now rich
 Is there anyone who doesn't like these.

In the same group's (Oriental Brothers) collection is a song that ends with the following lines which strategically repudiates women leadership.

(4)

Ala nga nwanyi chiri eze
Ala nke ahụ alaluola

A land where a woman is king
 That land is doomed

This song negates all reason and known facts regarding women performance in leadership positions.
 The poem "Ajo nwanyi" (evil woman) in Nolie

Emenanjo's (ND: 18) collection of Igbo poems has as its first, second and some parts of the third stanzas the following wordings.

(5)

Ajo nwanyi puo n'ulo
O dika uguru juuru
Ajo nwanyi bata n'ulo
Ulo enwuru oku
Onu ya na-agba ka ukpaka
Ire ya bu oku
Ajo nwanyi na-aga ije
O di ka Shakara
O manye akwa n'ukwu
O di ka o puru ara
Any a ya na-enwu vam vam
O ga-eme gini?
Ukwu ya na-aga wam wam
O ga-azogbu onye?

An evil woman's absence from the house
 Is like the cessation of the harmattan wind
 When an evil woman enters the house
 The house catches fire
 Her mouth cracks like dry oil bean pods
 Her tongue is fire
 When an evil woman walks
 Her gait is like Shakara (wayward person)
 When she ties wrapper on her waist
 She looks like she's gone mad
 Her eyes glitters vam vam
 What can she do?
 Her legs move briskly wam wam
 Who will she trample upon?

This is in sharp contrast with the portrayal of men in the same anthology titled "Mbem Umuokorobia" (p.17)

(6)

Ogidi
Nkume ike Iduu na Oba
Onye ju ibua, e nye ya ato...
Ukpaka na ike
Gidingidi
Nwa para o nyijie ya aka...

Pillar of strength
 Strong rock of the ancestors
 If one refuses two, he will be given three
 The strength of the oilbean tree
 Enormous strength
 That breaks the hands of a child that carries it...

It is assumed that when a man acquires a wife, he automatically ceases to bother about domestic issues like cooking and housework. The following song is a complaint by a man whose newly married bride failed to recognize this division of labour and expects him to

assist her in these menial tasks in the domestic sphere. The idea of the bride asking her groom to stoke the fire is a deconstruction of the sexual division of labour and a woman who contemplates that is said to have crossed her line.

(7)	
<i>Anutara m nwanji ka m zuru ike</i>	I married a wife to get some rest
<i>O sikwasi ite</i>	When she puts a pot on the hearth
<i>O si m funye oku</i>	She asks me to stoke the embers
<i>O rubego</i>	Time has come
<i>Mgbe anyi ji awa anya</i>	For us to shine our eyes
<i>O rubego</i>	Time has come
<i>Mgbe anyi ji ewe iwe</i>	For us to get angry
<i>O rubego</i>	Time has come

Songs usually linguistically construct men as workers and women as eaters. The song in (8) is usually sung by men to reinforce this construction.

(8)	
<i>Oru rie nne</i>	When there is plenty of work
<i>Choba umu nwoke</i>	Look for men
<i>Ka fa rusia ya n'ofu awa</i>	So they can finish it in one hour
<i>Nri rie nne</i>	When there is plenty of food
<i>Choba umu nwaanyi</i>	Look for women
<i>Ka fa risie ya n'ofu awa</i>	So they can finish it in one hour

Women songs: “Talking back”, negotiating and reconstructing their identities Acceptance songs

(9)	
<i>O bughi ma nwa</i>	If not for a child
<i>Aziza: Onye ga enye m</i>	Refrain: Who will give me (good things)
<i>Ogodo ukwu</i>	Waist wrappers
<i>Intorica</i>	Intorica (George material)
<i>Okporoko</i>	Stockfish
<i>Aburod</i>	Going abroad
<i>Onye ga-akpo m agbagote</i>	Who would have taken me up there

The above songs usually feature during child-naming/outing ceremonies and show that Igbo women find agency in child bearing as it gives them a lot of advantages and agency from both the husband and other members of the immediate family who shower her with gifts during after childbirth. The following song (10) buttresses the concept of marriage as a commercial transaction which has yielded a “profit” of a child (girl) that brings in wealth for the family.

(10)	
<i>Ahia abara anyi uru</i>	The trade has yielded profit for us
<i>Ahia nwa o o</i>	Trade for a child
<i>Ahia nwa na o bara anyi uru</i>	The trade for a child has yielded profit for us
<i>Ahia e jiri abali zu o o o</i>	The trade that was transacted in the night

The last part referring to “night” serves to explain that children/babies are usually made in the night when most marriages are consummated. The songs in (11) and (12) below show how a child is a woman’s assurance of a stable marriage. Without a child, a woman’s sojourn to her husband’s house is shaky as she has not been “given a strong seat”

(11)	
<i>Omumu amaka omumu amaka</i>	– Procreation is good, procreation is good
<i>Omumu ebunyela anyi oche</i>	– Procreation has given us a seat
<i>Nnodu m ukwu esie m ike</i>	– I sit and my waist is stable
<i>Omumu o dighi ihe ka nwa o</i>	– Procreation, nothing is comparable to a child

The song in (12) is sung during traditional marriage when the *Umuada* (daughters of the kindred) come together to give their sister away in marriage. The importance of procreation as a woman's role in marriage

(12)

Ka anyi je ga lelee ada anyi mara mma (2ice)
Ada Umueze mara mma ee.
Ada anyi mara mma
Ala o biara ije di
kunyekwa ya nwa
Ala o biara ije di
Bunyekwa ya oche
Ada anyi mara mma ó ó ó ó ó ó

After this prayer for the land to "give their daughter a seat" in her husband's house (that is, children), the *umuada* will call on the husband to go ahead and "harvest

(13)

Ogo m nwoke manye aka n'ite omumu
Ka I ghoru nwa ooo -

- My inlaw, dip your hands into the birthpot
and harvest babies.

This reinforces the sower metaphor in Igbo proverb in a previous study, where the man sows in a fertile land (the womb) to harvest babies, while the man who involves with illicit love relationship with another woman is said to be "sowing wild oats" (Ezeifeke, forthcoming).

3.2 Ambivalent Songs

Women's attitudes are ambivalent when they are neither

(14)

Umu okeibiri onye asana di ya okwu
Aziza: Ka a biakwonu taa Huuhu m 2ice
O di m esekpuola muo 2ice

Wives, don't talk back to your husbands
Refrain: Just exercise patience Huuhu m
Our husbands, our knees are on the ground 2ice

The above is usually sung in mixed sex gatherings like funeral or marriage ceremonies when the husbands take decisions that the wives do not like and so they start restraining themselves not to take rash actions but to use their natural power over men to get what they want. It is a kind of instruction not to answer back when the husband talks but to wait for an appropriate time for dialogue. This is in line with the snail sense feminism propounded by Adimora-Ezeigbo.

is so profound that the daughters of the kindred has a song in the form of a prayer that the land into which their sister is married will bless her with children (give her a seat) to stabilize her sojourn.

Let us go and see our beautiful sister (2ice)
The daughter of Umueze is beautiful e e e
Our sister is beautiful
Let the land into which she's married
Hand her a child
Let the land into which she's married
Give her a seat
Our daughter is beautiful o oo ooo

babies" from "the fertile birth pot" their daughter has symbolically brought to her home of sojourn as exemplified in (14).

overtly resistant nor conforming to the prevailing gender construction. Such attitudes are evident in songs that indirectly allude to men's insensitivity to women's rights. In this case, rather than being overtly confrontational, they appeal to their characteristic natural endowment of soft natures in smoothing out conflicts. The song in (14) illustrates such encounters.

(15)

Inyom ona (2ice)
Refrain: Inyom nyoghonyo
Anyi eje enyonyo
Anyi enyonyoputa
A muta nwa
Jee kputa aturu
O nyunyobe ka nne ya
Inyom nyoghoayo nyoghonyo nyoghonyo
Inyom nyoghonyo!!!

Wives of the kindred (2ice)
Refrain: Extremely foolish wives
We have begun our art of foolishness
We have come out with our foolishness
(We) beget a child
Go and bring in the sheep
He starts behaving foolishly like the mother
Foolish, foolish, foolish wives
Extremely foolish wives

The song in (15) is aimed at mimicking the male perception of the women as foolish. It is usually sung when the women had done something worthy of commendation and they want their husbands to acknowledge publicly their good deeds. They present themselves ironically in their stereotypic identity that includes men, for if mothers are foolish, then their offspring (men inclusive!) are also foolish.

3.3 Didactic Songs

Some songs are meant to teach both sexes their roles and expectations towards achieving social harmony in the gendered division of labour. For instance, the seeming prerogative to hate by men in Igbo culture is

also evident in songs but the following song advises women not to hate their husbands even when the husbands hate them, because childbearing will always give the woman succour and she will find solace in her children.

(16)

Umu nwanyi o onye akpola di ya asi (2ice)
Onye di kporo asi o
Omumu agaghi akpo ya asi
Onye di kporo asi n' uwa
Ya ewere omumu diwe

Women, don't hate your husbands 2ice
 One who is hated by the husband
 will not be hated by her offspring
 One who is hated by the husband
 will be consoled by her offspring

The songs in (17) enjoin wives to study their husbands' disposition well and be obedient to them so as to avoid tales of woe. Notice that in the song, the wife

is specifically mentioned and advised as the responsible agent for keeping family peace. The husband is only referred to using indefinite pronoun (whosoever).

(17)

Ezi nwanyi mara di ya o
Ezi nwanyi mara di ya
Ogori luo di o maghi obi di ya
Ya na di ya toro n' akuko
O lutara nwanyi mara mebe ya
Na mma nwanyi bu njicha
Won, turu, tiri, foro

A good wife should know her husband's heart. 2ice
 A wife who does not know her husband's heart
 she and her husband are always telling tales.
 Whosoever marries a wife should treat her well
 for a woman's beauty is caring
 One, two, three, four

The women will also advise their in-law to condone his wife's misdemeanour when she is nursing a baby.

(18)

Onye nwunye ya muru nwa
Ref: Hapukwa ya na o muru nwa
Nke o mebere o metaghi ya
O jebe ahia o nataghi gboo
O sibe nri o sichaghi gboo
I kpoo ya o zaghi gi gboo
I nakwaa ya o nyenoghi gi o

One whose wife gave birth
 Leave her alone, she has given birth
 Whatever she didn't do well
 If she goes to the market and returns late
 If she cooks late
 If you call and she delays in answer
 If you ask (for sex) and she denies you

This song advises a man to exercise some restraint in handling a woman who has just given birth as she is saddled with much responsibility.

injustice. These undercurrents of feminist resistance show that some gender constructions cause social dissatisfaction that are seeking for redress. For instance, patriarchal attitudes of wife battering are resisted in songs. The two songs below are meant for husbands who take their owner-property stereotype to extreme and batter their wives at will. The song in (19) questions the dastardly act of wife battering by likening it to the act of grating garri, while (20) mocks the man for beating up the wife after feeding her.

3.4 Resistance Songs

As our data reveals, the Igbo women's covert and feeble resistance finds expression only in songs rendered in satiric tones either to bemoan their socially ascribed fate or to register displeasure on men's inconsiderate nature and

(19)

Nwoke in a-anu nwanyi anu?
Ka in a-akwo ya ka gari
Ka o kpoo?

Man, are you marrying your wife?
 Or are you grating her like garri
 So that she will dry?

(20)

I tite i taa
I tite i nye nwunye gi o taa
O kwasu, i tie nwunye gi o bee

Crack (the kernel) and eat (2ice)
 Crack and give to your wife to eat
 If she misbehaves, you beat her up to cry

The song in (21) is usually sung by women to catalogue the numerous roles they have to contend with in their caregiving work while the unappreciative men do practically nothing except erecting the four walls of house.

(21)

Nwanyi na-eme enu- o –

What does a woman do

Refrain: Ihe anyi na-eme ehika

Refrain: What we do are numerous

Nwanyi na-akpu nwa o

Woman form a baby

Onwa itenaani o

For nine months

Nwanyi na-amu nwa – o

Woman delivers the baby

Aguu na-agu nwa o

The child is hungry

Nwanyi site nri o

Woman cooks food

Nwoke chowa nri – o

Husband demands food

Nwanyi bute nri

Woman bring food

Ahu adighi nwa – o

The child is ill

Nwa na-ebe akwa-o

The child is crying

Ozi nta na imo

All domestic chores

Nwoke na-eme enu-o

What does a man do

Ogo aja naano

Only the four compound walls

Ka nwoke na-egbu-o

Does a man erect

Gbaba abubu nri –o

And begins to reject food

Ihe anyi na-eme ehika

The things we do are numerous

The above song is a subtle resistance of women's in contesting the numerous duties and chores in the home which go unappreciated by the men folk. Women are by this song deconstructing the superiority of men because in actual fact it is the women who keep the world moving by their activities in spite of being assigned inferior position in the patriarchal arrangement. The implication of the above song is that men do not contribute much to the making of the family except erect the four walls and then begin to reject food. For husbands to reject their wives' food is not only ominous in terms of the wife losing her husband's favour and risking being thrown out of the matrimonial home, but

also an indictment on her as a bad cook. A good wife strives to cook delicious meals to win the husband's love and respect because "the way to a man's heart is through his stomach". She is expected to do all that to keep the husband's love because she is better off married than not.

The following song is sung by women to cajole and admonish their fellow women who are so lazy to succumb to the consumer stereotype into which the culture has constructed them. The womanist stance in the song resists such stereotypically prescribed passivity and enjoins women to play active role in the provision of family sustenance.

(22)

Nwanyi di ya huru n'anya

A woman loved by her husband

Refrain: Onye ujo oru

Ref: Lazy bone

E bute akpa raisi o

Bring a bag of rice

O richaa

She consumes all

E bute akpa binsi o

Bring a bag of beans

O richaa

She consumes all

Nwanyi bia nje oru

Woman, come let's go to work

Anaghi m eje - o o

I won't go

Na di m huru m n'anya

My husband loves me

Onye ujo oru

Lazy Bone

The next song warns such women that when hunger comes because of their laziness, they should not blame anybody but themselves. Women are warned in this song not to wait for the husband to provide food but

should strike out on themselves and take their destiny into their hands. They should no longer be content with the identity of "eater/consumer" but should also be "provider"

(23)

Onye echeda mgbe di ya ga-enye ya 2ice
Onye chebe mgbe di ya ga-enye ya nri
Iba abia ya
Opogho abia ya
A si na o bu ihe chi ya na-eme ya
O bia bu ihe aguu na-eme ya.
Huu m huu.

Let no one wait for the husband to give her (2ice)
 If one waits for the husband to give her (food)
 Malaria will come
 Anaemia will come
 People will start blaming her personal god
 Not knowing that hunger is to be blamed
 Huu m huu.

The song in (24) is also a composition by women who have abandoned their prescribed domestic, caregiving roles for westernized sophistication.

(24)

(i) *Agbala idiganga*
 Refrain:- *O O O*
Kwebelu m agbala idiganga
Kwenu ogba ntu aga ije
Ogba ntu aga ije
Ozi dikwa n'ulo
O na eje eje

(i) Thick Madam
 Refrain: O O O
 Sing for me "Thick Madam"
 Sing "wearer of nails" (high headed shoes)
 wearer of nails
 While domestic chores litter the house.
 She doesn't attend to them.

(ii) *Agbala idiganga*
Kwenu omegburu nwa na-eku
Omegburu nwa na-eku
Umu ya nokwa n'ulo
A na-eje ozi

(ii) "Thick Madam"
 Sing "the scourge of house maids"
 The scourge of house maids
 Her own children are in the house
 They don't run errands.

(iii) *Kwebelu m agbala idiganga*
Kwenu o kere utara n'ikwe
O kere utara n'ikwe
Afere juru n'ulo
O na-asa asa

(iii) Sing for me "Thick madam"
 Sing "sharer of foofoo in the mortar"
 Sharer of foofoo in the mortar
 when unwashed plates litter the house.
 She does not wash them.

(iv) *Kwebelu m agbala idiganga*
Kwenu okporo di ya Daddy
Okporo di ya Daddy
Nna ya nokwa n'ulo
O na-eje eje

(iv) |Sing for me "Thick madam"
 Sing "she calls her husband Daddy"
 She calls her husband Daddy
 Her own father stays neglected in his house
 She does not visit him.

The song in (25) is a folktale about a king who decreed that his seven wives should bring home only male children who will inherit his throne while female ones should be drowned after birth. The song is said to be sung by a boy born by the king's estranged wife who had her new baby boy thrown away by the other jealous wives.

(25)

Nna m eze achoba m - ee (2ice)
Aziza: Saman Samankwe
Nna m eze malu iwu
Onye muta nwanyi ya tufuo
Onye muta nwoke ya kulata
Mkporomasi muta mu oo
O were iwe tufuo mu oo
Onye oku azu tututa mu oo
O zuba m zulite
Nna m eze achoba mu oo
Nna m eze onye iwe

My king father seeks for me (2ice)
 Refrain: Saman Samankwe
 My king father decreed
 My king father decreed
 If you deliver a boy you bring home
 The king's hated wife delivered me
 She threw me away in anger
 A fisherman picked me up
 He brought me up to manhood
 My king father looks for me
 My king father is anger personified

This song expresses the extent to which the desire to have male children can lead to irrational and inhuman decision such as throwing away female children and bringing home only the males when they are born. It also foregrounds the patrilineal culture of the Igbos and the premium attached to male children at the detriment of the females. This song brings up this injustice to be resisted and condemned.

DISCUSSION

The present study shows the power of collective voices afforded by women's group solidarity and how these voices consciously deconstruct the sharp edges of gender asymmetries and deploy their femininities (daughterhood, sisterhood, wifehood, motherhood) in smoothing out conflicts in gender relations in domains of lineage continuation, family life, marriage and allocation of social privileges with particular focus on the feminist voices, perspectives and state of feminist awareness encoded in the songs, a hitherto relatively unstudied area in the Igbo cultural context.

Feminist perspectives in the African context, especially the Igbo culture seems to be less dogmatic and incisive in their manifestation. As evidenced in the sampled songs, they seem to be of a different texture. The voices in these songs are not radical in nature; they are calling for compromise, for understanding and harmony. We therefore subscribe to the womanist standpoint in our analysis, one that takes the perspectives of the agency and fulfilment of the Igbo woman, one that accommodates rather segregates men, one that seeks for compromise. Women stereotypic solidarity and camaraderie are also put to good use in these group performances that seem to accord the women power that goes unchallenged by the men's folk.

From our analysis, it is seen that the songs by men only serve to strengthen the masculinised social arrangement of patriarchal dominance. Men would want to hold tenaciously to their control of the womenfolk. Take for instance, the songs by the masquerade, the afro musicians and traditional poets (Songs 1-4). Men in these songs do not seem to want any disruption of this institutionalized rigid masculine power that may divest them of cultural control. The night masquerade queries the consumption of the kidney and the gizzard by a woman church convert, delicacies reserved for the males (because, invariably, the church does not see why a woman should be denied such benefit, since it does not constitute any health risk). Response from interview claims that this taboo was imposed on the Igbo women as a result of the myth that claimed that women who ate such delicacies in the past turned to stealing. Nothing was said about men who steal in spite of eating those delicacies.

Songs (2) and (6) are nuanced along hegemonic masculinity; the man's wealth giving him passport to

"own" a woman, and in (6), the woman must fetch and carry for the man since he is the one who paid the bride price. Therefore a woman who asks the husband "to stoke the fire when she put the pot on the fire" is looking for trouble. This positive-male and negative-female representation is also evident in (4) and (5) where poems referring to men project their strength and prowess while those referencing women portray them as wicked, talkative and wayward, and in (7) as gluttonous, weak and unfit for any strenuous work.

It is to these negative representations and social repressions that women talk back, but instead of being completely resistant, women songs show some moderation in terms of accommodating and accepting the practices that edify human existence while rejecting those artificial, repressive gender practices that show outright dehumanization of women. From our analysis, it is seen that a number of ways have been contrived by women to negotiate their subordination in the gendered and patriarchal social order. These have ranged from acceptance and accommodation, ambivalent, didactic and outright resistant attitudes.

The songs in 8 to 13 are focussed on the role of the woman as wife and mother. Women accept these roles as their prerogative, their power over the men folk who are not so endowed. These roles emphasize their agency and give them relevance. Womanhood, motherhood and wifehood are thus given priorities in the Igbo woman's struggle for agency in the patriarchal order. Wifehood is their passport to a better life, while motherhood means a stronger seat in their husband's house as illustrated in 11, 12 and 13 where the prayer was for the bride to earn a strong seat in her land of marriage sojourn by bearing many children, while the husband is called upon to dip his hands in the birth pot and harvest children.

In asserting this agency, women realize that they have to be diplomatic even as they negotiate these difficult terrains. They employ irony, indirectness and humour to appeal to the forces that denigrate them. The songs in 14 and 15 are typical examples. In 14, instead of presenting their grievances in a confrontational manner, they utilize their socially prescribed stereotypes of submissiveness to dissipate tension before presenting their grievances in a kneeling position. As a participant observer, these grievances are always resolved amicably to the women's satisfaction than would otherwise have been the case if coercion was employed. The same applies to the song in (15), where women counter lack of commendation from the men folk by using their power of motherhood. The song implies that men are also foolish if they label their mothers so, thus the attendant humour calls attention to their deeds for the men to acknowledge. Thus women employ these ambivalent strategies to negotiate the patriarchal terrain and gain compromise from the men folk.

Perhaps the most intriguing of the songs in the selected data are the ones that are geared towards educating the

sexes on the need for compromise, for accommodating the gender differences and not allow them to engender friction and disharmony. These unconscious womanists realise that they need men's support in their life engagements and so the songs come in handy to impact this cultural knowledge to both sexes. For instance, women are enjoined to love their husbands even in the event of their hate, to study their dispositions to avoid family disharmony while the men are advised to accommodate their wives' misdemeanour during parturition. These admonitions become even more necessary in a culture that stigmatizes broken marriages and divorce. Any act that negates the above cultural order is strongly resisted whether they emanate from women or men. Songs (19) to (25) songs resist a number of injustices to humanity like attaching special importance to a particular sex at birth as exemplified in Song (25) about a king who orders the drowning of the female child and bringing home the male which runs counter to complementarity as essential to the symbiotic existence and survival of the family and society. Equally resisted are wife battering and unappreciative attitudes of men. For the women, these songs resist women adopting prescribed passive roles by being indolent, lazy and content with the *oriaku* ("consumer") stereotype. Women who mimic the western culture and abandon their roles in the family are unacceptable Igbo woman attributes.

These findings point to a number of interesting facts about feminist awareness in Igbo culture. Firstly, this level of feminist awareness espouses gender equity and not equality, thus calling to question the feasibility of the Nigerian government projection of "fifty-fifty gender equality by 2020" (NTA news commentary, June 21, 2013), in line with the Millennium Development Goals' (MDGs) fourth item in the eight-point agenda "Women Empowerment and Gender Equality" (Asiabaka, 2015). Secondly, the impact of the songs is a valuable contribution to the feminist debate, a feminism that is not confrontational, that demands the sustainability of not only Igbo but also African values of family cohesion, child nurturance and enduring marital relations, a feminism that includes men as integral part of women's lives.

Thus, the songs edify family unity, women agency in child bearing and nurturance roles, while at the same time calling for understanding and appreciation, complementarity and compromise. This is in line with Chikwenye Ogunyemi's concept of "African womanism" where the woman as wife and mother is agentized and feminist resistance shifts from the idea of "palava" or trouble, to consensus, compromise, complementarity and cooperation (Ogunyemi, 1996). This is exemplified in the songs where the woman asks her husband to stoke the fire after she puts the pot on the hearth, and the other calling on the women to prefer dialogue, humility (by kneeling down) to confrontation in dealing with men's

insensitivities. Thirdly, there is a huge gap between the voices in these songs with the tenets of mainstream feminism: whereas the latter calls for a complete blurring of gender categories and anti-essentialist, performativity approach, the former is still largely essentialist, admitting to different but symbiotic gender roles for harmonious existence of women and men in the culture. This stance echoes Umeogu's (2011, p.6) assertion that "the Nigerian women have not undertaken a sustained resistance to stereotypes that relegate women. They tend to internalize the picture of them painted by men, and act out these pictures in their behaviour". This assertion leads to our last observation that there is need for more enlightenment and awareness creation, through education and the media to highlight and address the excesses of men and women that complicate gender relations, such as wife battering, male chauvinism, women indolence and adaptation to a deprecatory image of themselves.

CONCLUSION

This paper has made a case for gender construction, negotiation and contestation encoded in selected Igbo songs and has argued that they speak to a different form of feminism even as they construct gendered spaces, roles and expectations. Though the contrast in the voices of men and women in the songs point to dominant masculinity and subordinate femininity, what is interesting is the different voices of women as they react to the masculinized culture. These voices range from acceptance of the status quo to ambivalence, didactic and resistant attitudes. In muted, indirect and dialogic voices, utilizing the power accorded them in the song medium, they celebrate the Igbo values of a united family, peaceful and fruitful marriage and complementarity of gender roles. At the same time, these voices resist male chauvinism, wife battering, strategic denial of basic human rights like the rights to life, sacrificed on the altar of lineage perpetuation (exemplified by the song calling for the female child to be drowned and the male heir brought home) and of tabooing certain foods for women (like the kidney and the gizzard). They also resist in strong terms fellow women who indolently live out their stereotypes of prescribed passivity and complacency, admonishing them to contribute to the economic sustenance of the family and society, take their destiny in their hands and blame no one but themselves of the consequences of not doing so.

The paper has thus contributed to the debate on feminist research by supporting the view that though feminism is feminism, they take different hues and perspectives in different cultures and contexts. It follows that gender problems facing the Fulani moslem woman in the purdah for instance, may differ significantly from the Igbo or Yoruba or any other ethnic group based on the different ethno-religious and social experiences. What is obvious in the songs is the fact that feminist awareness

requires subtlety and tact, dialogue and understanding in the Igbo and African context, as opposed to coercion and confrontation, as explicated in Adimorah Ezeigbo's snail sense feminism, a facet of womanism. That, I suppose, is the contemporary Igbo woman's voice. It is also obvious that these voices are calling for equity and not equality to echo Oraegbunam's (2015) submission. There is no doubt that this level of feminist awareness is still far behind other developed countries going by the Nigeria rating on the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) (2014) of the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) where Nigeria is still rated very highly in gender discrimination against women (86 out of 102 countries) in spite of its having a National Gender Policy that focuses on women empowerment while also making a commitment to eliminate discriminatory practices that are harmful to women. It also begs the question of Nigerian government's projection of fifty-fifty gender equality by the year 2020 (NTA news Commentary, 2013, June 21). However, compromise feminism which these songs are calling for seems appropriate for the stage of feminist awareness in Igbo culture, in the hope that with time, new opportunities for harmonious gender relations keep opening up. This is even more so when one considers that the most pernicious conflicts in human history have been solved not by confrontation but dialogue, concession and compromise.

The contemporary Igbo woman, the literary artist, the educated career upward mobile woman, as well as the rural woman gain agency in a united family, a loving husband, a number of children, her unique power to procreate which the man does not have—qualities that are alien to mainstream feminism that insist on lesbian standpoint. She needs her father, husband, son, brother and all the important men in her life to feel fulfilled. And for that matter, who among these chauvinistic men out there who are equally at the butt of global racial and classist oppression can dispense with the love of a mother, wife, daughter and sister? That is the essence of womanism which the songs as well as contemporary literary works by Igbo women preaches—a shift from “palava” (trouble) in gender relations to “palaver”—consensus, compromise, complementarity and cooperation (Ogunyemi, 1996).

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