Emergent Masculinities: Gendered Power and Social Change in the Biafran Atlantic Age

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BOOK REVIEW


Focusing on the Ohafia-Igbo people in the southeastern region of modern Nigeria from 1750 to 1920, Ndubueze Mbah’s pathbreaking book was a finalist for the African Studies Association’s 2020 Best Book Prize. It constitutes a major contribution to our understanding of the political, economic and social processes that shaped the Bight of Biafra region during the periods of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the so-called legitimate trade, Christianization and colonialization. Mining rich Igbo oral narratives and interviews, performative traditions and material culture, as well as slave trade, colonial and missionary records, Mbah shows how Igbo peoples both shaped and were transformed by the Atlantic systems. He argues that in this new era, gender became the primary mode of social differentiation – to women’s detriment. Struggles over modes of production introduced new ideas about gender, sexuality, and ethnic and kinship traditions. These changes paved the way for the patriarchal extractive economies of the slave trade and colonial periods.

Before the onset of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, in contrast, Ohafia-Igbo society possessed strong dual-sex political and economic systems. Men achieved social status as great warriors with political authority, while women, as the primary agrarian producers, were central to social and material reproduction. These roles also gave them significant political authority. The emergence of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in this region led to male dominance in the new long-distance exchange economies. The Ohafia military apparatus was transformed into a slaving system that reshaped masculine honor and social prestige and awarded men greater social importance than women. The successful warrior, as the marker of a great man, was superseded by the successful slave raider. Male slave raider-merchants were enriched by both slave and commodity trading. The rise of this profession led to a new “wealthy person” masculinity. Those with this status increasingly usurped the institutions of male political authority.

The abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and its replacement by so-called legitimate trade during the first half of the nineteenth century further diminished women’s power and status. Legitimate trade in fact led to a massive increase in domestic slavery for cash crop production and sexual slavery for social reproduction. The accumulation of trade goods became the new marker of social prestige. European products, especially guns, as well as slaves and wives, were particularly valued. Women, as the majority of those enslaved, and as the producers but not the beneficiaries of cash crop production, were the greatest losers.

Christianization and colonization, from the second half of the nineteenth century, intensified gender inequalities. These European impositions favored males over females. Missionaries and colonial officials refused to recognize the dual-sex political system and awarded men greater access to the new prestige goods: Western education, European manufactured goods, cash wages and colonial positions. Women’s roles as agrarian breadwinners, slaveholders, commodity traders, spirit mediums and diviners were undermined. The warrior-slave raider-merchant markers of social prestige were superseded by new idioms – owners of cars, square houses, European consumer goods, and holders of European educational certificates who boasted cash wages and positions in the church, colonial, military and political bureaucracies.
Throughout the period under consideration, Igbo women both resisted these encroachments and claimed and reshaped the new masculinized markers of social status. They did “men’s things,” for example engaging in yam production (a “man’s crop”) not only as the laborers but as the beneficiaries. They participated in long-distance trade – including the slave trade – and some became wealthy merchants and slave owners. They continued to function as spirit mediums and diviners – defying missionary attempts to stamp out these practices. They married female husbands, whose offspring they claimed as their own, and who provided them with status and heirs to whom they passed on their wealth.

Despite women’s efforts to resist, reshape and reclaim, by the second half of the nineteenth century, female sociopolitical superiority had given way to male political and economic dominance. Mbah’s complex and nuanced account demonstrates that this transformation was well underway before the onset of colonialism. In contravention of received wisdom, it was not solely the product of Christianity and colonization, but instead emerged during the trans-Atlantic slave trade, intensified during the period of “legitimate trade,” and was rigidified during the period of Christianization and colonial rule.

Mbah’s findings challenge the common assumptions that patriarchy is either a timeless feature of Igbo culture or, conversely, the product of the colonial era. Mbah argues instead that it was the gendered slave systems that emerged during the trans-Atlantic slave trade that exploited women’s labor and sexuality and resulted in male political, economic and social dominance. Although the domestic enslavement of women predated this trade, it was the Atlantic slave system that transformed the Ohafia-Igbo political economy in ways that eroded existing dual-sex political and economic systems and cemented male superiority.

More broadly, Mbah’s work bridges the gap between the scholarly literature on gender theory in West Africa, which has tended to focus on women’s power and authority, and the burgeoning field of African masculinity studies. He rejects the straightforward notion that women were marginalized under colonialism and then rebelled, replacing it with a more complex paradigm in which women sometimes resisted and at other times claimed and attempted to reshape the new masculinized forms of social prestige.

Mbah makes his case with sources that are both varied and innovative. He plumbed Igbo oral and performative traditions, including life histories and other narratives, men’s war songs and dances, and women’s songs and dances that mocked men. He conducted 180 interviews with Ohafia women and men and supplemented these rich oral sources with documents from colonial and missionary archives, such as court cases, which included a preponderance of gendered disputes. Documentary evidence from the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, and from trading company and merchant accounts, corroborates much of his oral data.

In sum, Emergent Masculinities transforms our understanding of the role of gender in a particular region of precolonial Africa and deepens our knowledge of the impact of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and European colonization on Igbo and neighboring societies. Its ramifications extend beyond the Bight of Biafra to vast areas on both sides of the Atlantic. The book constitutes a major contribution to our understanding of the political, economic and social dynamics that shaped the Atlantic world during the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is a must-read – and a must-have – for scholars of Africa and the Atlantic world and for college and university libraries.

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