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

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With Emergent Masculinities, Ndubueze L. Mbah makes a vital contribution to West African and Atlantic world gender history and in particular to the study of African masculinities. Most work on masculinity in Africa has concentrated on southern Africa and on female masculinities in West Africa. With Emergent Masculinities, Mbah shows how the expression and the role of male masculinity changed as the Bight of Biafra became more integrated into the Atlantic economy and into the British colonial era. Focusing on the matrilineal Ohafia-Igbo people of the intracoastal Cross River region, Mbah demonstrates how with growing integration into the Atlantic world starting in the 1750s, there was a masculinization of key sociopolitical institutions that led to a gradual shift from precolonial female sociopolitical supremacy to male political and economic dominance. He further demonstrates the importance of gender dynamics in understanding processes of enslavement and slavery and how dual-sex sociopolitical systems and conceptions and practices of hegemonic masculinity and femininity were shaped by the Biafra region’s participation in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Whereas other historians of gender in West Africa have concentrated on female masculinities in patrilineal societies, Mbah’s study is focused on male masculinities in a matrilineal society.

In five chapters and an introduction and conclusion, Mbah traces how economic change upended gender relations and transformed conceptions of male masculinity through examining three distinct time periods: prior to integration
of the Bight of Biafra into the Atlantic economy, the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and finally the early colonial period. In his periodization he is following in the footsteps of other researchers of gender in West Africa such as Ife Amadiume, Oyeronke Oyewumi, and Nwando Achebe, who also use the chronology of pre-, during, and post-European contact/colonialism. Mbah examines the transformation of male masculinity by tracing the shifting practice of *ufiem* (hegemonic masculinity) and its changing relationship with female economic and political power. As he states, prior to the 1750s, Ohafia-Igbo women were in control of the main economic activity, farming, and therefore controlled economic and political power. They were the “breadwinners.” The dominant male activity, and way to express masculinity, was warfare. Indeed, Mbah argues that one of the reasons men embarked on warfare, and for the development of warrior *ufiem*, was to escape female sociopolitical dominance. Yam cultivation, *dibia* (divination/spirit mediumship), and membership in secret societies were also ways to express honorable masculinity but were subordinate to warrior masculinity.

According to Mbah, the trans-Atlantic slave trade and legitimate trade transformed hegemonic masculinity from being based on warrior prowess to being based on wealth accumulation. The slave trade provided men, as warriors, access to a new form of wealth in terms of slaves and the European goods they were able to purchase. This new wealth allowed them to challenge women’s economic and political dominance and carve out certain social spaces as distinctly masculine. Moreover, the incorporation of male-owned female slaves into matrilineages increased male influence in matrilineages and led to free women developing ritual practices and discourses to distinguish themselves from enslaved women. Legitimate trade further challenged female economic dominance as the male control of enslaved labor led to male appropriation of land for oil palm and yam plantations. Plantation agriculture and control of long-distance trade transformed Ohafia men into economic “breadwinners” who could challenge female control of agrarian wealth.

Although the expansion of Atlanticization in Ohafia diminished women’s economic dominance, according to Mbah, it was the British introduction of the warrant chief system and the colonial bolstering of male political institutions that led to the great reduction in female political power and the marginalization of sources of female political authority. This was reinforced by British Christian education that taught that women should be subordinate to men. Women who gained economic and political power did so through masculine forms of wealth and power accumulation such as yam cultivation, long-distance trade, slave ownership and female husbandhood, thereby simultaneously reinforcing *ogaranya*, “wealth,” masculinity while undermining and rebelling against British conceptions of gender.
In demonstrating how changing gender regimes, and in particular changing hegemonic masculinity defined how the Ohafia-Igbo participated in Atlantic modes of production and consumption, Mbah makes a vital contribution to methodology and the use of sources. As well as using the relevant European and archival sources and making excellent use of biography, Mbah bases *Emergent Masculinities* on the three major forms of Ohafia traditions: oral traditions of migration, lineage constitution, and adaptation of political institutions; military traditions preserved in performative war songs; and gendered rituals and memorialization ceremonies. Mbah views these traditions as a form of historical discourse. Through his extensive collection and analysis of these traditions, he reveals how the recitation of these traditions are gendered and how women and men emphasize different aspects of the traditions thereby demonstrating the continuous contestation of the past, gender roles, and power. Indeed, one of Mbah’s main contributions to methodology is his reinforcement of the importance of interviewing a wide range of people especially when gathering oral traditions as what is emphasized and what is not is dependent on the individual reciter. In *Emergent Masculinities* Mbah balances these gendered oral traditions and through his interpretation and analysis makes a significant contribution to our understanding of pre-1750s Igboland. Just as crucial, his collection of oral traditions demonstrates how the precolonial past continues to be remembered, memorialized, and contested and therefore its importance and impact on contemporary society.

*Emergent Masculinities* reveals the significance of gender in understanding the nuances of economic, political, and social change at both the micro-community level of Ohafia and at the macro level of the Bight of Biafra and the Atlantic world. By focusing on gender, and in particular changing conceptions and articulations of male masculinity, Mbah is able to bridge the gap between the conceptualization of African slavery as kinship-based assimilationist on one hand and commercial, slave-mode of production on the other. On the micro level he shows how gendered contestations over power led to Ohafia developing a double unilineal descent system whereas on the macro level he demonstrates both the importance of local communities and of gender dynamics in shaping social, political, and economic processes within the Atlantic world and Atlantic Africa.

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