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Abstract

Nigerian authors have consistently and effectively critiqued insidious connections between masculinity, political power, religious fundamentalism, and capitalist interests. The unstable political structures in Nigeria since the 1970s have led to such critiques. This essay deploys the idea of polygamy in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) in contrast to the exploration of polygamy in Nigerian-American dramatist Tess Onwueme's early play *The Reign of Wazobia* (1988), written a year after Chinua Achebe's novel. As a third generation African writer, and one whose work is less well recognized than other African novelists and playwrights, Onwueme occupies a relatively marginal role in the Nigerian and African literary canon. Nevertheless her work facilitates an analysis of neocolonialism, though in contrast to Achebe's realist narrative, her evocation of myth and tradition appears to take the discussion into a pre-colonial past as in many of Wole Soyinka's plays.

My reading of Onwueme's play claims that the past is not an idealized space and time but rather a strategy used by the dramatist to comment on postcolonial realities and politics. As an arrangement involving sexual and economic relations, a discussion of polygamy in *Wazobia* is crucial to examining the interplay of gender, sexuality, and political power in Nigeria during the late 1980s when Achebe's novel and Onwueme's play were first published. Nigerian feminist anthropological and sociological studies are useful in assessing gender and power dynamics in Onwueme's play. Since these studies sometimes valorize pre-colonial pasts, I also look at feminist responses to such an idealization, again with Onwueme's play as a reference point. In accounting for "polygamous postcolonialism," which I define as a negotiation between national and transnational capitalist interests often in favor of the latter at the expense of the former, this essay also offers a feminist critique of the social structures supporting polygamy. The conclusion

describes why it is as crucial to examine political structures in Nigeria from a transnational feminist perspective today as it was in the 1980s.

When the radical Islamist terrorist organization Boko Haram abducted two hundred girls from a school in Northern Nigeria in April 2014, any expectation of global action morphed into several high profile social media campaigns. Instead of concentrated international action to combat fundamentalist violence, what was on display, according to Chimamanda Adichie, was an attempt to fit the incident into an already existing narrative of Taliban-style repression of girls familiar to the Western media and the public. Indeed, Adichie speaks of the use of the social media campaign “Bring Back our Girls” as a tool for silencing the significant harm caused by Boko Haram in disrupting what the group perceives as Western-style education of girls and boys in Nigeria.¹ Nigerian authors have never been shy of critiquing the connections between masculinity, political power, religious fundamentalism, and transnational capitalism. The unstable political structures in Nigeria since the 1970s lend themselves to and, indeed, demand such critique. For instance, in one of the key chapters of his landmark novel, *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), Chinua Achebe describes the intelligent, articulate, and staunchly nationalist government employee Beatrice Okoh’s visit to His Excellency the President’s private party, which is essentially a gathering of supporters of his corrupt regime. Here Beatrice meets Lou, an American journalist who wishes to talk to her about the “women’s angle” in the country when he advises His Excellency to keep the foreign debt servicing rate high enough to entitle the country to receive American aid. Achebe describes Beatrice’s nationalist reaction at Lou’s neocolonial economic suggestions in a rather strange twist of the plot. Beatrice decides to counter the American’s sexual advances by offering herself to the Nigerian President. Knowing that she has been summoned to “have a turn in the bedchamber of African polygamy,” Beatrice’s submission to His Excellency is, at least in Achebe’s rendering, a desperate attempt to distance herself from the neocolonialism epitomized by Lou (Achebe 1987, 73).

While Achebe’s representation is awkward, it describes Western attempts to flirt with Africa’s future as indicative of the selective transnational

corporatist interference in Nigeria that Adichie and others have diagnosed.² Achebe obfuscates a feminist nationalist message, especially since polygamy is the recurring motif evoked in *Anthills*. If African nations are the “first wives” of these corrupt African leaders, then these leaders’ selling out to Western capitalist interests is no more or no less than a traditionalist impulse towards polygamy.³ Achebe deploys polygamy—with all its negative connotations—as a way to critique the African leadership’s lack of concern for women’s rights. Using the moral charge implicit in such regressive traditionalism, Achebe is perhaps conveying the economic and political betrayal of the continent by African leaders and presenting a nationalist argument against a corrupt regime allied with transnational financial agencies. Polygamy thus becomes a metaphor for examining the simultaneous relations between the corrupt leader of an African state with a nationalist (Beatrice) and a neocolonialist (Lou).

Nigerian-American dramatist Tess Onwueme’s early play *The Reign of Wazobia* (1988) (hereafter *Wazobia*), written a year after Achebe’s novel, presents polygamy in the context of an egalitarian woman-led society in which the major tribes in Nigeria exist in harmony and work towards the creation of a vibrant nation. Achebe and Onwueme occupy vastly differing positions in the canon of African and postcolonial literature as first and third generation African writers. Onwueme’s analysis of political corruption in *Wazobia* has been less recognized than Achebe’s in *Anthills* in a long tradition of transnational critique of political power. Onwueme does not sidestep a critique of neocolonialism, though in contrast to Achebe’s realist narrative, her evocation of myth and tradition appears to take the discussion into a pre-colonial past. Yet, as I argue in my reading of Onwueme’s play, the past is not an idealized space and time. Rather, the author strategically invokes the past to comment on postcolonial realities and politics.

My own stake in this enquiry derives from several decades of scholarly and participative involvement in postcolonial dramatic representations of gender and sexuality. To cite obvious comparisons, both India (my country of origin) and Nigeria have followed neoliberal trajectories of governance since the 1980s with a simultaneous valorization of the pre-colonial past as an uncontaminated space of gender fluidity, political efficacy, and ideal governance. In this scenario, rather than assume responsibility for bad postcolonial governance, those in authority would

rather blame colonial rule for the many problems faced by the nation. I am especially interested in Onwueme's dramaturgy since it differs from the dominant theatrical tradition in Nigeria which has stopped short of a serious engagement with women's issues.⁴ The author admits to a change in her feminist beliefs, from an aggressive separatism since the publication of her play *Wazobia* in the 1980s to one more accommodative of ideological differences in her later plays (Personal Communication, August 2012). Given this context, African gender and sexuality studies is an effective lens for analyzing the play. However, with notable exceptions (Azodo and Eke 2007; Dunton 2007; Epprecht 2008; Hoad 2007; Oyewumi 2005), much of this work has either not taken into consideration important studies by anthropologists and sociologists in assessing African gender and sex systems, or dismissed them as reinforcing essentialized social identities. I summarize some of this scholarship later in this article to offer a reading of *Wazobia*.

My main argument is that to account for a 'polygamous postcolonialism,' which I define as a negotiation between national and transnational interests, we must begin from a feminist analysis of the social structures supporting polygamy. As an arrangement involving sexual and economic relations, a discussion of polygamy in *Wazobia* is crucial to examining the interplay of gender, sexuality, and political power in Nigeria during the late 1980s when Achebe's novel and Onwueme's play were first published. To provide a multifaceted understanding of polygamy, I turn to Nigerian feminist anthropological and sociological studies as useful for examining gender and power dynamics in Onwueme's play. Since these studies sometimes valorize pre-colonial pasts, I also look at feminist responses to such an idealization, again with Onwueme's play as a reference point. This approach involves a multifaceted understanding of polygamy from Western and African feminist perspectives in order to negotiate an idealized pre-colonial versus pragmatic postcolonial view of Nigerian society. Pragmatic postcolonial analyses, such as those by Achebe, Onwueme, and Adichie, deploy a critique of masculinity and political power in Nigeria that is aware of collusions with transnational capitalism. I conclude with a brief justification of why it is as crucial to examine political structures in Nigeria from a transnational feminist perspective as much today as it was in the 1980s.

Gender and Social Mobility in *Wazobia*

Wazobia is the second play in Onwueme's trilogy about political inheritance and the only one in which she envisages the significant role women can play in national politics. While some characters make an appearance in all three plays, each play also stands on its own as a complete dramatic composition. In the play preceding *Wazobia*, titled *Parables for a Season*, the lack of a male heir traumatizes a king so deeply that he chooses to step down against the wishes of his four queens, Anehe, Wa, Bia, and Zo. At the time of the king's abdication his youngest queen, Bia, is pregnant. *Parables* describes the machinations of the courtiers Idehen and Iyase to control the kingdom, especially after they learn that Bia has given birth to a son who is the king's rightful heir. With Anehe's assistance they kidnap and supposedly kill the heir only to have the child discovered by Zo. During the public council, when Iyase thinks he can usurp the throne, it is revealed that Bia's son is alive. This leads to the choice of a regent to govern the kingdom until the rightful heir comes of age. Fortuitously, the choice is Zo, who, in her new identity as King *Wazobia*, humbles Iyase in public by making him submit to her authority. The word 'Wazobia' combines the names of the king's four queens and literally means "coming together."⁵ *Wazobia* describes the reign of "king" *Wazobia*, focusing on her progressive ideas on personal and public relations in opposition to patriarchal control of the nation-state and its women. In the play these feminist ideas are juxtaposed against the corruption of male chiefs such as Iyase and Idehen.

The publication of *Wazobia* in 1988 coincided with political change in Nigeria that heralded a specific version of feminism focused on rural women's empowerment under Nigerian military dictator Ibrahim Babangida's rule. Under this regime, Babangida's wife Maryam played a token role in policies for betterment of lives of rural women in Nigeria. An account of the political situation in Nigeria in relation to the play indicates that the playwright allows us to imagine the possibility of women's role in national processes even while the ground reality is one of 'polygamous postcolonialism', my term for a tightrope between national and transnational interests which precludes the Nigerian people's choice in the path to national development.

Feminist anthropologists have analyzed sex and gender relations in particular social contexts such as the “surrogate masculinity” acquired by women in political situations. On reading *Wazobia* through Kamene Okonjo and Ifi Amadiume’s analyses of Igbo social structures, it is clear that women’s attainment of political power signifying their surrogate male status is based on a disjunction between their biological sex and social gender, a disjunction that was crucial to acquisition and perpetuation of women’s political authority in Ibo society in precolonial Nigeria.⁶ Okonjo and Amadiume offer important contributions to reading Ibo society and culture, but they also uncritically valorize Ibo social and political systems (1976; 1997).⁷ Their celebratory view of precolonial social systems rhetorically counters Western feminist views about oppressive traditions in precolonial Africa. The analytical move is similar in intent, though not in impact, to one employed by Chandra Mohanty in the landmark essay “Under Western Eyes.” Here, Mohanty questions Western feminists’ representation of African and Asian women as victims of patriarchal traditions. Onwueme’s play eschews Okonjo’s and Amadiume’s celebratory rhetoric to offer an assessment of past, present, and future political systems, that is, the historical, existing, and imagined structures of political power in Nigeria. The following analysis reads *Wazobia* to articulate a critical feminism knowledgeable about Western modes of critique and reflexive of hierarchies and power differentials in Nigerian, and by extension African, social systems.

Feminist political and social commentators have observed that, though the channels of electoral and national politics have been largely closed to women in contemporary Nigeria, women make significant contributions to the national economy (Mama 2000; Eboiyehi et al 2016). In contrast to women’s lack of political influence in postcolonial Nigeria, Onwueme’s drama represents both elite and subaltern forms of women’s political agency. The fortuitous ascension of a female king leading to a gender-just social system in *Wazobia* can be read against elite women’s misuse of power subverted by rural women’s political assertion in a later play, *Tell it to Women* (1997). Such grassroots action is presented as exemplary of postcolonial agency. Rather than reflecting different trajectories of her feminist thinking, Onwueme’s plays are best examined as suggesting measures for women’s empowerment. They thus present the political aspirations

(though not the situation) of women in Nigeria amid a system which has traditionally worked to exclude them from participative governance and colluded with transnational capital to make the lives of ordinary citizens harder in recent times.

Writing of political organization in precolonial Nigeria, Okonjo mentions that, “In Nigerian society in general, and Igbo society in particular, women’s lack of interest in political matters—or more accurately, their invisibility in present-day politics—is a legacy of the colonial past” (1976, 46). Amadiume echoes this view in her narrative of the declining influence of women’s community organizations from precolonial times to the present. Evoking a past where women had authority and influence sometimes leads Okonjo and Amadiume to ignore forms of patriarchal control within the matriarchies they glorify. Okonjo and Amadiume’s research into the social organization of Igbos in Nigeria helps us understand *Wazobia*, since the events in the play point to patriarchal incursions in the “dual-sex” matriarchal social systems so usefully described by these anthropologists. Okonjo explains that the dual-sex system of organization of Igbo societies meant that “each sex generally managed its own affairs and had its own kinship institutions, age grades, and secret and title societies” with two local monarchs, the male *obi* and the female *omu* (1976, 47). According to Okonjo, in this system women’s interests were well-represented at all levels of society. While the *obi* was supposed to be the head of the kingdom, his authority extended only to men; the women were governed by the *omu* and her council of representative women called the *ikporo ani* who made decisions regarding laws governing the market and sometimes disciplined those who violated these laws. The *omu* also presided over family disputes, particularly since men, whose complaints against their wives were beyond “the competence of the family circle,” sought redress from the council of women (1976, 48–51). Thus the two main spheres of influence of the women’s council headed by the *omu* were the community as extended family and the market.

Amadiume extends the significance of this mode of social organization by introducing the important co-relate “power” that she is careful to differentiate from its imperialist connotations. For her, the crucial difference between an imperialist connotation of power and power as “autonomy in self-determination” is that these meanings are

“gender-derived” (1997, vii). Elaborating on the Igbo ideology of gender, based on extensive fieldwork in Nnobi, an Igbo area in Nigeria, Amadiume points to the contest between “the moral kinship ideology of motherhood” and “the jural force of patriarchy” (1997, 19). Amadiume makes a distinction between the “household as the matricentric unit” and the family as “a wider construct which includes the head of one or more of these household matricentric units.” Among the Igbo, either men or women can be the head of the family since “the status of the role of head of family is genderless” and this explains the presence of the “woman-to-woman marriage” among the Igbo and many other African communities. Thus she argues that by recognizing the motherhood paradigm as central to matriarchy, one can avoid the error of thinking that patriarchy is a given and prove “the structural presence of a basic matriarchal system in the social structure of traditional African societies” (1997 21, 83).

Okonjo’s and Amadiume’s analyses implicitly refute Western feminists’ diagnosis of patriarchal structures as the malaise afflicting African societies by indicating positions of prestige and power occupied by African women in indigenous societies before colonialism. This also explains Okonjo’s justification of the market taboos decreed by the *omu* and her council of women as rooted in traditional beliefs about medicine and magic. Some of these taboos promulgated by the *omu* include obviously humiliating discriminatory practices against widows such as the decree that “widows in mourning were not to enter the market or engage in market transactions” (1976, 49). Amadiume idealizes matriarchy in a way similar to Okonjo’s justification by positing that the system had a “clear message about social and economic justice . . . couched in a very powerful goddess-based religion, a strong ideology of motherhood, and a general moral principle of love” (1997, 101). However, to see these claims exclusively as responses to Western feminist commentaries on African social systems that present these systems as inherently oppressive to African women is somewhat circuitous since it contributes to the “West and the Rest” polarization that leaves indigenous modes of agency and oppression almost completely unexamined. Indeed, as Bibi Bakare-Yusuf points out in her review of Oyeronke Oyewumi’s *Invention of Women*, “desire to foreground and celebrate Yoruba or African female power need not preclude an analysis of the ways in which they experience constraint and domination” (2003, 135).

In keeping with this line of argument, Onwueme indicates that there are distinctly patriarchal incursions in matriarchy.

Wazobia begins three years after the conclusion of the sequence of events detailed in the previous play *Parables*, where Zo had been elected as king-regent. Towards the end of Wazobia's legitimate period of rule there is a flurry of intrigue similar to the one before her ascension to the throne. Insofar as the play focuses on Wazobia's "kingship," traditionally a male prerogative, it presents a disjunction between biological sex and social gender. By ascending to the throne, Wazobia has attained surrogate male status not only because of the position she occupies as head of the state, but also as "husband" to the former king's wives. Her dress, symbols of authority, and her demeanor are decidedly "masculine" as indicated in the stage directions to the play. The directions also specify that there is "a transition in Wazobia's personality here from a young maiden to an authoritative king" and "she can appear in public only in these royal outfits. On no occasion should she be dressed any longer as a woman" (Onwueme 1988, 137, 141). With the change in appearance also comes a change in her demeanor and in the behavior of others. This includes a subservient attitude of the former king's wives towards Wazobia as they try to vie for her attention, illustrating gender identities which permitted what Amadiume called "woman-to-woman marriage," enabling women's alliances with other women as "female husbands."⁸ When Wazobia, herself one of the late king's many wives, becomes a husband to the other three queens, the fraught issue of polygamy is implicitly interrogated. Wazobia does not take the former king's queens through the traditional way of same-sex marriage whereby aristocratic and rich women acquired wives. Rather, she inherits them because of her surrogate male status as a ruler.

Having been one among the many wives of the erstwhile king, Wazobia understands the implications of a system which strives to keep women under patriarchal control, whether exercised by men who marry several wives, or women who choose to take many wives.

Wazobia refuses to give credence to traditions and customs that are humiliating to women. Though there is no overt reference to polygamous situations, Wazobia does not encourage hierarchies among co-wives.⁹ Nor does she credit competitiveness among the queens to win her

favor either through food or conversation. Anehe complains about this to Iyase to make him understand how difficult it is to put his plan of poisoning Wazobia into action: "Wives no longer take turns to cook and compete for their husband's tongue and stomach. Wazobia insists that we all cook and share together. Reducing us all to the same level. There is no longer any incentive to try" (Onwueme 1988, 164). Against the Omu's advice that "women who survive funeral rituals dance in the marketplace as final mark of their innocence regarding their husband's death," Wazobia asks why "must widows be subjected to the torment of incessant funeral rites that men are free of under similar circumstances" (Onwueme 1988, 143).

She dismisses traditions that are not in keeping with the times by the declaration that "these women have more urgent roles than such ceremonies meant to extort the very last breath, wealth, and dignity from them!" (Onwueme 1988, 144). Wazobia also calls for emancipation from sources of overt patriarchal oppression, as in the scene in which a woman seeks shelter to escape her abusive husband. In her role as ruler, she strategically invokes traditions that are in keeping with the spirit of the times by telling the man: "Tradition forbids you to touch anyone who has protection of another. And more so, your king? Is it that men in these parts make traditions for others to bear them?" (Onwueme 1988, 146). Wazobia's ban on domestic abuse and her encouragement to women to educate themselves, to learn trades and occupations that will enable them to be independent, and to make meaning of their lives "with or without men" are indictments of structures which make women subservient despite the existence of a dual-sex system and matriarchy to counter the force of patriarchal authority.

The play thus expresses a rudimentary feminism and a progressive outlook on women's roles that takes into consideration the dual-sex system of organization and the possibility of its revision. This system allows for a separation between biological sex and social gender and is marked by an awareness that matriarchal systems cannot escape patriarchal influences. By recognizing non-egalitarian social structures, the play counters dichotomous representations of African women as either hapless victims of patriarchy or completely liberated agential subjects under matriarchy.

Class, Status, and Authority

Despite the valiant efforts of feminist anthropologists and sociologists to indicate that the dual-sex system permitted women to occupy social roles complementary to men, what the play indicates is in keeping with Amina Mama's view that, "in precolonial systems too, most women were subordinate to most men" (2000). Indeed, speaking about African gender studies such as ethnographies by Amadiume and Okonjo discussed in the previous section, Carole Boyce Davies calls for the continued importance of the intersections of gender and class as "a critical lever of analysis" (2015). Further, Davies's larger concern is how the "privileging of older systems affect our ability to understand the present reality in the face of tremendous inequities produced in the pre-Euro colonial, colonial, and contemporary moments" (2015, 16). Here it is important to remember again that the political situation in Nigeria in the late 1980s (when Onwueme's play was written) necessitated the intersectional analysis Davies calls for, and that such an analysis is perhaps even more important today when gender concerns seem to have become a lightning rod for fundamentalist and political opportunism.¹⁰

In keeping with Davies's call for intersectional and transnational analysis, we can see how *Wazobia* dramatizes the correlation between gender, class, and status through Wazobia's transformation from a monarch drunk with the attainment of absolute power to one who decides to use it to improve the status of women. In fact, the dynamics of gender and power are sustained through a combination of factors that include class, domicile, and biological sex. These factors offer ways of reevaluating the idealization of matriarchy within the dual-sex system. In *Wazobia*, the king regent is elected by the Priest of Ani. The Priest excludes the head of the women, the Omu, from the ceremony. In this clash between what Amadiume has called the "moral kinship authority of motherhood" and the "jural authority of patriarchy," it is the jural power wielded by the priest that holds sway in the exchange between him and the Omu:

OMU. And you call me woman?
I, the Omu, surpassed all women
King among women?

PRIEST OF ANI. King among women,
But woman all the same,
No matter how, I still smell woman in you.
OMU. And is that why you must leave me out of
Such important rituals as Ifejoku?

(Onwueme 1988, 134)

Even as market leader, the Omu cannot command or demand respect from the overwhelmingly patriarchal religious or political establishment.

The Priest's disparaging views invites readers and potential audiences to consider how the moral force of matriarchy did not necessarily guarantee power and respect to women, regardless of class or status, a possibility that is indicated but not developed in Amadiume's analysis when she claims that matriarchy "embodies two oppositional or contesting systems [matriarchy and patriarchy], the balance tilting and changing all the time" (1997, 93–94). The ceremonial marginalization of women from the regent's election in the play reveals patriarchal codes of conduct in matriarchal systems where a selective gendering of both male and female subjects indicates varying levels of authority and power. Wazobia's ascension to the throne invests her with the patriarchal "jural authority" that she uses to good effect. She also wins the Omu over to her side by making the Omu realize that change is the order of the day and that the past must give way to the present. The Omu's initial hostility to Wazobia's overturning of traditions is gradually transformed into an acceptance of change. This is in part due to the respect Wazobia accords her by addressing her as: "Queen and mother of the tribe! First among women. Thumb without which other fingers cannot snap" (Onwueme 1988, 154). The Omu is so completely won over that in the final "movement" of the play it is she who strategizes to combat and foil Iyase's plan to overthrow Wazobia as the king.

Iyase's strategies to link sexuality to political authority evince another form of power that connects to the organization of the sex and gender system in this society. This power dynamic involves an aggressive masculinity equated with exploitative domination. In contrast, the surrogate masculinity acquired by Wazobia by virtue of her kingship is linked to a pacifism that discredits competition and exploitation in personal and public life. This is evident in the non-competitive relations Wazobia

encourages between her co-wives, her proclamation of a ban on wife abuse, and her exhortation to men and women to work towards the betterment of their conditions by engaging in purposeful occupations.¹¹ In this scheme of things, where power is primarily juridical and patriarchal, only a few men, like Iyase and Idehen, and those who have attained surrogate masculinity, like Wazobia, possess authority. The general male populace referred to as the “termites of Idu” in *Parables*, the precursor to *Wazobia*, are virtually non-existent in *Wazobia*, except in the sixth movement when the “men and chiefs of Ilaaa have gathered in the palace square” to hear Iyase proclaim that Wazobia’s reign has robbed them of their “manhood” (Onwueme 1988, 168). The populace, identified as the “chorus of men,” respond to (rather than initiate or lead) the transfer of power suggested by Iyase:

IYASE. (*calmly*) You want your king deposed, then?

CHORUS OF MEN. Yes!

IDEHEN. Sons of Ilaaa! It is your choice! May your will be done!

(Onwueme 1988, 171)

The only person who protests against this arbitrary decision is the “foreigner” Ozoma, who is “powerless because he is a stranger who came and established himself and was honored with the chieftaincy title” (*Wazobia* 162, emphasis added). Ozoma walks out of the public meeting only to be reviled as “Wazobia’s wrapping cloth,” “woman wrapper,” and somebody who has sold his “manhood” (Onwueme 1988, 171).

The Priest of Ani, relatively lower down in the hierarchy of importance than the chiefs Iyase and Idehen, is divested of his authority when is forced to participate in Wazobia’s deposition ceremony despite his reservations, since he feels she was “the choice of the gods.” Despite requests to be left out of the deposition, he is coerced on the pretext that this is the “will of the people.” As in the apparently unanimous decision about the deposition, here too the chorus of men echoes what the titled chiefs declare:

IYASE. It is the people’s will

IDEHEN. You are the servants of the people

PRIEST OF ANI. We are the servants of the gods. The will of the gods.

CHORUS OF MEN. You serve the people! You serve the people!

(Onwueme 1988, 172)

Wazobia's firmness in combating the intrigue with the support of the women, led by the Omu, is a consequence and consolidation of her surrogate masculinity but also a recognition of women's strong sense of community. Far from being reduced to nonentities, the women rally around Wazobia, affirming their belief in her declaration: "Wazobia is us/ We are Wazobia." In the final scene of the play when the women, led by the Omu, emerge in their "natural state," forming "a naked legion" intended to "shame" the men, the men are "so shocked that they retreat, stagger, and freeze in their stupefaction" (Onwueme 1988, 166–173). Through this action the women assert matriarchal power by taking recourse to a traditional and peaceful means of collective protest.

If we take masculinity as one constituent of patriarchy then we must consider class, status, domicile, and titles as its other attributes. Through selective and relative disempowerment of several groups and individuals—women, the general male population, foreigners such as Ozoma, and the Priest of Ani—the play illustrates the role of class and status in the assignment of gender and power. Hence power is to be understood not merely an attribute of biological sex, but rather arising from social gender. Such a reading of the play qualifies the celebratory view of indigenous social structures which supposedly empower women. The women-centered structures show the incursion of patriarchy as revealed in the Omu's initial reluctance towards Wazobia's plan of emancipating women from outdated customs. Additionally, male-centered power structures impact both men and women, as is evident in the domination of the men of Idu, and selective disempowerment of some including priests and foreigners.

Polygamous Postcolonialism

I began this article by referring to Achebe's equation of polygamy with a corrupt postcolonialism that allies with transnational capital at the expense of national interests. Besides the obvious neocolonial deals that exploit people and their resources, such alliances directly impact women in postcolonial nations. Onwueme's plays from the 1990s and 2000s, including *Shakara: Dance-Hall Queen* and *What Mama Said*, reveal the insidious effects of neocolonial economic policies on women in

the nation. *Wazobia*, set in an unspecified pre-colonial or colonial era, precludes any direct connection between political corruption and the status of women. It can, however, serve as an allegory of women's struggles for political empowerment in postcolonial times, when an imbalance between national interests and transnational capital has led to a polygamous postcolonialism. *Wazobia* lends itself to such an interpretation in its representation of political intrigues, manipulation of the general populace, and deliberate exclusion of women from decisions that continues in Nigeria well into the twenty-first century. As Adichie muses in a 2016 article titled "Nigeria's Failed Promises," the democratic election of the former military head of state, Muhammadu Buhari, as president of Nigeria in 2015, seemed to hold out hope to people of her generation who had lived through times when the government had destroyed the national economy through its ill-conceived plans. However, these hopes were soon dashed as corruption became the order of the day, the government controlled all foreign exchange inflow, and extra-judicial killings became common.

Much as the dictators Babandiga or Buhari or Iyase in *Wazobia* might say, His Excellency in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* grandly declares: "African chiefs are always polygamists" (1987, 72). The consequences of African political polygamy are chiefs such as Iyase who declaims that African men's neglect of their "households" has led to the unnatural union of African women with Western modes of thinking: "Money! Money! The opium that sent us to sleep while the strangers slept with our women, leaving us with the *Wazobias*" (Onwueme 1988, 158). Bemoaning a lost ideal of African femininity, Iyase, like many other leaders, lays the blame firmly at the door of outside influences. The fruit of this "miscegenation," according to him, are the *Wazobias* or the *Beatrices* who represent a resistant (though compromised) feminism that is in opposition to Iyase and His Excellency's polygamous postcolonialism. Iyase's boundless ambition at the cost of the nation and its people is comparable to the careers of Nigeria's successive military dictators.

While the idea of a polygamous postcolonialism is useful for representing the relationships between African dictators, governments, and nation-states, it has very specific implications for women in those nation-states. My discussion of gender and power in the previous sections

bears on the transition from a pre-colonial to a postcolonial scenario via the incursive history of colonialism. The 1980s was an important decade for debates about the inclusion of Nigerian women in national politics. The playwright refers to this period through an argument between Iyase and Wazobia. When Iyase declaims that “women and youth” must be sent away during deliberations on important “state matters,” Wazobia asserts her royal authority to declare that their presence is necessary since “these matters affect the women and youth” as much as they affect “chiefs and princes” (Onwueme 1988, 148). Iyase’s claim that the union of white people with African women has produced the Wazobias is, in effect, an assault on Wazobia’s political practice that can be labeled feminist in its applications. It is not surprising that Iyase attributes this feminism to a deleterious Westernization since it undermines his prestige and power. Analogously, African postcolonialists and Western feminists have been perceived as some of these interest groups that focus on African underdevelopment by invoking “traditional” practices such as female genital mutilation, purdah, and polygamy, among others. For instance, theatre critics have described how female genital mutilation became an object of “development” for theatre workers in the 1990s, in part because it was a central concern for Western feminists in the 1980s (Batra 2007; Mike 1999).

Like female genital mutilation, polygamy sets up the possibility of a fraught dialogue between African postcolonial and Western feminists. The existence of non-African forms of polygamy (such as those among the Mormons and among Muslims in many other parts of the world) makes it somewhat difficult to ascribe it as a tradition endemic to underdeveloped nations and cultures. Zulu Sofola, one of the first published Nigerian women dramatists, comes to the defense of the practice in what one assumes is a rhetorical move against the denigration of African social and cultural practices as undermining the rights of women. The “educated African woman,” writes Sofola, is so totally “alienated from her culture, she does not even know how polygamy is organized and operated. Instead, she embraces monogamy where the husband is the central focus rather than a shared commodity as in polygamy...the more he is shared, the less central he becomes in the wife’s life, and the more central the mother/child dynamic becomes” (1998, 63). For Sofola, the practice is not an

indication of patriarchy as much as a measure of the woman and mother-centric systems that characterize African societies. Other African feminist perspectives on the nature and practice of polygamy that are similar to Sofola's position include Filomina Steady and Lila Abu-Lughod's opinions, though Abu-Lughod's ethnography of the Bedouins indicates the complex negotiations undertaken by women in polygamous relationships and the emotional and economic costs of the practice to both men and women.

Framing polygamy in ways that enables Western and non-Western feminists to debate their respective concerns is important, but it should not be the only way to discuss an issue with serious implications for both men and women. As already described, the Igbo have a tradition of cross-sex and same-sex polygamous relations, where men can take more than one wife and some rich titled women can have the status of "female husbands" and marry other women (Amadiume 1987; Uchendu 2007). When viewed as a means of multiplying sexual and domestic labor in the patriarchal household, polygamy is at the cost of women, even if it involves their "choice," a word fraught with physical, emotional, social, and economic implications. To what ends is polygamy chosen by women domestic and social relations? And what if it does not involve the choice or consent of a person who may be coerced into a polygamous situation against their will? These are legitimate concerns that need to be discussed in light of the cultural validation of polygamy in some societies and its feminist repudiation in others.

In an essay on "Nego-feminism," which she defines as no-ego or a negotiated feminism, Obioma Nnaemeka mentions, "Arrogating to themselves the moral responsibility to intervene to rescue women victims from the 'weird regimes,' Western feminists have brought to the fore intense debates about the conception of good, social justice, and moral responsibility from which, unfortunately, the humanity of those to be rescued is relegated to the background" (2002, 371). Nnaemeka mentions in particular Susan Moller Okin's essay on polygamy among African immigrants in France. In her opinion, Okin's analysis of polygamy as a cultural tradition leading to conjugal instability is faulty since Okin does not take into consideration economic and race relations in the wider social sphere that may also contribute to conjugal instability. Rather than subscribe to such views as Okin's, which would place African women on the lowest level of feminist consciousness (owing primarily to practices

such as polygamy), Nnaemeka believes that “African feminism challenges through negotiation, accommodation, and compromise. . . African women working for social change build on the indigenous by defining and modulating their feminist struggle in deference to cultural and local imperatives” (2002, 378). I would like to take this definition of African feminism, retain the emphasis on social change, particularly the racial and economic determinants Nnaemeka mentions while discussing polygamy, and connect it to the notion of choice to further elaborate on “polygamous postcolonialism” as proposed earlier in the essay. This allows me to bring together both feminist and postcolonial concerns related to women’s (lack of) participation in democratic processes in Nigeria. If, as both Achebe and Onwueme suggest, African leaders are willing polygamists wedded to both Africa and the West, often disregarding the former’s interests in an effort to woo the latter by entering into exploitative relations that harm national interests, do women have a choice in this model of governance? By not taking the national populace’s choice and opinion into consideration, the political leaders engage in undemocratic political and economic relations with transnational capitalism. Polygamous postcolonialism is thus reinforcement of state patriarchy by a strategic invocation of African indigenous traditions in some situations and a pandering to Western internationalist models of development in others. Often both of these gestures are invoked simultaneously.

The Nigerian state attempted to amend its record on women’s rights by putting in place structures that were suggested during the UN decade for women (1975–1985). Unlike the previous military regimes, though with none of the sincerity about participatory governance asserted by Wazobia, the Babangida regime, which came to power in Nigeria in 1985, introduced programs ostensibly intended to include women in development. One of the most famous schemes launched by the Babangida government was the Better Life for Rural Women Program, inaugurated and headed by the First Lady, Maryam Babangida. Much has been written about this initiative, which was meant to uplift “grassroots women” (Amadiume 2000; Ityavyar and Obiajunwa 1992; Mama 2000). The scheme is often hailed as an African attempt to solve the problem of underdevelopment in contrast to the self-serving solutions offered by Western interest groups. It was obvious that the motivations behind the Babangidas’ Better Life program had little to do with

the needs and priorities of the “grassroots” women it was intended to benefit. According to Mama, “[T]he military has found it opportune to exploit gender politics as a means to reassure . . . the international community” (2000, 33). The capitalist motivations behind these schemes have not gone unnoticed. Ityavyar and Obianjunwa observe, “the [Better Life for Rural Women] programme is all out to integrate the rural women into Nigeria’s main stream capitalism and perpetuate the subservient position of rural women in the family” (1992, 79). Given the consolidation of state power at the expense of the poor, especially women, it is not surprising that African feminists have taken a critical view of such state-sponsored measures aimed to empower women. Today such gestures are not even necessary.

Through anthropological accounts, literary analysis, feminist critique, and political commentary, I argued that *Wazobia* models a critical feminism that appraises the dual-sex social structure, patriarchy, and the dichotomy between biological sex and social gender as participating in non-egalitarian practices in indigenous societies. These include social hierarchies affecting both men and women, competitive relations between women in polygamous relationships, and unfair treatment of socially vulnerable women such as widows. In looking back at precolonial/colonial societies in Nigeria, the play also asks us as readers and its potential audiences to look forward towards a re-assessment of indigenous structures without idealizing them to serve a progressive agenda. The evocation of the past is a strategy to ground the feminist message in indigenous rather than Western traditions, to describe a time before or close to the period when Western influences were not dominant in the Nigerian landscape, and to present a woman ruler as an alternative to corrupt autocracies in Nigeria whose downfall is imminent as women become aware of their own capacities for leadership and change. In visualizing an end to the polygamous postcolonialism that has been a constant feature of the Nigerian political landscape at a time when no such end appeared imminent, the dramatist offers us a feminist postcolonial utopia. Although there are many impediments to the attainment of this vision, by offering it to us, the playwright joins other Nigerian authors and activists who imagine the possibilities of change amidst the very conditions that inhibit social transformation.

NOTES

1. See the article in *The Guardian* on Adichie's closing lecture at the PEN World Voices Festival available at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/may/11/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-fear-causing-offence-a-fetish>.
2. See, for instance, John Campbell's analysis of and suggestions for US policy to counter Boko Haram. Campbell is programmatic in his assessment that Nigeria's large oil reserves and place in the African economy present no opportunities for US and other outsiders to have leverage in the political and social trajectory of the country (2014).
3. South African President Jacob Zuma's supporters defend his polygamy in the name of Zulu tradition and custom. Zuma, who was tried for rape in 2005, married for the sixth time in 2012.
4. The university-based anti-establishment theatre of Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, and Wole Soyinka has yielded little in this direction. Women playwrights such as Zulu Sofola, Stella Oyedepo, and Julie Okoh, who deserve acknowledgement for their contribution to Nigerian drama, have not articulated a feminist aesthetic. In contrast to this dominant theatrical tradition, Onwueme's work allows a glimpse into the history and future of women's political roles in Nigeria.
5. In a recent article, Rotimi Fasan explains the connotations of *Wazobia*: "*Wazobia* is made up of three words, each of which means 'come' in Yoruba (*wa*), Hausa (*zo*) and Igbo (*bia*), Nigeria's three largest linguistic groups. It is a pidginized reference to Nigeria's indigenous languages, clothing, foods, and culture in general, viewed as one indivisible whole. A popular television programme of the 1970s that focussed on different aspects of Nigerian culture was called *wazobia*, as are several indigenous/pidgin language radio stations. The N50 Nigerian currency note, a legal tender, with its image of three human figures depicting persons from the three major ethnic groups is popularly called *wazobia*" (2015, 8).

Awam Amkpa's questions the efficacy of the title of Onwueme's play by stating that it "prompts the question whether the play is yet another call to national unity." He concludes that the author subverts the neologism *wazobia* with "a post-independence currency, by adapting it to her own call for unity among women fragmented by patriarchy and class" (2004, 64).

6. See also Oyeronke Oyewumi's *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, where the author claims that, historically, gender was not a structuring principle among the Oyo-Yoruba in Western Nigeria.
7. Ironically, in 2012, the BBC reported that Kamene Okonjo, retired sociology professor, was kidnapped in Delta State in Nigeria. Okonjo was released by her kidnappers and it was unclear whether a ransom had been paid. The motive was suspected to be political retaliation against Dr. Okonjo's daughter, Ngozi

Okonjo-Iweala, an economist who had led an anti-corruption drive to clean up a fuel subsidy program. The bizarre string of kidnappings in Nigeria has continued. Chimamanda Adichie's father was kidnapped in 2015 with the kidnappers demanding a huge ransom amount, as they were aware of Adichie's international reputation as a writer.

8. For contemporary manifestations of the disjunction between sex and gender in local communities that permitted women to take on "wives," see Amadiume's account of fieldwork in Nnobi in *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*.
9. For a nuanced analysis of competitiveness and collaboration in polygynous situations see Sangeetha Madhavan's essay "Best of Friends and Worst of Enemies: Competition and Collaboration in Polygyny."
10. Boyce Davies's scholarship is always wide-ranging and timely. In particular, she mentions how "The Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa (African Union 2003), the product of the work of African feminist lawyers and activists and scholars over the years, speaks to the kind of issues that the legal instrument was designed to address, particularly contemporary issues like the abduction of young women from school by Boko Haram in Nigeria or the rape of women in war in the Congo. And the denial of rights to women is not symmetrical; it can be taken as an index to persisting problems." (2015, 18).
11. Onwueme might be presenting Wazobia's pacifism as a deliberate contrast to the military exploits of powerful women rulers in Nigeria such as Queen Amina of Zaria (c1576) and Queen Kambasa of Bonny (c1450). The periods of rule of these and other women are described in the contributions to the volume on Nigerian women in history edited by Bolanle Awe (1992).

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