

JR C | RELIGION & CULTURE

Volume 25



Then & Now



RELIGION & CULTURE

A Canadian Graduate Student Journal
2015 Volume 25

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The Journal of Religion and Culture is produced
by the Graduate Students of the Department of Religion at Concordia University.

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Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec.

ISSN 1198-6395
Journal of Religion and Culture Volume 25, 2015

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JRC logo designed: Christopher Burkart
Book Design: Joseph E. Brito
Front cover photography: Alexander Nachaj
The type face of this journal is Minion Pro,
designed by Robert Slimbach,
issued as a digital Open Type font
by Adobe Systems, Mountain View California, 2000.

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Book Review

Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society

Ifi Amadiume. London: Zed Publications, 1987.
pp 223.\$48 USD (hardcover).

Ifi Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* is a publication which has begun to receive the renewed notice and attention of gender studies departments in North American Universities. Exploring the transposition of Western mores onto West African society, Amadiume outlines a new gender reality brought on by the imposition of European Christian values on a traditionally matrilineal society. Despite a history of wielding economic and social power, West African women have found themselves at a disadvantage vis-à-vis their male counterparts since the early 1900s, a disadvantage since attributed to a variety of alternating factors.

The book is based on fieldwork conducted by Amadiume in Nnobi—the Igbo area where the author hails from—in the 1970s. As such Amadiume was not considered a stranger or outside researcher, allowing her to conduct a revealing amount of work. Her fieldwork consisted of interviews with women, out of which she constructs a systematic description of the history and social problems of the area. The study is divided into three parts—pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial—after which she concludes by putting forth 22 questions for further research on African women, and 8 recommendations to aid in rectifying the marginalization of women's political power. Through these, Amadiume calls to attention the importance of religion in relation to women's agency. In particular, she suggests the initiation of debates on religion to reveal to women the positive and powerful roles in which women have played in various religions in order to arm them against those who would use religion against them.

To support her thesis, Amadiume seeks to reevaluate the importance of matriarchy. She shows that gender ideologies behind sexual division of labour in Igbo society stem from their myths of origin. Yet, the goddess Idemili, the central religious deity, encouraged industriousness: the title of

Ekwe was bestowed ritually upon women who created wealth through the control of others. One way was through *igba ohu*, woman-to-woman marriage. The ‘female husband,’ she who was in control, often had wives who bore children in her name. Powerful and assertive women were also able to dominate their husbands and not be stigmatized for it, since gender was understood as separate from biological sex. While patriarchal beliefs and a male ancestor cult existed, the goddess cult legitimized women becoming husbands in relation to their male partners— and consequently male themselves. It was not matriarchy that allowed for female power, contrary to popular beliefs about non-Western, non-patriarchal societies. Rather, it was a dual-gender system that celebrates typical ideals of femininity and motherhood, but in which gender realities are not necessarily fixed.

Whereas indigenous concepts were flexible in terms of gender and power, the new Western concepts were not. As Amadiume states, “a woman [is] always female regardless of her social achievements or status” (119). Further, unlike *Idemili*, God is meant to be a “he”. Consequently, all activities associated with the goddess were banned in the colonial period and women took on more passive social roles upheld by the Bible. The biblical story of creation, for example, was cited as proof of the necessity for the new and preferred power dynamic. Churchwomen could not see themselves as possible clergy members, and exclusion from politics and from the economy became acceptable in terms of Church law. Christianity not only condemned the goddess, but also banned the associated Ekwe title, effectively shattering symbols of female self-esteem and economic incentive.

Today, the Ekwe title continues to be felt as contrary to the teachings of the Church. Indigenous gender institutions were condemned as pagan and anti-Christian and have been abandoned or reinterpreted to the detriment of women. Interpreted according to canon law and Christian morality—which sets out acceptable forms of marriage and equates marriage with sexuality—the institution of woman-to-woman marriage, a practice that had allowed women to accumulate wealth, was forbidden. “Female husbands” and women’s inheritance laws inevitably were outlawed as well. Subordination is, as Amadiume shows, not the result of imposed domestic and maternal roles, which were valued in the pre-colonial period. Instead, it is the result of gender inflexibility and the eradication of the magico-religious means by which women gained and maintained a title allowing them control. This study, then, most definitely calls for further analysis of culture and belief systems worldwide that have legitimized women’s power.

Amadiume notes similar gender flexibility patterns in other West African societies, particularly the existence of invisible husbands in comparison to their wives, but the implications of her conclusions extend far beyond Nnobi's goddess religion. Islam, for instance, spread through modern West Africa faster under colonial rule in six decades than it had during the thousand years preceding European occupation and domination—for this to be the case, there is surely a relationship developing between gender, religion, and contemporary society that needs to be explored. For instance, Rabiatu Ammah recently argued that an emerging acceptance that the Qur'an does not explicitly restrict women from positions of authority. This has been the case across Muslim West Africa after independence and throughout the religious revival. Dakar in particular has seen the emergence of female marabouts (people well-versed in esoteric Islamic knowledge and practice) who are navigating this male-dominated domain. Of course, as women, they face problems in legitimating their work. Amber Gemmeke asserts that they are solving these by presenting themselves as possessing traits normally ascribed to male practitioners. Furthermore, elsewhere in West Africa, Gemmeke asserts that the increasing access that women have had to Islamic education since 1970 has led to an ever-growing number of female preachers and female religious scholars.

The relationship between Western religion and female agency is also relevant outside of Nnobi. According to Amadiume, in Muslim communities in the Northern states women have formed formal organizations. Unlike the women of Nnobi, they have accused Christian societies of not representing Muslim women's views or the teachings of Islam. Amadiume does not name it, but the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations is one such organization, allowing women from all denominations and walks of life to feel a sense of belonging and solidarity. This is notable because women's organizations and NGOs have also been relied on politically: Nadine Sieveking uses the example the Senegalese Family Code (drafted 1972), the contested nature of which has forced the government to rely on organized women to promote it at a grassroots level. However, instead of the secular approach that the state had expected, argumentation has been taken over by points referring to Islam. It would appear that discussing the code in terms of Islam legitimizes it in the eyes of many, and that associations of women are carrying out this important work.

It is key to note the particular timing of Islam's revival in relation to the damage left behind by colonial values, as well as the particular uses that

this religion is being put to. Of course, there is a long way to go—data has been shown to inversely correlate Islam with success in regards to millennium development goals in comparison to other religions (See Njoh, Ambe J. and Akiwumi, Fenda A. “The Impact of Religion on Women Empowerment as a Millennium Development Goal in Africa.” *Social Indicators Research* No. 107 (2012): 1-18.). Nevertheless, the rise of Islam, a non-Christian religion, has in many cases improved women’s situations post-independence.

It is increasingly true that women are negotiating their own space and are using religion instrumentally—and flexibly. In light of this, Amadiume seeks to correct the distorted image of third-world and African women as vulnerable, and says: “Any work by [and about] Third World women must therefore [be] political, challenging the new and growing patriarchal systems imposed on our societies through colonialism and Western religious and educational influences. We cannot afford to be indifferent researchers” (9).

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