

# **Grassroots Democracy: Kinship and Women's Political Economy as Sites of Development<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Introduction**

In a situation in which development in Africa has come to be seen as something that is externally derived, particularly as foreign aid, I want to argue the connection between the concept of kinship and local political economy. I do this to emphasize the importance of kinship structures and organisations in the civil life of grassroots women, and call for the recognition and respect of different sites of government in African societies. A more honest concern about research ethics can help us avoid reproducing the racism of colonialism and imperialism.

## **Kinship ethics and social research**

Let me share some experiences from my own engagement in field work at home, to highlight the importance of kinship ethics. I have given a more detailed account of my field experiences elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> One of the issues I wrote about concerns the question of reciprocity. During field work, I have never considered myself a visitor in my host community. I usually saw myself as returning home to my own people. I was always conscious of racism and negative geo-cultural classifications and their implications in the global system. I interact with my people as a social subject

bound by kinship ethics, a member of an extended family, a daughter, a sister, a mother, since I know that all these things are important in determining the motives and methodology of a researcher. Relations of affinity provides me a kinship network that I can depend on for support. Often, it was the women who organised this help, invoking the matriarchal kinship morality of *umunne*, the spirit of common motherhood, to cross gender and class barriers. By setting up my own household in the village and mothering children who were kin and nonkin, I took my place in the local classificatory systems, interacting in local social relations, empathizing and reciprocating. My encounter was usually based on status and gender. By slotting into my rightful place in a kinship society, I was participating in the social relations involving expected and accepted patterns of reciprocity. There was no need to invent or look for an alien notion of civil society that would make natives strangers to their own customs and culture in their own land. My knowledge of gender and development politics is empirical.

## Concepts and methods

In *Reinventing Africa, Matriarchy, Religion and Culture*<sup>3</sup>, a historical analysis of the character of the culture and politics of gender, I argue for autonomy in self-determination and critique European patriarchal single paradigm of truth. The neo-colonial context compels us to critically assess conventional concepts and tools of analysis, including research methodologies and knowledges.

What methodology and what perspective would enable us to recognise and respect the legitimacy of the economic and civic work of grassroots women, their village organisations as democratic entities; their decentralised political systems and the diffusion of power among various interest groups and organisations?

In *Reinventing Africa*, I dismiss the whole notion of patriarchal paradigmatic monolithism by the thesis of paradigmatic opposition and structural gender contestation, as a result of the presence of matriarchy in the fundamentals of the ideas of kinship in ancient and traditional Africa, which continues into the present. I use the traditional African religion in Nnobi

which was a subject of my book *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*<sup>4</sup> to demonstrate the primacy of gender in the construction and contestation of religious claims, thus showing the visibility of women in religion, both as symbolists and symbols of worship. Women are culture and institution makers and not just objects of manipulation. We can therefore speak of women's religions, rituals, gendered moralities and ethics of social justice. These gendered notions also determine the characters of social institutions, cultures and states. It is the choice of gendered morality of civility and of state that would determine a just society and not the mere presence of women in politics. As I argue in *Reinventing Africa*, paradigmatic pluralism offers a perspective which takes into consideration the question of contestation and choice. The myths of Gods and Goddesses embody contesting and complementary systems, giving us a choice of narratives to think with.

### **One narrative of women and development: an Igbo example from Nigeria**

In 1985, following the UN End of Decade for Women and vigorous campaign to set up Ministries for women as an instrument of women's development, the Nigerian government formally appointed the Committee on Women and Development. Soon after it was set up, the committee, through direct consultation and fact-finding visits, effectively highlighted the social and economic conditions and the needs of rural women. Its first tours of some women's projects in Anambra State in February 1986<sup>5</sup> saw what women's groups were doing in a few communities, the assistance they received from government, and some of their problems, enabling the committee to recommend areas where the government could assist.

Apart from the fact that every Igbo woman belongs to a women's organisation by kinship rights, whether as a daughter, wife and village female citizen, information which I received from the Social Welfare Division of Anambra State Ministry of Information, Social Development, Youth, Sports and Culture in 1987 indicated that there were 136 registered women's organisations in Anambra State which included: women's

patriotic unions, women's improvement unions, associations of wives of professional men, church women's organisations, such as mothers unions and Christian mothers, women's trade organisations, market women, organisations of women contractors and women in industry, women's people's clubs, okwesilieze women's clubs [women who are fit to be kings] of very wealthy and independent business women. It is therefore obvious that visits by the committee were made only to a very select few. The visits were formal and included members of the committee, a staff member from the State Ministry of Agriculture, and a press representative from the State Ministry of Information.

One project noted in the committee's report was the Ojoto Health Centre, built by the Njikoka Women's Organisation in 1956 and turned over to the state government in 1972. The compound and building continued to be maintained by the Njikoka Women's Organisation who did the painting, wiring and cleaning, although the State Department of Rural Development supplied the electricity generating plant used at the health centre. The State Water Board provided two water boreholes, and the Federal Ministry of Health supplied the freezer for vaccines. Drugs were supplied by the State Ministry of Health and the World Health Organisation, but patients had to pay for them. A village health volunteer ran the small pharmacy, while a trained government health officer controlled the dispensary. The maternity section was run by a nursing sister, a staff nurse, and twelve volunteer health aides. Services at the centre included immunisation and general treatment for the public. Problems at the health centre included lack of money for paying health workers and lack of co-operation among government staff, village health workers, and the community. There was also no resident doctor.

In addition to the health centre, Njikoka Women's Organisation ran a farm which had not done well because of infertile soil and poor-quality seedlings. They hoped to start a fish pond and poultry farm. The women had to seek approval from the government before the fish pond project could begin, however, and they needed veterinary extension staff to assist with the poultry farm. They also needed the government-subsidised rate for the purchase of fertilizers, equipment, and seedlings and improved training for their personnel.

Another project was the Oba multi-purpose centre and home, which had been built by the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and handed over to the Oba Women Patriotic Union, which actually

ran the centre. It was a vocational centre for training young girls and women in handicrafts, agriculture, and home economics. It included a daycare centre, a nutrition unit with kitchen, gas cooker, refrigerator, freezer, basins, and cooking utensils, and a home-management unit with knitting and sewing machines and other materials. The machines were supposed to be maintained by the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, but most machines had packed up because of lack of maintenance. Teachers were paid by the women's organisation from the sale of products.

The committee saw a need for personnel who could train teachers on the use of some of the machines. The women themselves requested that the government take over payment of teachers and workers at the centre and asked that it assist in building a hostel for visitors. They also wanted the government to assist them in setting up money-yielding ventures and in supplying agricultural extension staff and fertilizer at the government-subsidised rate.

In Enugu-Ngwuo there were two sister organisations, the United Soul Sisters of Ngwuo and Nightingale Sisters of Ngwuo. The Nightingale Sisters ran a home-economics centre and received equipment from the Federal Department of Rural Development. Some women trained in their centre found jobs in schools and hospitals as cooks, while others became self-employed. The United Sisters had evening home-economics and adult-education programmes. Its first group graduated in 1979. In 1982, they introduced courses at the secondary school level. They also hoped to build a multi-purpose centre which would include adult primary and secondary schools, a nursery school, and a home-economics hall. They had acquired land to start a vegetable garden as an income-generating project and a demonstration farm for students. Their problems included lack of suitable accommodation and financing for the multi-purpose centre, teachers' salaries, and utilities such as electricity bills. Since much of their money was spent on renting typewriters, they had requested supply of typewriters from government, as well as home-economics teachers, teaching aides for the nursery school, and home-economics equipment.

The committee expressed disapproval over the age of children who attended the evening primary school which ran from 6:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m, arguing that the children should be in bed. The Soul Sisters pointed out that most of the children were house-maids<sup>6</sup> and that the Adult Education Unit of the Ministry

of Education had approved the scheme. The Sisters, however, promised to reschedule the time.

The Nachi Women's Group was sponsored by Ezinne<sup>7</sup> Women's Association and was jointly run with the State Ministry of Agriculture and the Federal Department of Rural Development, which supplied teaching equipment. The women's group offered classes in food and nutrition, home management, dress-making, backyard poultry production, and small-scale vegetable gardening. They aimed at income-generating skills to help rural women improve their standard of living and to foster unity among women in the town. The products they made included soaps, pomades, and snacks.

They too had a number of problems. One was a need for a place of instruction, as they were sharing a church hall with many other groups—a kindergarten, youth organisations, and other church groups. They also lacked transportation, both for themselves and for Ministry officials who were willing to come and teach. The growing numbers of participants meant a need for more equipment, and other commitments, such as paying school fees for their children, made it impossible for the women to make regular contributions toward the purchase of equipment on a regular basis.

The women wanted an adult-education programme so they could learn to read and write. They wanted assistance in setting up a poultry farm. They requested a supply of fertilizer at the government rate, improved seedlings, and agricultural equipment. They also wanted the government to equip their health centre, which was not in use. This meant that they had to travel far away to Oji or Udi for medical treatment. Lastly, they requested electrification, water, a resident home-economics supervisor, and more home-economics centres in the town.

I have used these example to show how the picture of African women's involvement in development is distorted and incomplete when listed as projects in this way. When compared with the case of women in Nnobi that I have described in my work, we realize that rural women are more occupied with their busy lives around daily farming or other commercial activities in their local political economy, and that projects as described above are part-time activities which are externally motivated. Women had better access to government ministries the nearer their location to the state capital, and only if they 'knew someone inside'. As such, projects have a corrupting influence in creating favoured groups or individuals in new class hierarchies

because of structural defects in the mechanisms of implementation of government policies.

## **Structural defects of the Committee on Women and Development**

Given the stated aims and objectives of the Committee on Women and Development and its specific focus on rural women, the elitist composition of the committee was questionable. The women on the committee were drawn from top positions in the civil service. The committee itself was located in the federal capital and the states' capitals. In addition, it lacked the funding and staff necessary to set up an effective system of linkages and contact with women at the grassroots level. In Anambra State, for example, a women's unit was set up in the Social Welfare Division of the Ministry of Information, Social Development, Youth, Sports and Culture. Its entire staff was one female welfare officer, who was also secretary to the Committee on Women and Development. Her budget for fiscal year 1987 was 1000 naira. The weakness and ineffectiveness of the committee as the formal instrument of development for rural women provided excuse for the emergence in the later 1980s of the cult of 'First Lady', organizing around the business of women and development.

In Britain, where all basic infrastructural amenities were provided by local government and where local government concerns itself with the provision of social services, from inside knowledge as a women's officer, I know that a Women's Unit normally employs several officers. They serve a women's committee, which budgets thousands—and sometimes millions—of pounds, a figure based on a percentage of the total Local Government Council capital budget. A women's committee with the aims and objectives of the Committee on Women and Development would normally be an integral part of a Local Government Council. The Anambra State Commissioner, who set up the committee in his Ministry, stressed the importance of promoting measures designed to integrate women in development. He should have created the women's unit and its committee as part of the local government council.

When we look at the function of a local government women's committee in the British local government system, from which

the Nigerian model is derived, we find the local government women's unit serves the Women's Committee, which consists of elected councillors, co-opted representatives of local women's organisations, and local residents. The women's unit functions as an administrative arm of the women's committee which is a policy-making body. If this structure is applied effectively to develop an effective and gendered local government democracy in Nigeria, both organisations would consult effectively with rural women.

Such a committee would provide first-hand information, guidance, and 'enlightenment' to those rural women who are illiterate, uninformed, and marginalised and thus integrate all women into governmental development plans and strategies through democratic processes—that is, through local or community self-government. The powerful meetings of the women's committee would provide a discussion forum where different classes of women can discuss and argue issues, policies, budget allocations, grants and funding as a matter of civil rights.

Under such a democratic arrangement, Nnobi women's council would bring their cultural traditions of orature and organisational skills into contemporary political forum. They would debate policies about market development in the women's committee of their local government. They would go to the women's committee for funding for their projects, so would Njikoka women, Oba women, Enugu-Ngwuo women, Nachi women, and numerous local women's groups and organisations in other Nigerian communities. Such a unitary system would encourage inter-community and regional exchanges and alliances among women from different local communities. Such a system structurally linking women to government would encourage the decentralisation of state power and a more regionally balanced democracy. It would enable women and their communities and local governments to negotiate the degree of access they wish to grant international development agencies. Most of all, local women would be better placed to respond to the corrupting powers that sections of elite women derive as agents of donor agencies.

Under such a system, how would international development agencies argue the right to intervene in democratic communities in Africa? I will look briefly at a few such agencies functioning in Nigeria, how they are structured, what they say they are doing, and the real effects of their presence as an instrument of class reproduction.



## **Developmentalism, corruption and class reproduction**

I pointed out that Nnobi women, whose economic activities i have knowledge of, and women of the other Igbo communities whose projects were visited in 1986 by the committee on women and development, saw their daily economic and social activities as integrated in the development of their towns. The idea of development as itemised projects was externally imposed. When women were told to submit a list of their projects, we find that the list involved part-time concerns or activities outside their daily duties. It is sad therefore that more attention and money go to these projects rather than building up local government infrastructures. In 1986, The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) approved grants totalling \$1 million (U.S.) for developing the skills of rural women in Nigeria. The scheme was to be set up within the Home Economics Division of the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Water Resources and Rural Development. The grant also provided for a teacher-training project in Gongola State.

When we look at the activities of the UNDP scheme, they are exactly the same as the projects described by women to the Committee on Women and Development. When women say that they receive equipments and so on from the Ministry of Agriculture, we see how women's demands have been influenced by dictates of the UNDP. At the time, other activities of the scheme were limited to Enugu, Ibadan, and Jos. The Home Economics Division was mandated to train women in various work skills to increase the production of processed farm, semi-agricultural, and craft products, using appropriate technology and local resources. Uneven development can be seen in its policy to identify specific women's groups and their needs, provide food-processing, preservation, and storage equipment to ten select village women's groups, and to train women in basic business management skills, including the formation and operation of co-operatives. We saw that women's access to these resources depended on their having someone inside the establishment. This would therefore be breeding corruption and inequality.

While the UNDP worked through a government ministry, there are other independent international organisations such as The Center for Applied Religion and Education/Christian Association of Nigeria (CARE/CANS) also claiming to work on

development. Western cultural imperialism has continued recently in the religious arms of development under bodies set up by the Christian establishment.

CARE holds workshops which aim to motivate group leaders in the churches and communities, through discussion and dialogue, on main issues obstructing women's active participation in their own development. CARE also hopes to enable women group leaders discover the role that a committed sharing group can play in the development of women themselves and their community. To achieve this, it hopes to enable women's groups involved in rural development in Africa to create a network for sharing problems and gains with women from other parts of the world as a way of learning from one another, thereby improving their situations.

Each Centre of Applied Religion and Education has a co-ordinator who takes charge of its women's programme and projects.

CARE/CANS in its sectional interest obviously mixes church moral training with development interests, and is likely to have more success reaching rural Christian women to the exclusion of other women. This is hardly the desired objectives of national development. This example further exposes problems arising from lack of effective government and local government infrastructure.

All these cases prove that African women have continued to build traditional women's organisations, while bourgeois women and agents of development agencies are capitalising on their knowledge of the existence of these organisations. Like capitalist entrepreneurs, they use a select list to solicit external funding and they use externally determined development policies to not only fragment women's gender solidarity organisations and councils, but also distract women from their traditional commitment to the development of their towns and villages.

## **Gender and class consequences of external intervention**

In our criticisms of the role of the United Nations and its development agencies in Africa, we tend to stress more economic and policy issues, and don't lay enough emphasis on the role of

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these agencies in gender and class reproduction in the formations of elite movements and leadership in Africa. Every development strategy devised by the Economic Commission for Africa of the United Nations (ECA)–modernization theory and its variants from the 50s to the 70s, to Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) from the 80s to this day–in reality, has translated into punishment of the poor for the corruption of their governments. Under the earlier strategies before SAP, we at least had strong governments, even though the operators were corrupt. We also witnessed imaginative opposition in left intellectuals and activists denouncing the ills of the corrupt politicians. They condemned imperialism and external capitalist intervention, whether economic, political or cultural, pointing out that the presence of these forces leads to underdevelopment. These discourses had a radicalising influence on African feminists and radical women's groups. But it all took place in a climate of strong feelings of the sovereignty of the state.

Development issues are everyday activities everywhere, whether in Africa or Europe or America. Planned, institutionalized intervention in the name of development is a continuation of colonialism and modernisation. Nnobi women have never heard about agencies that claim to pioneer the human resource development approach, yet they combine a number of approaches in their personal, kinship and community efforts in welfare, human resource, moral ethics, rights and social justice, and empowerment. The major difference is that they don't command so much dollars and don't think up development approaches for women in Europe or America. They don't tell women elsewhere how to live their lives.

My argument is not that African communities should not receive assistance. I am arguing against the patterns of development strategies that have undermined the state in Africa and fragmented communities. I am also arguing against the development interventions that have undermined community self-reliance and encouraged dependency. I am arguing against the development mentality that has accepted refugee camps as permanent homes for millions of Africans, as for example, the case of 2 million Rwandan refugees who lived in a refugee camp in Zaire for two years and cost the United Nations one million dollars a day.

There is a sense in the welfare approach of UNICEF which is to give limited assistance and not to build government or organise anyone, as such, it must approach the communities via

governments. Productive and community activities are national issues for government policy and civic groups to negotiate contextually as local forces play themselves out and reach an equilibrium. External intervention disrupts these local contestations and creates terrible imbalance in the system. In contemporary times, it has created dictatorships as for example the case of military regimes in Nigeria and the emergence of a cult of 'First Lady' under the Ibrahim Babangida regime, and reproduced in the Abacha successor regime.

## Notes

1. The data in this paper is taken from my forthcoming book: Ifi Amadiume, *Daughters of the goddess and daughters of imperialism: African women struggle for power and democracy*, due out later this year.
2. Ifi Amadiume, "The mouth that spoke a falsehood will later speak the truth: Going home to the field in Eastern Nigeria" in Diana Bell, Patricia Caplan, Wazir Jahan Abdul Karim, eds., *Gendered fields: women, men & ethnography*, London: Routledge 1993.
3. Ifi Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa, matriarchy, religion and culture*, Zed Books: London & New York, 1997.
4. Ifi Amadiume, *Male daughters, female husbands: gender and sex in an African society*, Zed Books: London & New York, 1987.
5. Interview and reports given to me by Mrs Chikodi J. Amobi, secretary Women's Unit of Anambra State Women and Development Committee. She was also a Senior Social Welfare Officer at the State's Ministry of Information, Social Development, Youth, Sports and Culture.
6. Most elite women got around the problem of education for their maids by having at least two, sending one to morning school and the other to afternoon classes so that there was always one maid in the house.
7. ezinne in Igbo means beautiful-good mother, a heritage from the Goddess and a name popular with daughters of the goddess.