

## The Female King of Colonial Nigeria: Ahebi Ugbabe

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**Reviewer:** Ogechukwu Ezekwem

*The Female King of Colonial Nigeria* is the story of a woman, Ahebi Ugbabe, who rose from the status of a local girl and commercial sex worker to that of a village headman, a warrant chief and a king. Ahebi was born in Enugu-Ezike, an Igbo community, in the late 19th century. At the age of 13 or 14, she fled into neighboring Igala land to escape marriage to a deity as propitiation for her father's sins. While in exile, she became a commercial sex worker, and in this way, aligned herself with powerful men such as the ruler of Igala, and British colonial officials. She also became fluent in pidgin English and other African languages, a skill that proved relevant to her future political ambitions. The early 20th century was a period of British incursion into Igboland, and Ahebi used this to her benefit by leading the British forces into Enugu Ezike, her hometown. As a reward for her support, the British invaders installed her as a village headman. Due to her efficiency and continued loyalty, she was elevated to the post of warrant chief, a feat that was contrary to British policy of female political exclusion in colonial Nigeria. With the help of the Attah (ruler) of Igala, whose influence extended to Northern Igbo land, Ahebi Ugbabe became king of Enugu-Ezike, therefore upsetting the gendered politics in her community. As king, she performed female masculinities, and superseded all existing male political hierarchy and authority. However, when she attempted to assume full manhood by introducing her own masquerade, a deed performed only by men fully initiated into the masquerade cult, she met serious resistance from which she never recovered. For fear that her society may not accord her a befitting burial, Ahebi performed her own funeral in her life time. When she eventually died in 1948, she had a very quiet send-off. Notwithstanding, she became deified as a goddess in her mother's hometown, and is remembered in many Enugu-Ezike songs and parables.

Nwando Achebe reconstructs Ahebi's story in a very interesting and engaging way. She surveys the society in which Ahebi grew up, the possible influences on her life while in exile, and the nature of the society in which she re-emerged as a man. She takes the reader through every step of her journey in search of Ahebi. Throughout her text, she describes the processes in which she gathered her information and arrived at her conclusions. Her approach is instructive to students of history in terms of the possible challenges of oral history, especially community silence and selective memory, and field research methods. It also offers a practical insight into the process of balancing and validating oral data. Achebe's book is a brilliant reconstruction of local history through a combination of oral interviews, archival sources, published materials, and, interestingly, personal communications. The manner in which she documents and applies

personal communications is commendable. It is through one of these private correspondences that she learns of Wangu Wa Makeni, a Kikuyu woman chief, who became recognized by the British in 1901. She points out that Wangu was not made a Warrant Chief by the British, but her existing status as a female chief was only endorsed (p. 225).

Achebe's study of Ahebi Ugbabe is significant because it salvaged the history of a woman who became the only warrant chief in colonial Nigeria, and perhaps Africa. Her book distinguishes between Western concepts of gender and sexuality, and the indigenous meanings of these concepts in an African setting. She highlights the fluidity of gender and sex in Igbo land, where a woman, under certain circumstances, can assume the religious and social status of a man. A menopausal woman of wealth and integrity can also socially transform into a man, and enjoy the rights and obligations accorded to men. Such fluidity of gender and sex in Igbo land is portrayed in the life of Ahebi who, as warrant chief and king, became a man and assumed otherwise male roles, including marrying wives for herself and her brothers. Achebe repeatedly and rightly states that, in Igbo land, this practice of woman-to-woman marriage is totally unrelated to homosexuality. It is only a mark of wealth and social status. These wives married by women had sexual relations with men. However, children born of such marriages belonged to the female husband.

Another routinely misunderstood issue which Achebe analyzes is the concept of bride-price. The bride-price is routinely interpreted in Western feminist thought as a payment for a wife, and therefore derogatory. Achebe chooses to interpret this practice as 'child price' (p. 40) since it has nothing to do with the wife. This is an important and valid assessment because, in traditional Igbo land, when a couple marries or cohabits without paying the bride-price, all children from such marriage belongs to and can be claimed by the girl's family. As Achebe points out, the symbolism of the bride-price is not a payment for the woman, but a transfer of the right to all children born of that marriage to the groom and his family.

Achebe further offers an African interpretation of commercial sex work which she distinguished from its Western form. She portrays it as an individual affair often practiced from the comfort of one's home. Her book shows that African social and cultural institutions can have meanings and symbolisms different from their Western counterparts

While Achebe acknowledges that her book is about 'interpretation of knowledge about gender in Africa' (p. 206), and is a story of one woman's agency in an era of marginalization of women, she does not seem to be concerned with immersing Ahebi's story in the broader historiography of female rulers in Nigeria and Africa. At first, I was concerned that her book does not relate to a wider historiographical context, and I am sure that several readers will be quick to draw this conclusion. However, I realized soon enough that this is the kind of history she set out to write. Hers is a deliberate attempt to reconstruct the history of a local people, devoid of Western interpretive models and theoretical frameworks. She argues that 'there are some stories that simply need to be told' (p. 14). Elsewhere, she states that 'I write for several audiences, but my primary audience is the people who own the stories I am telling' (p. 229). Thus, Achebe's approach is a conscious choice which every historian has a right to make. While this approach may limit her audience, it enables Achebe to tell the Igbo story through an indigenous Igbo lens.

However, I find Achebe's use of the Igbo language across the text cumbersome for non-Igbo speakers. There are terms which do not have a satisfactory English version, and thus need to be written and then further explained in English, but Achebe goes beyond this. She prefers to write both complex terms and certain simple phrases in Igbo language. For instance, she wrote that 'Ahebi visited *be ikwu nne ya* (her mother's village)' (p. 77). It is simpler and sufficient to say that 'Ahebi visited her mother's village'. Though she offers the English meanings of these Igbo words in the text, in many cases, the English explanations suffice.

Achebe's book also serves as a contribution to Igbo studies. It reveals the nature and symbolism of various Igbo practices such as marriage to a deity and woman-to-woman marriage. Achebe traces these practices to the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade when entire communities were pillaged. As a result, deity marriage

and woman-to-woman marriage were instituted in Northern Igbo land in order to replenish the population (pp. 58–9). She also reinterprets oral traditions of state formation in Igbo land, which she depicted as having connotations beyond the actual stories. She offers an alternative interpretation of Enugu-Ezike traditions of origin. According to one of these traditions of origin, Ezike, a man from Igala, went on a hunting expedition, shot an elephant and followed it to Ugwueka hill in the present Enugu Ezike where it died. In the process, Ezike was met by the priest of Ugwueka who allowed him to settle on the hills. Ezike's descendants eventually formed the town of Enugu-Ezike. According to Achebe, this story of a dead elephant and Ezike's settlement in Ugwueka hill may be an allusion to a contest between a settler community and the indigenous population (p. 32). This is an interesting way to interpret various Igbo traditions of origin.

In the final chapter of her book, Achebe writes about Ahebi's final bid to realize full manhood by introducing her own masquerade. This was regarded by the elders of Enugu-Ezike as the ultimate insolence. In Igbo land, masquerades were considered as the spirits of the ancestors, and it was a taboo for any biological woman to control them. Even men had their proscriptions. Unless a man was fully initiated into the masquerade cult, he could neither control the masquerade nor behold a naked mask. Ahebi's introduction of her own mask was therefore viewed as an abomination which, according to Achebe, led to the ultimate resistance to her powers, and her decline. This resistance, in Achebe's words, revealed 'Igbo society's resolve about the extent to which female gendered transformations would be allowed to materialize' (p. 206). I would like to point out that Ahebi's successful transitions from an ordinary woman to a female headman, a warrant chief and a king were mostly successful because she had British support. Becoming a female king was as daunting and bizarre to her community as attempting to introduce her own masked spirit. Prior to Ahebi's ascent, Enugu-Ezike had no king, least of all an autocratic female one who had no regard for traditional male authority or hierarchy. Ahebi was only able to become king and remain one because she had the support of the British colonial government, and the Attah of Igala. Had the British not suddenly withdrawn their support from Ahebi over the issue of the mask, and therefore encouraged open defiance to her authority, perhaps Ahebi would also have succeeded in this final quest of achieving full manhood. When her mask was confiscated by the male elders of Enugu-Ezike, she took the matter to a colonial court which transferred the case to the British resident in Onitsha. If the British resident had ruled in Ahebi's favor, the male gerontocracy would have yet again become helpless over this new ambition. Therefore, I do not think that her failure in this regard was because of limitations of the Igbo regarding female gender transformation, but mostly because she had lost the otherwise unwavering support of the British, who obviously had no further need of her. Moreover, unless Achebe implies that the male leaders of the community did not resist Ahebi's accession as king and her disregard for established male authority, it would have been relevant if she elaborated on the form this resistance had taken. Otherwise, one is left to believe that they simply threw up their hands in frustration and accepted Ahebi as King.

Nwando Achebe's book is well-written, amply researched, and efficiently documented. It is a major contribution to African history and the practice of oral history. It also offers African-based insights and interpretations to various Western concepts in gender and sexuality studies. *The Female King of Colonial Nigeria* not only tells the tale of Ahebi Ugbabe, the woman who became king, but also takes readers on a field trip through her life and times. The greatest significance of Achebe's writing style and methodology is that it enables the reader to criticize and analyze her use of data and her conclusions. It also enables one to make his/her own inferences from Achebe's work. This is only possible because she reveals the intricacies surrounding her data collection and her findings. She engages her readers in the entire process of her field work, from her decision to study Ahebi to her final days in Enugu-Ezike.

The author acknowledges receipt of the review, but does not wish to comment.

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