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## REFERENCES

ACHEBE, Nwando. — *The Female King of Colonial Nigeria: Ahebi Ugbabe*. Bloomington-Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2011, 305 p., maps, ill., bibl., index.

- 1 This book tells three distinct histories. The first, and most original and important contribution, is a biography of colonial Nigeria's only known female warrant chief, Ahebi Ugbabe, who ruled over a collection of 33 villages known as Enugu-Ezike from 1918-1948. The second is a social history/ethnography of northern Igboland that emphasizes the perspectives of the author's Igbo informants. And the third is how the author managed to reconstruct Ugbabe's life and times when conventional sources, including oral history, have so very little to say about her.
- 2 Ugbabe is without doubt a fascinating figure, deserving of critical attention not only for her performance of "female masculinity" but also for her role as a collaborator in the extension of British colonial rule. Prior to asserting herself as a "king" ("eze") over a community that had never before had such an entity, she was a prostitute in the neighbouring district. During her time as eze she married numerous women who gave birth to her children by proxy. She possessed a small army of enforcers and her "palace" became the locus of some controversy. Indeed, although Achebe does her best to portray Ugbabe in a sympathetic light, she emerges as a rather unsavoury and uninspiring character. Among the main charges against her after a decade of rule were "refusing to consult the elders, using forced labor, receiving bribes and forcibly taking away men's wives" (p. 172). Her main contribution to the district's development seems to have been a primary school named after her and now in a state of disrepair.
- 3 On the whole, the book engages well with existing scholarship, combatively so in the case of those who would retroactively imagine a lesbian-like quality to female kings in

Africa. Achebe substantiates the argument that the Igbo, like many other African cultures, had a flexible sex/gender system whereby social status was linked more to ritual performance than to biological bodies. Claims that gender was not an important social marker prior to colonialism, however, are clearly not warranted by Achebe's evidence. Ugbabe may have been tolerated, perhaps even admired, as *eze* up to a certain point. However, a line still existed beyond which a woman could not pass. She crossed that line when she committed "the abomination" of performing a truly men-only ritual, bringing out a sacred mask. For this she was publicly humiliated by the male elders and, in Achebe's analysis, later felt obliged to perform her own ritual burial while still alive (no one respected her enough to bury her when she was really dead was the motive).

- 4 These are inherently difficult topics to research, and Achebe tries some innovative approaches. She is not completely successful. The biography aspect of the book in particular suffers from simple lack of evidence. There are huge gaps in the narrative, and a great deal of (admitted) speculation in an attempt to fill in them. Sometimes one has to wonder, why bother? A whole section speculates on Ugbabe's wanderings as a child running away from home, complete with maps, descriptions of the villages and countryside, and distances provided in precise kilometres. In other cases, the gap is filled by verbatim transcripts of sample court cases, sheet music, artistic impressions (apparently no photos exist of Ugbabe), diary-like reconstructions of Achebe's own conversations with people, and long interviews with old people recalling sometimes tangential memories. There is a significant amount of repetition, often verbatim. At one point the author cites a certain famous novel to illustrate what Igbo society was like at the onset of British rule.
- 5 Given the androcentric nature of most sources in colonial Africa, a degree of speculation or cognitive reasoning from fictional or somewhat analogous accounts is unavoidable when doing the history of gender and sexuality. Moreover, some of the speculation is interestingly provocative and might lead researchers to ask pointed questions of similar topics in the future. Often, however, with such a glaring lack of verifiable evidence, Achebe sounds disconcertingly uncertain (or too certain). Sections devoted to sexuality are almost exclusively assertive, with Achebe claiming lots of female-controlled heterosexual pleasure. As an example, the relationship between Ugbabe and her wives was "one of companionship, a close friendship, such as best girlfriends might have" (p. 148). How does Achebe know this and so emphatically rule out either an erotic element (however defined) or patriarchal abusiveness (which would seem to fit with Ugbabe's other behaviours)? If we go by her footnote, her surely-anachronistic claim about Ugbabe's wives rests on two ethnographic overviews of the whole continent.
- 6 Achebe presents her material in a chattier way than is the dominant tendency in Western academic publishing. This involves placing an emphasis on relationships, including between the historical subjects (so-and-so was related to so-and-so), between the living and the ancestors or spirits, and between the researcher and researched. It is an intriguing idea, and makes for some lively passages. Ultimately, however, I was not convinced that it is really helpful to the scholarship. Indeed, it results in some rather dry lists of names which may be of interest to the people of Enugu-Ezike but unlikely anywhere else. It also results in quite a lot of detail about Achebe's personal interactions with people. Acknowledgements run to no less than five pages with (I have

never seen this before) a footnote—reproducing a praise email Achebe received from a mentor.

- 7 These are quibbles—Achebe is to be commended for trying to break out of the mould. She has enriched the historiography of gender and sexuality in Africa, of colonial rule in Nigeria, and of the Igbo people.