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Book Review

Review of Ndubueze L. Mbah. Emergent Masculinities: Gendered Power and Social Change in the Biafran Atlantic Age. By. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019.

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For a long period of time, women played significant roles in many pre-colonial African societies, serving in various capacities as religious, political, and economic leaders. The exact roles and status of these women, however, differ contrastively from one society to another based on factors such as religion, culture, and social organization. Though this unpopular fact about African history receives little or no attention from scholars, few studies offer some insights into the history and transformation of the powers of female leaders in Africa (Weir, 2000; Ogbomo, 2005; Weir, 2006; Achebe, 2011; Akyeampong & Fofack, 2014). Along this intersection, Mba's *Emergent Masculinities* is no doubt a significant contribution, especially to the pre-colonial and colonial history of the Igbo at the Bight of Biafra (1750-1920), focusing mainly on how certain Western influences such as the Trans-Atlantic Slavery, legitimate trade, and colonialism shaped the peoples' socio-political and economic institutions.

Mba's book is lucidly written and aptly crafted in five good, successive chapters. In the first chapter of the book, the author traces the evolution of Ufiem as a direct response to female dominance. This is adequately demonstrated in the activities of Ohafia-Igbo men, which include fighting against external aggressions, as well as their participation in long-distance slave raiding throughout Igbo and Ibibio lands, especially in the 18th and 19th centuries. To consolidate their power, they opted for a female-centered agrarian economy and a male-dominated military structure. In this way, the chapter explains how women assume specific socio-political and economic roles.

Chapter two, on the other hand, dwells mainly on how the Trans-Atlantic Trade played a significant role in the promotion of the male-dominated socio-political authority and its adverse effects on the hitherto privileges and control enjoyed by the Ohafia-Igbo women. Chapter three excellently explains the economic impact of military slaving within the context of empowering Ogaranya masculinities in the 18th and 19th centuries. The chapter also argues that 'Atlanticization' paved the way for the marginalization of the women folk, particularly within the slave institutions and beyond. This incident also promoted gender inequalities while increasing demands for women within domestic economies as captives.

Chapter four provides a critical examination of the socio-economic impact of the ‘Atlanticization’ of the Bight of Biafra in the 19th century. The chapter posits that factors such as legitimate trade, Christianity, and Western education created a conducive atmosphere for ex-marginalized male slaves to attain unimaginable economic and political power within the society that outweighed the women’s domestic agrarian economy. Chapter five, which is the last one, dwells largely on how colonial political arrangements, especially in the creation of warrant chiefs by the British, led to the decline of women’s political power in the 20th century. Mba argues that ‘Atlanticization’ is a term that basically refers to the process by which a country or a region becomes more closely integrated with the socio-political and economic systems of the North Atlantic region, especially the United States and Europe (pg 94-100). This ‘Atlanticization’, according to him, was more evident with the emergence of Ufiem—an extractive and often a violent form of hegemonic masculinity. The author further observes that through this process, the hitherto female socio-political dominance was eclipsed by promoting male superiority during the colonial period. This sudden shift, according to the author, also defines who controls what in terms of Atlantic modes of production, distribution of resources, as well as consumption.

In explaining gender roles and the contextualization of masculinity in Igbo society, the author further argues that while Ufiem symbolizes the bravest men category that can bring back human heads as trophies of war, men often referred to as Ujo are typically relegated, de-gendered, and subjected to public humiliation because they could not ‘cut a head,’ which was equated with heroism. The region’s slave trade experience from 1750-1840, however, encouraged male dominance in military slave production, which gave them material power that symbolized the ‘heads’ the Ufiem brought back from the battlefield. Through this process, Mbah opines that women domestically enslaved were further relegated, while their male counterparts became breadwinners, a position that the former enjoyed before the ‘Atlanticization’ process.

On the other hand, however, the author states that the ‘Legitimate Trade’, which promoted domestic and sexual slavery systems, was also placed on equal footing with the Ufiem ‘head trophies’ that symbolize power and societal dominance. Through what the author calls ‘British colonial patriarchy,’ assault rule was indigenized due to the ability of wealthy individuals to usurp the political authority of both male and female traditional institutions. This transition, the author observes, was also supported by the British colonial economy and Western education that gradually replaced the previous Igbo dual-sex political organizations with a unique form of ‘masculinist’ political system, but this time around fashioned in the form of the so-called Westernized elites.

Despite male dominance during the colonial period of Igbo society, Mbah shows how some women have also demonstrated their power as ‘Ogaranya’ through gender-dissident yam cultivation (that was the prerogative of males), trading, material acquisition, as well as the practice of female ‘husband-hood’. The author also argues that the British colonial economy, however, brought a lot of changes leading to the emergence of new social classes that were sharply parallel and defined by who owned or controlled what, with men at the top of the pyramid.

Based on extensive fieldwork and the use of oral tradition, Mbah also engages relevant literature on women’s socio-political power in Nigeria in particular and West Africa in general, which contributes significantly, primarily by amplifying the history and adverse effects of ‘Atlanticization’ in the Bight of Biafra. He also establishes the fact that masculinity, especially in Igbo culture, must be detached from biological and sex studies as a nexus of power. Contrary to the common notion that African societies were initially patriarchal, Mbah’s work shows beyond a reasonable doubt how Ohafia-Igbo women once

commanded considerable socio-economic and political powers only to be disrupted by 'Atlanticization,' colonialism and its by products.

Apart from the fact that some non-English words such as Ufiem, Ujo, Ogaranya, and Ije-Akpaka were not uniformly italicized, while figures lack proper reference and legends, *Emergent Masculinities* is no doubt an essential read that transports its readers into the intricacies of one of Africa's pre-colonial and colonial historical experience showing that gender and socio-political or economic status are not fixed as time elapses. The book will surely be of great interest to historians, gender-based scholars, anthropologists, and anyone who is in love with knowledge.

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