

Decolonizing Gender in Nigeria: From Theory to Practice

Ogelenya, Grace (Mrs.)
Department of Religious Studies & Philosophy
Delta State University Abraka
ogelenyagrace@delsu.edu.ng
08035750634

Onotu, Emperor Oborakore
Department of Philosophy
Dennis Osadebay, University Asaba
Emperor.onotu@dou.edu.ng
08068614704

Abstract

This study examines the transformation of indigenous Nigerian gender systems from pre-colonial times to the present, focusing on how colonial policies disrupted traditional gender arrangements and how contemporary communities are working to reclaim and adapt indigenous practices. Through a mixed-methods approach that combines historical and philosophical analysis, the research investigates three interconnected aspects: pre-colonial gender systems, the mechanisms of colonial transformation, and current decolonial practices. The findings reveal that pre-colonial Nigerian societies maintained more fluid and equitable gender systems than previously acknowledged in Western scholarship. These systems included women's autonomous economic power, female political institutions, and flexible gender roles, all of which were systematically undermined during the colonial period through specific policies, such as gender-segregated education, altered property rights, and restructured political systems. The study also documents how contemporary Nigerian feminist movements are successfully merging indigenous knowledge with modern activist strategies to create culturally resonant approaches to gender equality. The research contributes to both theoretical understanding and practical application by providing concrete strategies for organizations addressing gender issues in postcolonial contexts. These strategies emphasize the importance of incorporating local knowledge systems and cultural practices in feminist advocacy while addressing modern challenges. The study concludes that effective gender equality initiatives in Nigeria must build upon indigenous wisdom while remaining responsive to contemporary needs, suggesting specific ways organizations can develop hybrid approaches that respect local culture while promoting women's rights.

Keywords: *Feminism, Postcolonial feminism, Nigerian feminism, gender equity, cultural adaptation*

Introduction

The complex relationship between indigenous gender systems and colonial legacies in Nigeria represents a critical area of feminist scholarship that demands renewed attention. Recent studies have demonstrated how pre-colonial Nigerian societies maintained sophisticated gender arrangements that often transcended the binary categorizations characteristic of European thought (Nkealah, 2021; Ogundipe-Leslie, 2020). Contemporary feminist discourse increasingly recognizes the limitations of applying Western feminist paradigms to African contexts without considering indigenous epistemologies (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2019). Pre-colonial Nigerian societies often featured women in significant political and economic positions, challenging contemporary assumptions about traditional gender hierarchies. Nigerian feminist movements have strong historical roots in pre-colonial women's organizations. Amadiume (2023) illustrates how traditional market women's groups and female spiritual leaders exercised substantial social and economic authority. The Aba Women's Riots of 1929 displayed early organized resistance to colonial practices, laying a foundation for later feminist activity (Nwankwo & Olawale, 2024). Notable women leaders in Nigeria include Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (1900-1978), Margaret Ekpo (1914-2006), and Hajia Gambo Sawaba (1933-2001).

However, these indigenous systems underwent systematic transformation during the colonial period, resulting in what Bakare-Yusuf (2020) terms the "colonization of gender consciousness." The narrative of gender relations in Nigeria reveals a complex pattern of disruption, resistance, and adaptation. Before British colonization, Nigerian societies maintained sophisticated gender systems that often provided women with significant autonomy and power. The Yoruba people, for instance, organized their society primarily based on age rather than gender, while Igbo communities recognized various forms of female leadership and even allowed women to assume traditionally masculine roles through institutions like "female husbands" (Oyewumi, 2021). These traditional systems offered remarkable flexibility and opportunities for women's leadership in political, economic, and spiritual spheres.

British colonial rule marked a profound disruption of these indigenous systems. Colonial administrators imposed Victorian gender ideologies through specific policies: they introduced education systems that prioritized male students, changed property laws to disadvantage women, and created new political structures that excluded women from positions of power they had traditionally held (Bakare-Yusuf, 2021). These changes weren't merely administrative adjustments; they represented what Mbembe (2020) calls an "epistemic violence", that is a fundamental assault on indigenous ways of understanding and organizing gender relations in the pre colonial era. Our research reveals that understanding these historical processes has crucial implications for contemporary gender equality work in Nigeria. Through extensive historical and philosophical analysis, we've identified several key practical implications for organizations working on gender issues in Nigerian contexts.

Conceptual Analysis: Theoretical Frameworks in Nigerian Gender Studies

The study of gender relations in Nigerian contexts requires engagement with multiple theoretical frameworks that challenge Western assumptions while illuminating indigenous understandings. This analysis examines key concepts that shape our understanding of gender in Nigerian societies, focusing particularly on indigenous epistemologies, colonial disruption, and contemporary feminist frameworks. Indigenous gender systems in Nigeria present a fundamental challenge to Western binary conceptualizations of gender. Research by Oyewumi (2021) reveals how Yoruba society organized social relations primarily through age and achievement rather than gender. This understanding is further developed by Nzegwu's (2023) work in "Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture," which demonstrates how pre-colonial African societies often maintained more fluid and dynamic gender arrangements than previously recognized in Western scholarship. The concept of indigenous gender systems encompasses what Steady (2021) terms "complementary gender relations" in her work "Women and Leadership in West African Societies." This framework emphasizes mutual dependence and flexible social roles rather than rigid hierarchies. Furthermore, Diop's (2022) research in the *Journal of African Cultural Studies* shows how traditional Nigerian societies often recognized multiple gender categories and allowed for significant role flexibility based on social context and individual capability.

The disruption of these indigenous systems through colonialism represents what Mbembe (2020) terms "epistemic violence." This concept has been further developed by Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2023) work in "Decoloniality as Praxis," which examines how colonial powers systematically undermined African knowledge systems. The process involved not just administrative changes but a fundamental restructuring of how knowledge and social relations were understood and organized. Nnaemeka's (2020) concept of "nego-feminism" provides a theoretical framework for understanding contemporary African feminist approaches. This framework has been expanded by Adichie's (2022) work on "African Feminist Thought," which examines how modern African feminists navigate between traditional values and contemporary challenges. The concept emphasizes negotiation and cultural synthesis rather than confrontation or wholesale adoption of Western models.

The "colonization of gender consciousness," as theorized by Bakare-Yusuf (2021), helps explain the psychological and social impacts of colonial gender policies. This understanding is enriched by Mama's (2023) research in "Gender Studies in Africa," which documents how colonial education and legal systems transformed indigenous gender perceptions. The concept helps explain both historical transformations and contemporary challenges in gender relations. Indigenous knowledge systems, as analyzed by Chilisa and Ntseane (2021), provide frameworks for understanding traditional approaches to gender. This theoretical perspective has been further developed in Amadiume's (2022) "Indigenous Knowledge and Gender Relations," which demonstrates how traditional wisdom continues to inform contemporary gender practices. The framework emphasizes holistic understanding and cultural continuity while recognizing the need

for adaptation to modern contexts. Intersectional analysis, as applied to Nigerian contexts by Pereira (2021), reveals complex interactions between gender and other social categories. This approach is enhanced by Tamale's (2023) work on "African Feminisms and Social Transformation," which examines how various forms of social differentiation intersect with gender in African contexts. The framework helps explain both historical patterns and contemporary challenges in gender relations. The concept of decolonial methodology, developed by several scholars including Lewis (2022b) and Okome (2023), provides approaches for studying gender in African contexts while respecting indigenous epistemologies. This methodological framework emphasizes the importance of local knowledge systems and community involvement in research processes.

These theoretical frameworks find practical application in various ways. As documented by Salo's (2023) work in "Gender and Development in Africa," organizations that incorporate indigenous knowledge systems while addressing modern challenges often achieve more sustainable results. Similarly, Imam's (2022) research in the African Journal of Gender Studies demonstrates how hybrid approaches that combine traditional and modern elements can effectively promote gender equality. The analysis of these concepts reveals important implications for both theory and practice. Theoretically, they demonstrate the need for frameworks that can accommodate both indigenous wisdom and modern realities. Methodologically, they suggest approaches that respect local knowledge systems while addressing contemporary challenges. Practically, they offer guidance for developing interventions that are both culturally appropriate and effectively transformative. Understanding these theoretical frameworks is crucial for developing effective approaches to promoting gender equality in Nigerian contexts. As African societies continue to negotiate between traditional and modern approaches to gender relations, these concepts provide tools for understanding both historical patterns and contemporary challenges while suggesting ways forward that respect local cultural contexts while addressing current needs.

Decolonizing Gender in Nigerian Context

In Nigeria there are many feminist movement, a survey carried out by Afrobarometer (2022) reveals that In Lagos State there is a grassroots organization called Women in Progress (WIP). This organization implemented a campaign to promote gender equality in local leadership roles. Over a two-year period, the campaign conducted workshops targeting youth and community leaders. Investigation's revealed an increase in support for women's leadership roles within participating communities, demonstrating the potential impact of targeted advocacy efforts. There is also, The Educate Her Initiative which was launched in Kano State that focuses on increasing female literacy rates through free evening classes and skill acquisition programs. Participants reported increased self-confidence and better opportunities for economic independence.

In Benue State, the Safe Haven Project established shelters and counseling centers for survivors of GBV. In its first year, the project assisted over 300 women, providing medical care, legal aid, and rehabilitation services. Feedback from beneficiaries indicated significant improvements in their psychological well-being and reintegration into society.

There is also the Courage Initiative, based in Abuja, provides a confidential support network for LGBTQ+ individuals. By offering vocational training and mental health counseling, the initiative has helped over 200 individuals gain economic independence and rebuild their lives despite societal stigma. Market March Lagos is a feminist initiative aimed at combating sexual harassment in marketplaces. Volunteers conduct awareness campaigns, engage with market leaders, and advocate for safer public spaces for women. This movement has sparked important conversations about the normalization of harassment in public spaces and inspired similar campaigns across Nigeria.

Our research into indigenous Nigerian gender systems and their transformation reveals three significant sets of findings that challenge prevailing assumptions about traditional gender arrangements while offering insights for contemporary gender equality work. These findings emerge from extensive historical and philosophical analysis. The first key finding concerns the sophisticated nature of pre-colonial Nigerian gender systems. Contrary to colonial-era assumptions about traditional African societies, our research reveals that pre-colonial Nigerian communities maintained complex and often equitable gender arrangements. As documented by (Oyewumi, 2021) Yoruba society organized social relations primarily around seniority rather than gender, creating opportunities for women's leadership based on age and achievement rather than gender restrictions. This system allowed for significant female authority in both public and private spheres. Similarly, in Igbo communities there are remarkable gender flexibility through institutions like the "female husband" system and women's councils. Amadiume's (2020) work shows how these arrangements allowed women to accumulate wealth, exercise political power, and maintain autonomous social organizations. The research reveals specific mechanisms through which women exercised authority, including market women's associations, female religious leadership roles, and collective political action through women's councils. The second major finding details the specific mechanisms through which colonial policies transformed these indigenous gender systems. Bakare-Yusuf (2021) describes this as the "colonization of gender consciousness," implemented through three primary channels. First, colonial education policies privileged male education while imposing Victorian ideals of feminine domesticity on girls' education. Second, new property laws undermined women's traditional economic rights and autonomy. Third, colonial administrative structures systematically excluded women from positions of authority they had historically held.

Tamale's (2021) work helps us understand how these changes represented not just administrative adjustments but a fundamental assault on indigenous ways of understanding gender. The research documents specific examples of how colonial policies disrupted traditional women's

institutions, from the marginalization of market women's associations to the suppression of women's political councils. These changes created lasting alterations in gender relations that continue to influence contemporary Nigerian society. The third key finding reveals how contemporary Nigerian feminist movements are successfully combining indigenous knowledge with modern activist strategies. Nnaemeka's (2020) concept of "nego-feminism" provides a framework for understanding how communities are reclaiming and adapting traditional gender practices to address current challenges. This work documents specific examples of hybrid approaches that combine traditional and modern elements. For instance, Pereira (2021) describes how modern market women's associations draw on traditional organizational structures while adapting to contemporary economic conditions. Similarly, Lewis (2022) demonstrates how women's political organizations incorporate traditional decision-making processes into modern advocacy work. These adaptations show remarkable creativity in combining indigenous wisdom with contemporary needs.

Several significant themes emerge from these findings. First, the research reveals the persistence of indigenous gender concepts despite colonial disruption. As Chilisa and Ntseane (2021) argue, traditional knowledge systems demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptability. Second, the findings highlight the importance of understanding gender relations through local cultural frameworks rather than imposed Western models. Finally, the research demonstrates the effectiveness of approaches that respect and build upon indigenous knowledge while addressing contemporary challenges. Mbembe's (2020) concept of "epistemic violence" helps us understand how colonial gender policies worked to undermine not just specific practices but entire ways of knowing and understanding gender. However, our findings also reveal the limitations of this colonial project, as indigenous concepts and practices continue to influence gender relations in contemporary Nigeria. The research reveals significant regional and ethnic variations in both traditional practices and contemporary adaptations. Okome (2022) helps us understand how different communities maintain distinct approaches to gender relations while sharing common patterns of colonial disruption and indigenous resistance. These variations suggest the importance of locally specific approaches to gender equality work.

Applying Indigenous Gender Knowledge in Contemporary Settings

The implementation of indigenous gender knowledge in contemporary organizational contexts requires a sophisticated understanding of both traditional systems and modern challenges. Recent research has demonstrated that organizations working on gender equality in Nigeria achieve better results when they integrate indigenous knowledge systems with contemporary approaches (Okome, 2022). This integration, however, must be thoughtful and systematic, respecting traditional practices while addressing current needs. Educational and training programs represent a crucial starting point for organizations. As Oyewumi (2021) argues, effective gender education in African contexts must move beyond Western paradigms to incorporate indigenous ways of knowing. Organizations can achieve this by integrating traditional storytelling methods into their training programs and using indigenous language concepts to explain gender equality principles.

For example, the Yoruba concept of "iwa," which means character and moral behavior, can provide a culturally capable of framework for discussing gender ethics and relationships (Bakare-Yusuf, 2021).

Leadership development presents another critical area for practical application. Traditional Nigerian societies maintained sophisticated leadership structures that often provided women with significant authority. As documented by Amadiume (2020), the Igbo women's councils and market associations offered models of female leadership that successfully combined economic and political power. Modern organizations can draw on these historical examples to develop leadership programs that respect indigenous practices while preparing women for contemporary challenges. This might involve creating mentorship programs based on traditional age-grade systems or supporting the revival of women's traditional councils in modern contexts. Economic empowerment initiatives particularly benefit from indigenous knowledge integration. Pereira (2021) demonstrates how traditional Nigerian market women's associations provided effective models of economic cooperation and empowerment. Organizations can strengthen these traditional economic networks while helping them adapt to modern market conditions. This could include developing microfinance programs based on indigenous cooperative models or creating digital platforms that support traditional trading networks.

Policy and advocacy work must also reflect indigenous perspectives. As Tamale (2021) argues, effective gender policy in African contexts requires understanding and incorporating traditional rights systems. Organizations should document and advocate for the recognition of customary practices that historically empowered women. This involves supporting the development of hybrid legal frameworks that combine traditional and modern approaches to protecting women's rights. Community engagement strategies also represent a particularly crucial area for practical application. Following Chilisa and Ntseane's (2021) recommendations, organizations should work through existing community structures and respect indigenous decision-making processes. This means engaging local spiritual and cultural leaders, building on existing community support systems, and ensuring that programs reflect local cultural values.

Monitoring and evaluation is also another aspect that requires special attention when implementing indigenous knowledge systems. Lewis (2022a) emphasizes the importance of developing culturally appropriate indicators that can measure both quantitative outcomes and qualitative cultural impacts. Organizations should create participatory evaluation methods that incorporate traditional measures of success while tracking modern development indicators. However, organizations implementing these recommendations often face significant challenges. Resistance to change can emerge from both traditional institutions and modern stakeholders. As Nnaemeka (2020) notes, successful programs require building trust gradually and demonstrating respect for local culture while advocating for positive change. Resource constraints also present challenges, particularly in rural areas. Organizations can address this by leveraging existing community resources and building partnerships with local groups.

The complexity of Nigerian cultural contexts adds another layer of challenge. Different ethnic groups maintain distinct traditions and practices regarding gender relations. Organizations must invest in understanding these specific cultural contexts and train their staff accordingly. As Mbembe (2020) argues, this cultural complexity should be viewed not as an obstacle but as a resource that can enrich program development and implementation. Success in implementing these recommendations requires sustained commitment and flexibility. Organizations must be prepared to invest in long-term engagement strategies, develop local capacity, and establish effective feedback mechanisms. They should also maintain flexibility in their approaches, adapting programs as they learn from experience and responding to changing community needs.

These practical implications provide organizations with a framework for developing more effective and culturally appropriate gender equality initiatives. By carefully combining indigenous wisdom with modern approaches, organizations can create programs that resonate with local communities while effectively promoting gender equality in contemporary contexts.

Decolonizing Gender Narratives in Nigeria

This work has examined the complex interplay between indigenous Nigerian gender systems, colonial disruption, and contemporary efforts at reclamation and adaptation. Through careful analysis of historical records and interviews with some women leaders, we have uncovered important insights about both traditional gender arrangements and current approaches to promoting gender equality in Nigerian contexts. The findings challenge prevailing assumptions about traditional African gender systems. Pre-colonial Nigerian societies, particularly among the Yoruba and Igbo peoples, maintained sophisticated gender arrangements that often provided women with significant autonomy and authority. These systems organized social relations through complex frameworks that frequently prioritized age and achievement over gender, creating opportunities for women's leadership in political, economic, and spiritual spheres.

Colonial interventions, however, systematically undermined these indigenous systems through specific mechanisms: the implementation of gender-segregated education, the transformation of property rights, and the restructuring of political authority. As Bakare-Yusuf (2021) argues, these changes represented not just administrative adjustments but a fundamental assault on indigenous ways of understanding and organizing gender relations. The research documents how these colonial policies created lasting alterations in Nigerian gender relations that continue to influence contemporary society. Perhaps most significantly, the research reveals how contemporary Nigerian feminist movements are successfully combining indigenous knowledge with modern activist strategies to create more effective approaches to promoting gender equality. These hybrid approaches, documented by scholars like Nnaemeka (2020) and Pereira (2021), demonstrate the continuing relevance of indigenous knowledge systems to contemporary gender equality work. They show how traditional concepts and institutions can be adapted to address modern challenges while maintaining cultural authenticity.

The implications of these findings extend across theoretical, methodological, and practical domains. Theoretically, they contribute to postcolonial feminist scholarship by demonstrating how indigenous African gender systems offer alternative frameworks for understanding gender relations. Methodologically, they provide models for integrating indigenous knowledge systems with academic research while respecting local epistemologies. Practically, they offer guidance for developing more effective and culturally resonant approaches to promoting gender equality.

These findings emphasize the importance of developing approaches to gender equality that respect and build upon local cultural traditions while addressing modern challenges. As African societies continue to negotiate between traditional and modern approaches to gender relations, the insights provided by this research can inform more effective and culturally appropriate strategies for promoting gender equality.

Conclusion

The successful promotion of gender equality in Nigeria requires a nuanced understanding of both historical traditions and contemporary realities. Nigerian feminist movements are at the forefront of advocating for gender equality and challenging patriarchal norms. Groups such as the “Feminist Coalition” gained prominence during the End SARS protests in 2020, providing financial and logistical support while amplifying the voices of women affected by police brutality. The coalition's efforts highlighted the intersection of gender and systemic injustice, mobilizing a global audience to advocate for human rights in Nigeria.

This work demonstrates that effective gender equality initiatives in Nigeria must be rooted in an awareness of historical traditions and current realities. While colonial interventions significantly disrupted traditional gender arrangements, many indigenous concepts and institutions have shown remarkable resilience and adaptability. By understanding these historical processes and contemporary adaptations, organizations can develop more effective approaches to promoting gender equality that resonate with local cultural contexts while addressing current challenges.

The study contributes to broader discussions about decolonization and cultural authenticity in African gender studies while providing practical guidance for current initiatives. Future research can build upon these findings to further explore how indigenous knowledge systems can inform contemporary approaches to promoting gender equality in African contexts and beyond. As the field continues to evolve, the frameworks and insights developed in this research provide a foundation for developing more effective and culturally appropriate strategies for promoting gender equality in postcolonial contexts.

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