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# Decolonizing African Political Sociology: Gender and Judicature in Igbo Village-Republics

**Ifeanyi Ezeonu**
Brock University, Canada.

## Abstract

This paper aims (1) to reconstitute, using a decolonising framework, the notion of separation of powers as an original and defining characteristic of the Igbo traditional political system, even before Montesquieu's (1748/1977) thesis was published, and (2) to elucidate the gendered nature of the Igbo traditional separation of powers, as well as the sovereign judicial role of the kinswomen (i.e., the Umuada) in the society. The paper uses the Idemili communities of Anambra State, Nigeria, as its focus of analysis.

**Keywords:** Africa, political sociology, decolonization, Igbo, village republicanism, gender.

## Introduction

It is commonly treated as settled knowledge that the 18th century French Enlightenment philosopher, Baron de Montesquieu, is the original exponent of the notion of separation of powers. This notion promotes the idea that the three organs of government in a democratic republic - the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary - should hold separate and independent powers as a bulwark against political dictatorship. Thus, extant literature on the democratic dispersion of power generally neglects non-Western forms of political arrangements where such distinct separation of powers existed as a moderating tool of governance, even before Montesquieu's (1748/1977) celebrated book, *The Spirit of the Laws*, was published. Shaped by colonial experience, the African political thought is often couched in this form of Occidental framework (see Fombad, 2016, Matthews, 2023). From the social contract theories to the need to establish a democratic check against political dictatorships, the ideas of Western Enlightenment philosophers have always been

hegemonised at the expense of similar or competing ideas from other parts of the world. Thus, Baron de Montesquieu's (1748 / 1977) thesis on separation of powers has gained prominence in the literature of political theories over the more enduring traditional diffusion of power in non-Western societies, including the precolonial Igbo village republics. The Igbo diffused power arrangement was equally designed to prevent authoritarian exercise of power by a single institution of governance. Seeking to decolonise the social production of knowledge on African political sociology, this paper discusses the gendered separation of powers in the Idemili village republics, and the judicial role of women in these communities. The Idemili people are a subgroup of the Igbo nation and are indigenous to the present Anambra State of Nigeria.

The paper adopts an Afrocentric construction of gender which emphasises the fluidity and complementarity of gender status in Idemili village republics. This fluidity of roles provides that men could become females while women could become males to fulfil certain important functions in society. In other words, only a duty to the society could compel and/or legitimise cross-gender identity. Thus, the idea of gender deployed in this paper runs counter to the Western conception of gender along biological lines; a model which has become dominant in the literature on women and gender studies. This Afrocentric construction of gender is also incongruous with the current Western-style gender identity politics, which is anchored on individual agency. Thus, a cross-gender identity in Igbo society is culturally particularised and assigned.

The paper demonstrates that women in Idemili, and in fact many Igbo communities, have enormous powers, not only in the social organisation of the domestic sphere, but also in the public administration of their communities. As Uchendu (1965) observes, the African woman who is often presented as a chattel of her husband "is not an Igbo woman." The Igbo woman "enjoys a high socioeconomic and legal status. She can leave her husband at will, abandon him if he becomes a thief, and summon him to a tribunal, where she will get a fair hearing" (p.87). This is not to suggest that Igbo women exercise the same degree of power as men in all cases. However, they are not the domestic slaves often constructed by Western scholarship.

## Coloniality and the Politics of Western Knowledge Production

> *There is that great proverb - that until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter… Once I realized that, I had to be a writer. I had to be that historian. It's not one man's job. It's not one person's job. But it is something we have to do, so that the story of the hunt will also reflect the agony, the travail - the bravery, even, of the lions* (Chinua Achebe, quoted in Brooks, 1994, p.142; see also, C. Achebe, 2000, p.73).

Chinua Achebe, Africa's foremost writer and postcolonial scholar, thus encapsulates the effect and danger of the colonial epistemic marginalisation of the African voice in the social construction of knowledge about Africa and the African condition. He notes that European "vested interests" in justifying their predatory presence in the African continent (starting with their involvement in Trans-Atlantic slave trade) promoted "a literature of devaluation" which disparaged "African behavior, institutions and character." (C. Achebe, 2000, p.29). Highlighting that "there is such as a thing as absolute power over narrative", he argues that "those who secure this privilege for themselves can arrange stories about others pretty much where, and as, they like" (C. Achebe, 2000, p.24). This, certainly, is how the Occidental knowledge of Africa is produced and hegemonised.

The effect of European colonialism on the African knowledge infrastructure is enormous. A painting which once hung in the lobby of Kwame Nkrumah's office depicted three major enablers of colonialism in Africa. One was the capitalist; he carried a briefcase. The second was the missionary, he carried the Bible. The third, represented with a smaller figure, was the anthropologist or the social scientist. He carried a book (Galtung, 1967). It will probably be incontrovertible to say that anthropologists, who were at the frontier of African knowledge excavation for the European domination, inflicted as much harm on the continent as the two other bogeymen, although a smaller figure was used in the painting to represent their activities. While providing data which made the colonial occupation of Africa more efficient and acceptable to the European audience, anthropologists led the way for the other

European epistemic communities to reconstitute the way African societies are conceptualised, understood, and interrogated. These European knowledge imperialists were pivotal to the development of the African school systems and curricula.

In consolidating the European knowledge system, the colonial educational system privileged the political theories and experience of Europe over those of Africa. For instance, it presented the government of ancient Athens, which was a monarchical slave society, as representing the earliest model of democracy, even when women, slaves, and children were not regarded as citizens in this state (Agozino, 2009). As Agozino (2009, pp.566-567) observed, "as a slave society ruled by a king, Athens was far from what could be regarded as a democratic society compared to some African societies without slave economies or institutions of the monarchy."

Another European political framework which has gained hegemonic status is the idea of separation of powers as conceived by the French political philosopher, Baron de Montesquieu. In his work, anglicized as *The Spirit of the Laws* and which was first published in 1748, he proposed the division of government powers into three different and independent branches to check the excesses of one another's powers and thus prevent dictatorship (Montesquieu 1748/1977). Nevertheless, political systems built on the distribution of power across different institutions of governance had existed in many African societies even before Montesquieu's idea was published. One example was the gendered division of power between the Umunna and the Umuada in pre-colonial Igbo village republics. Similarly, contrary to a fluid conception of gender roles in the Igbo village republics, Western knowledge system has promoted the notion of gender which is based on the biological differences between men and women. Such is the extent of Western knowledge system which predominantly informed policy decisions in the continent. Unfortunately, not much of this system has changed since independence, given that many of the post-independence African leaders and scholars either trained in the West or consider its knowledge system superior to the African ways of knowing. It is not surprising that leading African scholars, such as Chinua Achebe and Claude Ake, see the European knowledge system as providing auxiliary services to imperialism (C. Achebe, 1958, Ake, 1982, Agozino, 2009). One motivation for this paper is that while a large body of works on contemporary African political sociology is still premised on the

theoretical and epistemological positions of European scholars (Fombad, 2016, Matthews, 2023), these studies often make little contribution to addressing the challenging realities of the African socio-political experience.

**Doing Gender Among the Igbos of Nigeria.**

While bifurcated categories based on biological differences have, until recently, been used in delineating gender roles in most Western societies, the social construction of gender in precolonial Igbo societies involved complex social arrangements designed to tackle challenges and mediate circumstances. It was not entirely determined by the biological differences between men and women. Until the British colonial occupation of Igboland and the attendant disruption of its cultural indigeneity, women in many Igbo societies could simultaneously play the roles of men or women depending on peculiar cultural exigencies. I use the phrase "many Igbo societies" to recognize the cultural heterogeneity of the network of communities, united by a common language, and which we collectively categorise today as Ndigbo (i.e., the Igbos).[1]

While Igbo societies were predominantly patriarchal, literature establishes both fluidity and complementarity in defining gender status and relationships in these societies (Amadiume, 2015, 1987, Chuku, 2016, N. Achebe, 2016). As Nwando Achebe (2016, p.36) puts it, "in Igboland, sex and gender did not coincide in precolonial society. Gender was fluid and flexible, allowing women to become men and men to become women." A well-regarded Igbo anthropologist, Ifi Amadiume, demonstrates that the Western feminist construction of gender based on a dichotomous interpretation of sexual differences was just part of the colonial epistemic imposition on Africa. She highlights that gender roles in traditional Igbo societies stretched beyond the limits of biological differences, and this enabled daughters to become sons ("and consequently male[s]"), and daughters and women to become husbands (and legitimately "males in relation to their wives"). In these contexts, being *male* is a socially assumed position legitimized by tradition. It is

[1] Following the antebellum and post-bellum genocides against Ndigbo in Nigeria, a section of these communities, especially in the present-day Rivers State, has found it convenient to redefine their ethnic identity, apparently to mitigate the continuing existential threat faced by the Igbos in the Nigerian political space. They now identify themselves as "Ikwerre" people.

different from being a *man*. Thus, gender roles were not always tied to one's biological sex. Under certain cultural exigencies, Igbo tradition permitted women to assume male roles, and accord them the privileges attached to these roles. Nevertheless, these women were not expected to be "*man-like*."

This was at least a common practice among the Idemili Igbos of the current Anambra State. Among the Idemili people, a family without a male descendant could keep one of their daughters at home to have children, replenish the family line and retain the family property. Such a family could also recall one of their daughters from her marital home to do the same. This practice is known as *nhayikwa* or *nhanye* - a form of replacement for absent males, in a society in which descent and inheritance of properties follow the male line. This was one strategy through which a man without a male child ensured that his "obi" (lineage) continued after his death and that his property remained in his family. The man or his male-daughter would choose someone (outside the immediate kindred) to copulate with the daughter (regarded formally as a "male-daughter") to produce children for him. If the male-daughter was unable to procreate, due to old age or infertility, she could marry a new wife on behalf of her dead father to continue his line. A daughter's assumption of a male status to continue his father's ancestral line could take immediate effect as soon as her father notified his patrilineal kinsmen of his intention to that effect and presented palm wine to formalise the ceremony. A daughter could still assume the male status to continue her father's ancestral line even if her father died before notifying his kinsmen. However, this would involve a more complicated negotiation with the kinsmen. Male-daughters enjoyed the privileges associated with their status (such as land inheritance) and were obligated to live up to the expectations of the same male status, such as payment of taxes which other women were exempted from (Amadiume, 2015, pp.15-17, 32). Other traditional practices in which daughters could marry wives to produce male children for their late father abounded in other Igbo societies. In some of these arrangements, the daughters assumed the traditional status of husbands/males in relation to the wives but appointed male kinsmen as the wives' sexual partners (Nwoko, 2012).

In traditional Igbo societies and among some African societies (such as the Nandi people of Kenya), women could marry their fellow women and assume the status of a male. However, this was clearly different from the present Western-style same sex relationships as the

traditional African female husbands do not have sexual relationships with their wives. In fact, the Igbo woman-to-woman marriages were not contracted in response to romantic attraction or love but were traditionally permitted as a strategy to preserve a patriarchal system which accords property inheritance exclusively to men (Nwoko, 2012, Amadiume, 2015). The same is true of this type of marriage in other African societies (see, Oboler, 1980). So, it is crucial to emphasize that the fluidity of gender roles deployed in this paper is not in consonance with the usage by contemporary Western scholars of alternative sexualities. Instead, an alternative gender was only authorized by the traditional Igbo societies as a mechanism to address religious and patriarchal exigencies, and not to legitimise alternative sexual or gender identities. Thus, the occasional recalibration of gender status in traditional Igbo societies is driven by cultural demands, rather than identity politics.

Among the Idemili people, a woman who was unable to bear a child or a male child could upon the death of her husband marry a wife to procreate and continue their husband's direct ancestral line. In Nnobi, an Idemili community, a few women could take the Ekwe title. This title was reserved for women who were stupendously wealthy and whose wealth were considered to be a blessing from the goddess Idemili. Women who took this title generally assumed a male status, and one of the privileges which they enjoyed was that they could marry wives to bear children on their behalf. These women could marry as many wives as they could afford. As they did not have any sexual relationship with these wives, they often would appoint a man of their choice to mate with their wives for the purpose of procreation. Nevertheless, female husbands exercised the customary rights of husbands over these wives (Amadiume, 2015). The customary practice of female husbands was also known among the Nandi people of western Kenya. In both societies, the female husbands bore the marriage costs of their wives, and related to these wives as males but without sexual liaison; and the woman-to-woman marriage was often motivated by the desire to produce a male heir for the family and to secure the family property which was always transferred through the male line (Oboler, 1980; Amadiume, 2015).

The mutability of gender status in Igbo societies is also highlighted by Nwando Achebe (2016), who in her study of Adani, Nsukka in Enugu State, documents the ritual transformation of men into females as a customary prerequisite to serve as priestesses to a powerful deity known as Anunje. After this ritual transformation, a male priestess

follows certain norms to make his new female status permanent and to distinguish himself from the other men in society. This included dressing like a woman and avoiding sexual liaison with his wife before going to worship the deity, which itself is culturally regarded as a female. The serving male "priestess" she interviewed put it concisely when asked how he became a woman: "I did not become a woman, I am a woman." (p.38) Amadiume (2015) therefore criticises most Western scholarship on gender status in Igbo societies and argues that the interpretation of gender roles by these scholars was rooted on a rigid Victorian gender ideology which tied male attributes and status to biological men, and female attributes and status to biological women. This form of rigid understanding of gender prohibited a more elastic role relationship in which women could assume gender statuses traditionally delineated for men, and vice versa.

**Village Republicanism: The Political Philosophy and Organisation of the Idemili Communities.**

Most precolonial Igbo communities were acephalous and politically republican by nature. This political philosophy and organization, best represented by the aphorism "*Igbo enwe eze*" (Igbos have no kings), has come to define the Igbo traditional political system, although it fails to account for some communities where some forms of established kingship systems existed prior to contact with European colonialists. The communities where established kingship system existed in pre-colonial times included Onitsha, Nri, Aguleri, Oguta, Arochukwu and some of the Anioma Igbos (those found across the River Niger) such as Asaba, Agbor and Osomari. In these monarchical communities, political authority was wielded by kings (Obi or Eze) in consultation with titled chiefs, known commonly as Ndichie (Chuku, 2016, Uchendu, 1965). While these kings and their council of chiefs were predominantly men, executive, judicial, and legislative authorities were often decentralised and distributed between sexes and among smaller political units, such as the age-grades and secret societies. One such prominent female political kingship tool which still survives to this day was the Omu. This position, which dates to about th15th Century, was common among the Anioma Igbos. The Omu position was always held by a woman who derived her status and title through great wealth and character and not by virtue of any form of relationship with the king or any man. She was regarded as the women's monarch, as she presided over the affairs of

the community's women, including the control of the village market where women traded. She had her own palace and female council (Chuku, 2016, Uchendu, 2006; Okonjo, 1976). Nevertheless, while the Omu was biologically a woman, she would transition socially to become a male upon coronation. Given her male status, the Omu could also use the traditional kingship title of Obi, which was used by a male king. In her new status as a male, the Omu could not marry a man, and if she desired to have children, she would only marry a woman and appoint a sexual partner for her wife for procreation (Ochei, 2019, Onoyume, 2018; see also, Okonjo, 1976; Uchendu, 2006**).** As Obi Martha Dunkwu, the current Omu Anioma and Okpanam puts it,

> At the point of coronation, [Omus] are bestowed male rights; that is why [they] can break the kolanut, [they] become a man and a woman put together… the Omu means Eze Nwanye [*Nwanyi, in some dialects*], female king in charge of women, female youths, markets, ancestral shrines, businesses (Onoyume, 2018, p.1).[2]

While the powers of the Omu were considered secondary to that of the Obi (who was biologically a man), she had a powerful political influence in her domain. So, whereas modern scholarship on the Igbo traditional political system appear to reflect mostly the political organization of the communities east of River Niger, some of the Igbo communities which are located west of this river were less acephalous with the kingship system distributed between the two genders, as the Omu institution demonstrates [3] (Okonjo, 1976, Uchendu, 2006).

Nevertheless, most precolonial Igbo communities were without established kingships or centralised political leadership structure. In these communities, power and authority were diffused (Chuku, 2016, Amadiume, 2015, Uchendu, 1965). It is the political culture and

[2] In most Igbo societies, only men were traditionally allowed to break kolanut, a ritual nut used in offering prayers. The situation is almost the same in contemporary time.

[3] The greater Igbo nation is spread across several states both east and west of River Niger. Most of the Igbo communities located west of this river are found in Delta State and are collectively known as the Anioma people.

organisation of these non-monarchical groups which are commonly associated with the Igbo nation, and which naturalises the narrative of "*Igbo enwe eze*." The Idemili Igbo group in the present Anambra State of Nigeria practiced this acephalous and republican form of political organization. This group of communities are currently located in two local government areas of the state – the Idemili North and the Idemili South local governments areas. The group is made up of sixteen communities, one of which is Ogidi, the home community of the late Chinua Achebe, Africa's most celebrated writer. Another of the communities is Ojoto, the home village of the late Chris Okigbo, the avant-garde poet who died in the Nigeria-Biafra war. Ifi Amadiume, a well-known Igbo anthropologist and gender theorist whose works are cited often in this paper, is a native of Nnobi, another Idemili community. The works of these scholars, particularly the plot of Chinua Achebe's acclaimed book, *Things Fall Apart*, tell the story of the Idemili people – their worldview, cosmology, and political organisation. This paper also benefits from my own experiential knowledge of the traditional political system of Alor, a notable Idemili community. Before their contacts with British imperialists, these communities existed as autonomous village republics, which operated effective structures of governments with independent internal, defence, commercial and foreign (inter-community) policies.[4]They had voluntary armies of young men, sometimes with identifiable war leaders (*ochiagha*), who conducted border or inter-community wars with neighbouring village republics in the same manner as the Anglo-Scottish wars of the 14th and the 16th centuries. These village republics also had an organised and efficient internal security architecture in which the Umunna (a diffused centre of patriarchal power), age grades, traditional chief priests and priestesses, and the ancestral spirits represented by sacred masquerades (such as Ayaka Anyasi and Onyekulum in Alor) performed policing functions by enforcing the laws of the land and the edicts of the gods. These communities had all the structures and attributes of independent republics, in addition to a unique system of governance in which every

[4] The exception was Ideani, which was a village in Alor until 1970.

male and female adult, to varying degrees, had a major say in how his/her community was run.

The village republics were autonomous and exercised their sovereignty in all matters. They were commonly segmented into different Ogbe or quarters (equivalent to states or provinces in modern parlance) and each quarter was made up of several kindreds or Umunna (which were made up of male descendants of a common ancestor). The Umunna constituted the structural foundation of ultimate power in the precolonial political organisation of Igbo village republics. They had the power to make laws, enforce laws, banish serious offenders, regulate commercial activities and settle disputes within their kindred units. The Umunna would send representatives to the council of elders at the other levels of power (quarters and village level). However, most political decisions in the village republics took place at the kindred (Umunna) level, and the republics were made up of several Umunna kin-groups in a system resembling a modern federal union (see, Afuekwe, 2011).

Idemili villages are traditionally governed by a unique system of village republicanism which I describe as consensus democracy. This form of democracy seeks to negotiate and secure consent from every single family unit that makes up a kindred. While political organisation at the kindred level is directed by elders and title holders, decisions are taken by the consensus of all male adults. Where dissent exists, every effort is made to secure the consent of dissenting adults or families. Sometimes ostracism is used as a last resort to secure this consent. Ostracism is used to exert enormous pressure on dissenting members of a kindred by cutting them off from participating in community life and denying them all benefits associated with being a member of the kindred. For instance, members of the kindred would refuse to visit their homes or host them in theirs. The ostracised would be treated as social pariahs in the local market, as people would neither buy anything from them nor sell to them. Members of the kindred would also not participate in marriage or funeral ceremonies involving family members of ostracised people. The latter action is particularly effective because Igbo marriages could hardly be contracted without the involvement of kinsmen. While ostracism does not usually involve the deployment of force (except where banishment is authorised), it is always designed to create a condition of social death for dissenting members of the kinsmen which would force them into compliance.

While the political culture and organisation of Idemili communities is well-documented (C. Achebe, 1958, Nwajide et al, 2011, Amadiume, 2015), this paper highlights the status of women, particularly the Umuada, in the power hierarchy of these communities. As the studies above demonstrate, while women in these communities exercise less power than men, they nonetheless wield significant power and influence, especially on judicial matters.

There are two major institutions through which women participate in the political organisation of Idemili communities. These are the institutions of Umuada (also known as the Umuokpu) and the Ite Ose (also known as the Ndi Inyom). The Umuada consists of all living female descendants of a kindred, irrespective of their age or marital status. The membership of this group is automatic for all females born into the kindred and does not require any ritual ceremony. The Umuada constitutes a powerful political group within the kindred. They are respected for their ability to resolve lingering conflicts among kinsmen and feared for their ability to stir trouble for the kinsmen and families. They are an alternate source of power to the Umunna and sometimes act as a check against the excesses of Umunna or a single kinsman. They are also known to deal ruthlessly with people who failed to take adequate care of their aging parents. As Afuekwe (2011, p.32) puts it, the Umuada "may play some peace-keeping role in troubled situations but are generally notorious for trouble-making" in their ancestral kindred. Even in contemporary times, organisers of certain ceremonies (especially funerals) in Idemili and almost every Igbo community work hard to avoid attracting the trouble of Umuada. Although the majority of the Umuada are married and live outside their ancestral homes, they exercise their greatest political power among their own paternal kinsmen. The magnitude of their power in their ancestral homes is hardly tamed by the patriarchal political system. The second political institution, the Ite Ose, is made up of all women married into a clan. This group of women is much less powerful than the Umuada and is not the focus of this paper.

So, while the Idemili communities are patently patriarchal, women are part of the governance structure, and have some say on matters which would affect their wellbeing. When this governance structure was disrupted by British colonial administration, Igbo women across the country strongly resisted the new system of governance, through a series of protests, known in local parlance as "Ogu Umunwanyi" (i.e., "Women's War"). The most famous and best documented of these protests

is known officially as the Aba Women's Riots of 1929. These riots, were organized against the colonial imposition of traditional rulers, known as Warrant Chiefs, without consultation with the local population, including women. These appointments were against the traditional system of village republicanism. The riots were also triggered by a rumour that a system of direct taxation which had been imposed on men the previous year was to be extended to women. This was against the traditional Igbo practice of not imposing any form of taxation on women. The women felt so strongly against this system of governance that they organised and confronted officials of British colonialism and attacked its symbols such as courts and prisons in the process. In response to these protests, the colonial occupiers deployed the police and troops to crush the rebellion, killing more than 50 women, while many others suffered different degrees of harms (Allen, 1975, pp.11-12, see also, Korieh 2001, Falola and Heaton, 2008).

**The Umuada and Gendered Separation of Powers in Idemili Communities.**

Long before de Montesquieu's idea of the separation of power was published in Europe in 1748, the political structure of Idemili communities were dispersed as a bulwark against dictatorship. Different levers of powers existed, often working as a check on the arbitrary practices of the others. The patriarchal powers of the Umunna (the kinsmen) and the powers of the Umuada (the kinswomen) represented, and still represent, different bases of power in the political organisation of these communities. Both institutions of government are independent and co-equal. Nevertheless, in some conflict situations which threaten to compromise the unity of the kindred, the decisions of the Umuada supersede those of the Umunna. This is because in these patriarchal communities, members of the Umuada have no proprietorial rights and therefore are often seen as impartial arbitrators. They are also committed to keeping the peace in their ancestral kindred since this is usually their place of refuge should they have problems in their marital homes. In fact, the pinnacle of Idemili women's power is collectively embodied in the Umuada institution and they exert their greatest political influence among their kinsmen. In the kindred groups in which they are married, they barely have any political influence.

However, one major area where the powers of the Umuada are seen as both sacred and inviolable is conflict-resolution in their ancestral clan. In this circumstance, the Umuada assume both judicial powers and those of arbitration when the Umunna are unable to resolve the conflict. The Umuada can also challenge the decision of Umunna which they perceive as either arbitrary or unfair. In precolonial Idemili societies, nobody (including the Umunna) questioned the decisions of the Umuada who were traditionally seen as embodying the spirit of Ani (the ancestral land), which is the mystical goddess of truth, morality, fertility, and death. The ancestral land was venerated because it was seen as the great provider for the people (the society then was predominantly an agrarian economy). The land was also seen as the home of the ancestors, whose spirits protected the clan. So, people were afraid of engaging in behaviours (such as murder and incest) which were traditionally regarded as abominations. Such abominable behaviours were seen as defiling the sacredness of the land. The land also represents that abode of Idemili spirits such that to resolve conflicts, people were sometimes required to swear by "aja ani" (sand from the land, which were seen as sacred). It was believed that a false oath made with these sands would result in death or calamities for the perjurer.

The most dreaded tool used by the Umuada to enforce their decision is the ritual curse, which they often complete with "itu aja" - i.e., ritually tossing the sacred sand from the ancestral land on the cursed person or his family compound. It was culturally believed that when someone or a family is ritually cursed by the Umuada, the accursed pronouncement continues for generation until the Umuada is appeased. Even in contemporary era, the fear of the Umuada lingers on. This cultural belief gives the Umuada of every ancestral clan the powers of judicial intervention in most disputes within a clan. However, the Umuada do not just intervene in the affairs of the clan. They only get involved when there is an impasse among the Umunna, when the Umunna are believed to be acting arbitrarily, or when they are invited by the Umunna to deal with a particular conflict. Traditionally, the Umunna act as a tribunal of first instance. However, when a problem could not be resolved by the Umunna, the Umuada gets involved either through direct intervention or by invitation. Their first judicial toolkit in conflict situations is arbitration. This process of negotiation often takes a long time with the intention to secure an amicable solution. Often many problems are resolved at this stage. However, when they fail to resolve

the problem through arbitration, they constitute themselves into a traditional court to adjudicate between the aggrieved individuals. This adjudication process is often led by the oldest members of the Umuada, but any member of this institution can cross-examine the disputants. In pre-colonial times, once the Umuada issued a judgement in a case, it was generally difficult to challenge it at other layers of authority, as clans were basically semi-autonomous within village republics.

While the Umuada performs these helpful peace-keeping functions in their ancestral clans, they could also cause serious disruptions in the clan if they felt disrespected or undermined as a group. For instance, the Umuada sometimes disrupt the burial ceremonies of kinsmen or other traditional ceremonies if their traditional entitlements associated with such ceremonies are not fulfilled. Even in these situations, nobody, including the Umunna, can overrule them. Instead, the clan tries to appease the Umuada in almost all circumstances (see, Afuekwe, 2011). So, although popular discourse identifies the Umunna as the ultimate wielder of traditional power in Idemili village republics, the de facto most powerful institution is the Umuada. While the Umunna controls the daily affairs of the clan, their power can be challenged and checked by the Umuada.

At every opportunity, the Umuada try to assert, through their actions, that although many of them may have moved out to live in other clans because of marriage, they have non-negotiable rights and social entitlements in their ancestral home. Of course, the Idemili traditional practices support this position. Prior to the contact with Christianity, whenever a Nwada (a daughter of the clan) dies, her body would always be returned to her ancestral home to be buried among her ancestors. Also, her livestock at her place of marriage would be returned to her ancestral home. While the massive conversion to Christianity has stopped this practice, a dead Nwada in Idemili community can still not be buried without the permission of her kindred. A violation of this rule could lead to a serious inter-clan or inter-community conflict. And if the kinsmen of a deceased Nwada determine that she was mistreated in her marital home or was not well-taken care of, they would deny the permission to bury her among her husband's people. In that case, they would return the body of the woman to be buried among her people as a way of protesting her ill-treatment. In precolonial times, a murder of a Nwada was always avenged by her kinsmen (see, C. Achebe, 1958).

The discussion of the gendered separation of powers in the Idemili village republics is, therefore, consequential for challenging the hegemonising influence of Occidental scholarship in political discourse. Years of colonial occupation of Africa has privileged the Eurocentric production of knowledge about Africa, its history and the experience of its people. This European episteme constructed an enduring narrative of a dark continent in which people "had lived in universal chaos and stagnation until the coming of the Europeans." (Davidson, 1958, p. ix). Eurocentric knowledge also consolidated the imposition of Western epistemology on the continent, including an alien conceptualisation of gender along biological lines.

Unfortunately, even after independence, the emergent African comprador leaders, many of whom were educated in the West or internalized western pedagogies, have done little to reform the remnants of colonial educational systems in their countries. The African intelligentsia are also complicit in the regurgitation of the Western ways of knowing. So, the challenge for modern African scholars is to deepen the decolonisation of the knowledge they produce and the type of knowledge they privilege. One way to do this is to re-establish contacts with and engage in a productive encounter with their African experience. An increasing number of African scholars have initiated this process (C. Achebe, 1958, Agozino, 2003, 2009, Amadiume, 2015), but more needs to be done. There is an urgent need to decolonialise the social construction of knowledge about African societies; but more importantly, to reconstitute existing theories and methodologies to accommodate the African experience. Then, maybe, the hegemonising ideas of Montesquieu and other European scholars will cease to take precedence over the preceding political framework under which African societies have been organised.

**Conclusion**

This paper aims to decolonialise the production of knowledge of the African political sociology. Using the precolonial Idemili village republics (in present day Nigeria) as the focus of analysis, the paper discusses the special role of ancestral kinswomen, known as the Umuada, in the administration of justice. It demonstrates that in these patriarchal communities, women play important roles in the arbitration and adjudication of conflicts. This function has endured even in contemporary time. Against the Western conception of gender roles along biological

lines, the paper uses a decolonising framework to highlight the fluidity and complementarity of gender roles in the communities.

The paper is conceived against the backdrop of the common practice which privileges Western knowledge system in the political discourse of separation of powers. It shows that even before the ideas of de Montesquieu were published in 1748, the Idemili village republics have been organised on a framework of diffused power among different institutions as a bulwark against political dictatorship. The paper challenges modern African scholars to re-engage with their African experience in the production of knowledge which will be relevant to the continent.

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