Interkulturelle und dekoloniale Perspektiven auf feministisches Denken

Mit Beiträgen von Patricia McFadden, Jimena Néspolo, Nkiri Nzewu, Maria Lugones, Evert van der Zweerde, Benjamin Baumann und anderen

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Ọkụ Extenders:
Women, Sacrality, and Transformative Art

ABSTRACT: Writings on African art are produced from a Euromodernity standpoint that presupposes gender as a universal hierarchical category. Yet according to the author in many of Africa’s ontologies and social logics there is no category of gender. In this article, Nzegwu argues that the concept of gender at the core of imperialism is complicit in perpetuating African women’s subjugation and diminishing their capacities and achievements. First, she examines and bypasses the dystopian concept of gender that never transcends its pivotal idea that sex differences entail social relations of male power and dominance. Secondly, she examines the world of humanness that emerges after banishing the dystopian reality of imperialism and sexism in which the agency and creative potentialities of women emerge in fulness while analyzing the role of art in African societies. Lastly, she describes ideas of knowledge and creativity life in these conceptually different worlds.

KEYWORDS: Gender, African art, African ontologies, women and art, decolonial theorizing

INTRODUCTION

There is no gender in ọdinani! This declarative statement serves notice that a decolonial, critical African studies methodology is being deployed. Unlike most decolonial theorizing, the following analysis is unencumbered by abstruse imperialism, a complicated and difficult preservation of imperialist ideas and processes, even as analyses represent the epistemological outcome as decolonial and anti-imperialist. Enough damage has been done by epistemologies propping up hegemonic idealizations that protect the theoretical relevance of gender animating the doctrine of feminism. Ọdinani, conceptualized as ancient »First Principles,« proclaim that physical materiality and àṣẹ non-material lifeforce are inextricably intertwined. Decolonial philosophizing takes us to ọdinani,
to the regulating force, Chi-Ukwu (Supreme Spiritual Consciousness) and to conceptions of reality and humanity, where »Ezi okwu bu ndụ« (Truth is life) and »Okwu asi bu onwu« (Falsehood is death). There, in that realm, one strives to avoid ida ikelekwum mmuo (falling into the bottomless abyss) that forever separates one’s chi from the universal anchor, Chi-Ukwu. Within this chi-permeated reality, humanness, that is, human attributes, regulating human values, and agency, define humanity. Human beings like every other entity in the universe, exist temporarily as individualized chi. Women as adult females, in their creative, productive, and reproductive roles as artists and mothers in various communities, are ọkụ (light, fire and energy) extenders. They transform life from one form to another, extending the ọkụ (energy) of Chi or life.

Writings on African art produced from the Western standpoint misconstrue the essence of art produced in a universe conceptualized as a living sentient being. The major defects of those writings not only are their exogenous epistemologies of alterity, they are vitiated by imperialism’s concept of gender that evacuates Africa’s ontologies and social logics and replaces them with Western ontology. This substitution of Africans’ teleologies for a Eurocentric one, fundamentally changes social reality, Africans’ existential experiences, and morality codes. Most significantly, it moves people from »thinking human« and seeing art as reductively matter and desire directed. In this article, I argue that the concept of gender at the core of imperialism is complicit in perpetuating African women’s subjugation and diminishing their capacities and achievements. The argument is conducted in three broad moves. First, we examine and bypass the dystopian concept of gender that never transcends its defining analytic, notably the pivotal idea that sex differences entail sexism or social relations of male power and dominance. Secondly, we examine the world of humanness that emerges after banishing the dystopian reality of imperialism and sexism in which the agency and creative potentialities of women emerge in fulness. Lastly, we consider how life in this conceptually different world expands our pathways to knowledge and creativity.

**Gender, the Dystopian Concept**

Prior to the moral rot introduced by the trans-Atlantic slave trade and which colonialism intensely exacerbated, Africans conceptualized peoples by our oneness as human beings tracing back to Oma, our primordial first mother. In defining mmadụ (human being), the human factor was never about autonomous individuals or isolated men and women. Rather, it was on their humanness, understood in terms of nwa nne (children of the same mother). Their connectedness to other humans, underscored by principle of siblinghood defines human beings by membership to a family, community, and nation. Being human meant

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1 Umen: After God is Dibia, 1, 5.
seeing others and thinking about them as similar to us. To understand who people were or the reason for their being where they were, we look to the social realm where meanings were assigned, and tasks distributed. We cannot ascertain people’s identities or tasks merely by their anatomy. Hence, the mere fact that a particular sex congregated in a social space is not epistemologically interesting, the information tells us nothing about who they are and why they are there.

With conceptual focus on the social, perceptual intelligence amplifies social meanings, social tasks and duties that a community’s organizational principle had distributed. The ọdinani of most African communities did not rank by biology because the concept of gender that dictates such ranking was absent. Rankings were based on tasks or on status that one has achieved. Although there were social interactions between women and men in these societies those were not gender relationships. Unlike societies with the organizational principle of gender, they did not lock the two sexes in a superordinate/subordinate relationship with female bodies as inferior and male bodies as superior. There was no biological sensing, biological idealization, and the principle of male dominance working synchronously to create a dystopian state for women.

The problem that exists in contemporary Africa stems from European colonial administrators hegemonically imposing their gender relations on societies. The practice continued after independence because African male rulers who were privileged by colonialism and tremendously benefited from its gender imperialism became ardent proponents of male dominance. Also, Western feminist researchers and their African surrogates, minimally educated about their cultures, collapsed all social relations between men and women into gender relations. But ọdinani of most African societies did not know gender. It underscored human oneness, even though as the colonizing frame denied Africans’ humanity and structured their lives along a superior/inferior axis that privileged men. Western imperialism ranked all bodies as gendered, then projected these meanings back into African communities as if they were accurate readings and as if they conformed to Africans’ views of themselves. These body-focused readings created searing conceptual tensions and social problems that are still being dealt with today.

Examples abound: our matriarchal/matri-lineal societies were problematized for flipping the West’s male dominance principle\(^2\). The overemphasis on »man« or its deployment as humanity’s yardstick was ludicrous as it oversold the virtues of males, and peddled falsehood about reality. This was why many viewed the British legal concept of »manslaughter« as totally incoherent. But the colonial enforcement of the West’s social idealization of »man« as human moral arbiter invisibilized women and correspondingly robbed them of social significance. The hegemony of colonial rule imperiously amplified Western values,

\(^2\) See Amadiume: Reinventing Africa; Diop: The Cultural Unity of Black Africa; Douglas: Is Matriliney Doomed in Africa?.
Euromodernity is the conceptual scheme developed under modernity that still dominates the academy.

Euromodernity is the conceptual scheme developed under modernity that still dominates the academy. The idea of gender as a central feature of Western imperialism and its negative impact on are effectively obscured by the global dominance, teleological narratives, and moral claims of Western power. Under Western hegemony, Africa's values and practices were transmogrified as the continent was ceaselessly depicted as a place of retardation, crudity, cruelty and male dominance. The impact of these attacks and the subsequent conceptual transfiguration that followed has rarely been addressed in the field of African art and aesthetics. Most Western art theorists are unwilling, hence, fail to engage the impact of colonialism on African peoples and cultures; yet they fully assume that the present sexist terrain is historically and endogenously given.
In their myopia, they assume that Western education and Western feminists are critically improving the lot of women. In the arts, these assumptions prodded the seemingly positive goal of highlighting the presence of African women, which earlier theorist had ignored.

The failure, or refusal, to theoretically engage colonialism means that many well-meaning Western feminist theorists are oblivious that African ideas and concepts had been consigned to pathological spaces and are not informing their research at all. Matters are further compounded with the theoretical deployment of gender which initially appeared significant and revolutionary. The putative liberatory capacity of gender galvanized the recovery of African women as artistic creators into scholarly literature. But the recovery is modeled on the Marxist analysis of class whose underlying sociopolitical concepts cast African women as inferior beings of retrograde cultures, not as being of the colonial policies that produced them. The persistent hiding of colonialism, and the constant raising of gender issues, as if all cultures were similarly gendered, prevents Western art theorists from encountering odinani and its logic. And so, these feminist gender analyses oblivious to the damaging social and epistemic impact of European racism and imperialism as well as the imperialism of Enlightenment ontology. The upshot is that such analyses continue to surreptitiously problematize Africa and erode her ontologies and social logics including her art and aesthetics.

The theoretical assumption that gender is normatively given and epistemologically important sets up this »givenness« as »the woman question« to be solved. Its effect, however, is that it unwittingly normalizes and deeply inserts the sexist ideology of gender into any society under investigation regardless of the sociopolitical reality and positions women had historically occupied in those communities. For most African societies, for instance, the insertion presents all women as necessarily socially disadvantaged, as all subordinate beings, and as under the domination of men. It is this broad assumption, this audacious reading into a society that is the colonizing turn. Once such readings are carefully advanced, they are automatically legitimized and prioritized. Scholarship ideologically pivots on the now firmly entrenched axis of gender. Its consequent narratives cover all African societies throughout history and represent them as having always been male dominated. This ideological feat further introduces and legitimizes the application of an array of concepts, conceptual categories, ways of seeing, and ways of being that are at odds with the erased ontologies and social logic of odinani.

Once this Western-created ideological shift recedes to the background, feminist art theorists within the racialized euromodernity tradition make portentous claims about African societies and the abject subjugation of women by men. Owing to their leadership dominance in the academic field, their unsubstantiated

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»facts« and worrisome assumptions are taken at face value and deemed to be true. These »facts« are automatically backed up by the epistemological weight of the Western intellectual tradition that irrationalizes challenges from subjugated societies, and then continues to interpret those cultures’ norms and values from a colonizing lens of power. The slick superimposition of cultural data from the West’s gendered ideology further obscures the fact that the West’s category of gender was produced under social conditions that did not historically exist in Africa. As earlier stated, it was European colonization that restructured African societies along gender lines then made it seem that gender ideology had always been part of African ontology. The morale of this analysis is that we should treat the colonized and postcolonial realities of Africa different from the preceding ọdinani reality that was being displaced.

Again, contemporary theorists working within the boundaries of euromodernity hardly make this distinction in their analyses of art. For them, gender analysis is a laudatory progressive move. They see all societies as populated by men and women, and the category of gender as a relevant tool for highlighting the relationship between men and women and for exposing the power differences between them. From this standpoint, the fact that gender analysis highlights women’s creative expressions are seen as important. But good intentions notwithstanding, the epistemological claims that gender makes about precolonial, and even colonialized African societies, and the methodological strategy it activates for its task are all fundamentally flawed. Gender is not the simple fact that men and women exist in a society. It is about a specific way of seeing, of categorizing bodies, of defining relations, and of organizing power in societies.

Gender speaks to the structural principle of power and its valutational character that in Europe was produced by complex interactions of patriarchal monarchical absolutism, patriarchal representational rule, masculinist ethos of ecclesiastical power, and male-privileging ideals of modernity. Like the category of race and class, the production of the category of gender is provincially located in Europe. Its global dissemination during the colonization of other lands meant that it was an implicit part of imperialism. The prevailing assumption that all societies across time share the category of gender prior to European imperialism is inherently false. I have argued elsewhere that it is the universalization of gender by imperialism that reconstituted African societies along gender lines. In short, the mapping of sexist ideology onto these societies raises spurious questions about their history that fly in the face of their ọdinani.

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8 Nzegwu: How (If At All) Is Gender Relevant to Philosophy; dies: Iyoba Idia 75–118.

9 Nzegwu: How (If At All) Is Gender Relevant to Philosophy, 75–118.
From the moment of European colonization, the presentation of African art to the world shifted it from its aesthetic base. The Western framework of knowledge ensured that Africa’s art was neither understood from its philosophical roots nor seen from the perspective of Africans. In the first phase of theorizing up until the 1970s, white males were the primary proponents of the art, followed decades later in the second phase by white women. A unifying thread runs through the works of the two groups of scholars that, as products of euromodernity ideology, were shaped by racial and sexual idealizations. From this epistemological base, the Western artistic lens instinctively privileged male bodies, male lens, male focus, and male activities. This male privileging character of euromodernity research is further magnified by reliance on male informants who, as the respected euromodernist ethnographer Robert S. Rattray later disclosed, revealed only male views and biases, having learned that the »whiteman« was interested only in men. Collectively, all this explains why Western researchers hewed to their own artistic scheme that treated ceramics and pottery as lesser art forms, and subsequently ignored them in Africa.

Yet, pottery-making in West Africa, for instance, is the oldest, most versatile and most important artform going back to before 10,000 BCE\(^1\). The 10,000 BCE cut of date merely refers the timeframe of recent archaeological discoveries, not the date of commencement of pottery-making in the region. The influence of the artistic and aesthetic euromodernity traditions explains why Michael Cardew described pottery as an inferior art, as »the lowest in the hierarchy of native handicrafts«\(^{11}\). The reason for this, he offers, is not that the »raw materials cost little, the tools and equipment almost nothing,« but because »it is very largely a woman’s trade«\(^{12}\). He justifies his inference on women’s inferiority by leaning on Rattray, whom he claims, »was informed in Ashanti that it was not worth the while of the men to make them«\(^{13}\). It is noteworthy that Cardew’s appeal to a white male »authority« is an imperialist move propped up by the colonialist idea that rationality inheres only in white male bodies. The deployment of Rattray to buttress the claim that »for the natives« pottery is an inferior art, reeks of masculinist prejudice toward both women and pottery that Cardew was oblivious of, find their home in his Western intellectual scheme.

In light of my earlier argument, it makes sense to ask: Do Africans really think this way? Why would the Ashanti think in this disparaging manner? Cardew failed to address the possibility that the artistic biases and prejudices he attributed to the Ashanti may instead have been coming from his euromodernity research.

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\(^{10}\) Messilil et al: *Direct 14C Dating of Early and Mid-Holocene Saharan Pottery, 1391–1402*; Huysecom et al: *The Emergence of Pottery in Africa During the Tenth Millenium Cal BC, 905–917*.


\(^{12}\) Ibid.

\(^{13}\) Ibid.
Relocation to the pre-1884 world of Africa, through underscoring complementarity and one humanness, moves us into a world without gender in which the category as a social organizing category did not exist.

14 Thompson: Namsifuelti Nyeki, 54.

15 Glaze: Art and Death in a Senufo Village, 553.
failings. For not so inexplicable reason, they were unwilling to question the validity of the assumptions of the Western hegemonic scheme, and so their unwillingness structured their interrogation and analysis to safeguard their intellectual scheme’s integrity.

But, what does this significance of women, this power that African women have in societies portend for art and art theorization? An African-centered reading that forces a foundational shift of the Western framework is required. Such a shift would return us to Africa’s ọdinani philosophies, histories, and social logics in the production of art and pottery. The ontological shift interestingly places females at the center of creativity and at the foundation of art. In different regions of Africa and in different historical moments, potteries had a prominent space and status in societies. They were widely collected as the ninth-century pottery shards at the Igbo-Ukwu excavations reveal; and equally too, the Emir of Abuja’s »magnificent collection of pottery« which Cardew positively acknowledged in 1972. More recently, Barbara Thompson reported on the deference that Tate Habibu showed to the »great potter« Namsifueli Nyeki, whose ceramic vessel he collected for his work as a healer. He spoke of its energy and power and that it was highly efficacious in his healing work.

Pottery is the foundation of African art due to it being the oldest art there is in Africa. It predates the emergence and spread of iron technology. Recent archaeological excavations establish that pottery production in West Africa goes back to over 10,000 BCE. Archaeological data in Igboland establishes that ceramics was one of the oldest art industries; in fact, it predates the development of ironworking and manufacture of bronzes. The symbolic and stylistic grammar of fine pottery produces a decorative aesthetics consisting of applique, concentric, spiral, and geometric patterns that proliferate widely in the region. Some of the styles display unique sculptural elements enhanced with lines and geometric forms. In 1989, Anselm Ibeanu established that the ninth-century decorative motifs and pottery styles found on Igbo-Ukwu pottery, which can be described as Igbo-Ukwu styles, have been dated to 670 AD in Afikpo, and identified in undated potteries at Inyi, Ishiagwu, and Nrobu Ehandiagu as well as in other parts of Igboland such as Nri, Udi, Okigwe, Nsukka, Isuochi, Umuahia, and neighboring Cross River Valley communities. The pervasiveness of the patterns, their longevity and continuation to present day, and their locally based meanings collectively establish that the aesthetics and stylistics developed

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16 Thompson: Namsifueli Nyeki, 55.
18 Ogundiran: Four Millennia of Cultural History in Nigeria, 141–142.
19 Onwuejegwu: The Search for the Missing Links in Dating and Interpreting the Igbo-Ukwu-Finds, 169–188; Shawn: Igbo Ukwu.
20 Ogundiran: Four Millennia of Cultural History in Nigeria, 148.
locally. Ogundiran makes a convincing case that the archaeological finds of Igbo-Ukwu and environs, and Onwuejeogwu’s history of Nri hegemony (1981) strongly undermine the ahistorical narratives of Simon Ottenberg on the Igbo and Igbo arts. Both works portray the Igbo as far more culturally sophisticated and technologically advanced than Shaw and Ottenberg envisaged.

In addition to archaeological investigations, various regional ethnographies, trade patterns, and local community histories establish that the main potters in Igbo land were women. The prevalence of women in this foundational art form and at the center of artistic activity says a lot about African women as artistic and technological pioneers, a fact that is hardly ever acknowledged in euromodernity scholarship on Africa that is always “looking to” men for explanation and answers about life, philosophy, and social dynamics. The intelligence, knowledge, and humanity of women were consistently ignored and routinely erased.

The foundation of art and the center of creative activity in most of Africa was working with clay and pottery production. With women at the center of this artistic production, researchers are yet to fully see and acknowledged them for their artistic and scientific discoveries. Consider that the act of *ikpu ite* or pottery production requires highly specialized skills that are rooted in knowledge and wisdom. It begins with a knowledge of soil types: knowledge of different types and properties of clay, knowledge of soils for producing coloring slips, knowledge of the relevance of slips, and knowledge of the geological locations of clay and red stone for the slips. At the very least, women had to have studied nature intently and intensely to have discovered where the pliable, malleable clay were geologically located on the earth surface, or where to quarry for those in the ground. The knowledge this transformation suggests is quite significant. It suggests, indeed it tells us that the very first geologists, scientists and technological innovators in the region were women. They pioneered and invented the exact processes of earthenware production after having experimented and determined the necessary chemical processes and steps for transforming quarried clay soil into impermeable usable earthenware products. This knowledge cannot be taken lightly as it did not exist before, and it was vital for producing earthenware vessels and containers that subsequently fulfilled human needs.

### Ṣọrinani as a Maternal First Force

*Sọrinani* is a compaction of three words – *ẹdị* (it is), *nọ* (in or on), *ani* (earth, ground, or land). Literarily, it states: “It is in the earth or ground”; but the expressive meaning of the world is much more than that. *Sọrinani* is not a simple empirical statement about the...
ground, earth or land. It is a deep important conceptualization about land, earth, or ground in the grand universal scheme. In Igbo cosmology, Ani is the earth and simultaneously alusi, a divine entity; and due to its sacredness, it is an altar. Ani is the first force that possesses and models the attributes of nne or mother. Maternal Ani as alusi is the link to Chukwu the Creator, with whose knowledge and wisdom she gave birth to rivers. Ani signifies the earth as sacred, as the first force and phenomena of creation from which earth dwellers arose, lived, and are welcomed back into her in death. At the same time, all newly born continue life in a long chain of seemingly endless cycles. As the place of habitation and life, the sacred energy of the earth sustains and nourishes all that live on earth. Its force parallels human mothers who are cast in her image and who, by virtue of the synchronicity of their tasks, became her propitiators and communicators. In their spiritual duties as intercessors’, Ani reveals Herself to them imparting knowledge of her varied forms, the different energy of her properties, soil types, plants, as well as the energy pathways in her.

Necessity is always the mother of invention and the catalyst that leads to discoveries. The catalyst for harnessing Ani’s properties fine pottery production was food preparation and food preservation. Her intercessors had to learn the diverse and different ranges of her properties. The cognitive and belief systems associated with translating the knowledge learned into use in pottery production boosted women’s power and social dominance as every facet of daily life – eating, drinking, cleaning, bathing, washing – required some form of vessel or container which women potters invented and produced.

Pottery was the mainstay of life, and in time became a major economic activity. All aspects of spiritual and everyday life were touched by pottery. Consider the ubiquity of ụte, the earthenware clay pot, among the Igbos. In the culinary department, there were ụte nni, general cooking pots; ọgbada, wide clay trays for drying items; ụtọ (colander) for draining items; ụgbugba or ụtọ ọfe, blacked smaller pots for cooking all kinds of soup; ọkwụ lightly decorated bowls, utilized for serving or storing food; and mbo oma, elaborately decorated bowls used for serving distinguished visitors. The latter were also found in shrines. For food fermentation, outsize, wide mouth ụte (pots) were used and were situated outdoors close to the cooking areas of the usokwu/mkpuke (wives’ areas of the homestead). They were utilized for fermenting ụkpu (cassava), ọgbado (corn), ọkili (sorghum), and achala/achara (millet).

For drinking purposes, there were nnukwu ụte ụmili large outsize storage water pots that held water for general household uses. Due to their large sizes these were generally stationary and were filled after numerous trips to the stream. There were also udụwu, wide-mouth, medium-sized pots for storing drinking water. These were generally kept in cool shady spots either in the interior of the home or in verandahs. The inside of these pots was treated with smoke before putting the pot in use to ensure that insects do not lay eggs in the water. Iko (special clay cups)
Pottery was the mainstay of life, and in time became a major economic activity. All aspects of spiritual and everyday life were touched by pottery. Was used to retrieve drinking water from ụdụ, as well as for drinking purposes; and ịte ogwụ, were small pots used for medicinal preparations and storage. Ịte mmanya were wine pots, with the body roped for carrying around and the base mounted on thick circular fiber pads; ịte ike is a pot of valour and strength; and ụdu a pot with multiple necks and rims ranging from two to seven were made exclusively for women of status and prestige.23 For musical purposes there was also another ụdu, a narrow necked, musical resonator pot with a handle and spherical opening at the top; the opening is situated at the opposite side of the handle; and ịte egwu, pot-zylophone with wide rims containing different water levels and are played with a fan-like beater. In short, different types of earthenware container were fabricated for a whole range of uses that met people’s needs.

The knowledge of pottery production was passed from mother to daughter and interested female relatives. Sons typically were not instructed in the craft due to the rituals associated with pottery production though some learn by observing. The social ontology of ọdinani that made this a female activity was like that which placed men in charge of the knowledge, domestication, and cultivation of yams, a key crop in Igbo agriculture and diet. A team of plant geneticists led by Nora Scarcelli recently corroborated what the Igbo had been stating all along, that yams were first domesticated not in the tropical savanna as had hitherto been assumed, but in the Niger River basin from the forest species D. praehensilis24. According to the Nri, this knowledge came from Chukwu Abiaama (the Great God of Knowledge and Wisdom), just like the knowledge of pottery production did.

Some may point to this differentiation of spheres of activities as proof of the existence of gender in Igbo society. But as I have continually argued, gender speaks explicitly to a society-wide institutionalization of male dominance and privileges that supervene the powers of men over women. This supervenient relation is illicitly and illegitimately achieved by simultaneously flattening men’s identities and inflating their social powers and flattening women’s identities and deflating their social worth. It is this hegemonic hierarchical power, this lopsided relation of power, that gives the category of gender its epistemic importance even as it is underplayed as the relevant factor. Consider that if there were no hierarchical differences between the sexes in a society, gender would hold no significant value or interest, since there would be nothing to say about the relationship between women and men. It behooves us to note the careful, intricate distribution of powers between women and men in Igbo society, for instance, that creates an intricate complementarity matrix of powers that obstructs the emergence of male dominance.

Because there are males and females in all societies does not mean all societies are gendered. But because the social ontology of the West is hegemonically upheld for all societies,

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24 Scarcelli: *Yam Genomics Supports West Africa as a Major Cradle of Crop Domestication.*
Because there are males and females in all societies does not mean all societies are gendered.

DIVINE OGWUGWU

In ọdinani conceptual scheme, art, aesthetics, cosmology and epistemology combine to illuminate women’s knowledge of pottery production. Ani, divinity/earth delivers empirical knowledge of the geological character and location of soils, and the essential chemical processes of production. At the center of artistic insight and inspiration, however, is Ogwugwu, the »female« divinity of human fertility. Creativity was seen and treated as synonymous with fertility, the capacity to produce or birth new life and new forms. Art, on this social logic, is an act of human creation that speaks to human necessity and results in the transformation of one substance and form into another of a different state and form. In a manner of speaking, ịkpu ite (to mold pots) is likened to the metaphysical processes of ịkpu mmady (to mold humans) in the sense that both references creativity, and artistic activity mirrors Chukwu Abiaama’s production of human forms from ọku na mmili (fire and water). In construing art as an act of conscious creation, very much like human gestation, development and birth, creativity and art become fundamentally entwined as aspects of human fertility that fall under the divine principle of Ogwugwu. In the hidden language and mysteries of ọfa (similar to Yoruba Ifá), Ogwugwu was an aspect or manifestation of Nne-Chukwu (Mother of God) who is also Nne Agwu (Mother Holy Spirit) the supreme ruler of society, eternity, and everlastingness.25

John Anenechukwu Umeh explains that in addition to naming a divinity, the word »ogwugwu« also references a well, hole, or pit.26 Such holes were, and still are evocative of the womb such that only females can be initiates of the divinity Ogwugwu and are authorized to invoke her knowledge and wisdom. In some communities, women potters ritualized the processes of production in order to preserve and protect the knowledge scheme that explains what pots really are. The knowledge scheme cloaks the relationship of clay to energy/lifeforce. It reveals what the manipulation of clay actually achieves transcendentally. While the knowledge processes also disclose technical matters about pottery production, expert potters were reticent about the philosophical meaning behind pottery as well as the constitutive energy of clay and the lifeforce that earthenware vessels emit. Subse-

25 Umeh: After God is Dibia, 111.
26 Ibid: 11.
In some communities, women potters ritualized the processes of production in order to preserve and protect the knowledge scheme that explains what pots really are. Consequently, clay quarries are sites of rituals dating back to earlier times, and quarrying clay is reminiscent of the physical processes of harvesting of the seed of life, while molding clay represents the molding of life and ultimately of giving birth. This social logic of paralleling life explains why women assumed supreme responsibility in controlling the quarrying of ụlọ (clay). Though, they may avail themselves of the help of male relatives, it is primarily the labor of adolescent males, which they solicit.

The female ethos of Ogwugwu, notwithstanding, the divinity cares equally for all humans – male, female and intersex. She extends creativity and creative essence to all. But it is, in pottery production that the foundational basis for the development of design grammar for all artforms began. Women in different African communities exercised the dominant role in the establishment of the prevailing aesthetics. Their pioneering work in artistic designs and imaginative articulation of the decorative grammar of motifs in all regions influenced all other emergent artforms. Prior to European colonization, their artistic contributions were well known and respected so much so that their pottery production was a very profitable and thriving business in diverse regions of Africa. It remained so six decades after the injection of euromodernity ideology. In different regions of Africa, women retained control of pottery production even as far south as southern Africa. Making pots was simultaneously an artistic, economic, and spiritual activity. Pottery’s instrumental goals notwithstanding, the vessels and containers were produced with technical rigor and artistic excellence in mind. Under ọdinani, the instrumental goal of the pots, containers, and vessels did not invalidate nor undermine their aesthetic quality and character as it does under the euromodernity scheme.

Beauty (mma) is an essential component of life under ọdinani. Producing mma in vessels motivated talented potters to strive for excellence and to produce exceptional works whose beauty, power and energy were incontestable. Coloring slips of votive energy, vegetal dyes of aesthetic character were utilized in the beautification of pots and vessels. In the aesthetic process of icho mma (beautification), mma established the regional character of the creations as well as marked visual patterns and textures, and the distinguishing hand of the potter. In the process of icho mma, the potters invented ụli (Igbo) and nsibidi (Ibibio) patterns that were either painted on or incised into the surface of vessels creating a complex, sculptural look. Expert potters continually pushed the tradition, adapted old forms, invented new ones, adopted the stylistic shapes of other cultures, and thereby stretched the canons of tradition.

Ọkụ and the Philosophy of Art

In many communities around West Africa, this dominance of women in the arts was ignored as the euromodernity lens shifted art to a masculine base and women were moved from a central to a marginal position. The shift demonstrates a deep-seated obliviousness to the achievements

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27 Thompson: Namsifuli Nyeki, 58)
of African women by deflating their worth and longstanding achievements in imagining and defining their world. It also obscures and dismisses their commingling of art and science; of studying and understanding their environment, of creating canons of taste in communities, and of seeking relevant solutions to the pressing social problems of their communities.

The ubiquity and pivotal nature of earthenware pots in community life across centuries provides insight into the importance and centrality of women in societies. It also sheds light on the seemingly marginal role of women in the arts that had hitherto been portrayed in African art scholarship. We subsequently learn that the latter is due to Western overemphasis on sculpture and sculpted forms. Given the longevity and centrality of pottery in diverse African societies, we must refocus research attention to how women created the design grammar of different artistic traditions from studying the vegetal and animal forms of nature. The decorative patterns and forms they invented, were the same one’s male sculptors’ and carvers transposed onto wood, iron and bronze works. Even the masking tradition did not escape women’s influence. They remained the dominant inventors of forms: as creators of ụli and nsibidi designs which men liberally incorporated into their woodcarvings, metalsmithing, leather-working arts and masking practices; and as creators of a body art on which men modeled their ọghogho mmuo »masquerades« and ugochammas figurative sculptures.²⁸

With Ogwugwu at the center of creativity, and with women as the sole initiates of Ogwugwu, women were at the center of art. It is instructive that the ọdinani conception of art radically differed from the Western one that did not underscore the holistic nature of life. Prior to European imperialism, pottery production in Africa was both spiritual, artistic, and utilitarian. The ọdinani approach to creativity was profoundly metaphysical in conceptualizing pots as vessels that embodied life. They were receptacles produced by ọkụ (fire/light) allowing them to simultaneously extend ọkụ (energy) that pervades the universe and infuses life on earth. Chukwu Abiama created Ụwa Mbụ (First World) from the eternal fire/light in Iba/Obi Chukwu. That monolithic world exploded with a gigantic flash that flung out pieces into the endless void until the phenomenal brakes of ọdgaghị ọkwalu stabilized them in orbit.²⁹

In accord with this cataclysmic creation, the clay endured the fire so that fired earthenware vessels encapsulated the ideational thought and energy of the fabricator. The constitutive energy of the clay, and the transformative energy of fire, merged to produce fundamentally different forms. Ọdinani artistic philosophy models divine fabrication – ka ọdi na mmadu, ka ọdi na mmuo (as it is in humans so is it in spirit). In so doing, ọdinani aesthetics preserves long forgotten knowledge and teachings with every stage of production corresponding to a philosophical lesson about

²⁹ Umeh: After God is Dibia, 4.
Decolonial theorizing is necessary for rethinking dominant assumptions in African art studies and in re-positioning African societies.

Decolonial theorizing is necessary for rethinking dominant assumptions in African art studies and in re-positioning African societies. *Odzinani* thinking is required to get us outside the boundaries of Western imperialism to a new realm. The hand of the critically conscious potter creating in spirit (or *mmuo*) is at best the divine hand of God. It is a hand infused with *ọkụ* (divine fire or energy) that infuses *ọkụ* (dynamic energy) into pots, bowls, or receptacles. This conscious extension of *ọkụ* (lifeforce) produces new objects and new meanings in which utility and artistic simplicity fuse to become art. The less critically conscious potter produces pedestrian works, which like rote-learning hardly rises to the level of alertness, supreme concentration, and technical skill that artistic excellence demands. Whereas pedestrian fabricators merely produce ordinary pots; artistic excellence by contract is highly inspired work. Inspiration is Ogwugwu alightment, an inexplicable nonlogical awareness that occurs in potters and other creators who are physically disciplined and psychologically receptive. The phenomenon marshals the artist’s mental focus, heightened visual awareness, and knowledge of relevant artistic traditions of one’s natural and cultural environments.

Tapping into the power of Ogwugwu places a potter-creator in a meditative state transforming her or him into extender of *ọkụ*, a producer like Tanzanian Namsifu Nyeke, of energy charged forms that diviners like Tate Habibu seek for their healing work. An elevated sense of mission and artistic creation moves fabrication beyond the state of mere craft. Celebrated potters in this vein are considered »sighted« artists who are powerfully linked to *ọkụ* (lifeforce). Their works are fresh and innovative by regional standards; they reflect the skill of the artist and are easily identifiable by community and regional buyers. »Sightedness« extends artistic tradition by ridding art of stultifying rules and conventions as creators heightened seeing, opened the mind to unique combinations of forms as well as to uncommon relationships of styles and patterns. Conjoining these forms and patterns results in the effortless production of vessels with energy-laden hands that capture elegance and simplicity in forms. The unique hand of a potter is the »signature« that marks her works from others.

**CONCLUSION: TRANSFORMATIVE ART**

Both the ideology, cosmology and values of euromodernity are at odds with how *odinani* construed art, pots, and pottery. For one,
Ọdinani valued the imaginative and artistic works of women potters. It centered them as pivotal forces of creativity. Their labor was neither gendered, commodified nor owned by anyone. This valuation ensured that the creators owned the products of their labor. Their unparalleled artistic activity and imaginative insight of the oldest artform, were accorded social status and the privilege they deserved.

Philosophically, moving art outside the concept and category of gender as well as outside euromodernity centers humanness, human values, and human creativity. It centers aesthetic agents of transformation. Through the first human art of pottery, Igbo women continued the tradition of being custodians of the ancient knowledge system of Ụwa Mbu (First World) ritualized in pottery making. The unparalleled legacy of that knowledge system opens up energy pathways, epistemic connectedness of human existence to ani (the earth). Reflecting on the processes of creative expression, pottery making speaks to the myriad of ways artworks like human life are brought into existence in ebili uwa (tidal waves of the universe), a pulsating field of consciousness that is the lifeforce. Art is not simply about aesthetic pleasure, or art for art’s sake. It is a powerful narrative about becoming and transformation. Art awakens us to the potentialities of our human powers and of the power of transformational change to bring possibilities into reality. As birthers of humanity, women have long been cognizant of this principle of adding to life that is actualized under different conditions.

In olden times, when women »listened« to Ani (the Earth divinity) and harnessed the powers of Ogwugwu, they became aware of the immensity of life and of who they were. They utilized this dynamic power to initiate the sort of sociopolitical changes that was relevant for life but which the euromodernity category of gender curtailed. Today, gender is being presented as an important category of transformation in modern, neocolonial Africa created by neoliberalism. It is instructive that the very conditions that contemporary gender discourses are celebrating as radically progressive are fraught with pitfalls. They diminish the enduring worth and longstanding achievements of African women and represent them as marginal beings in society who are just newly attaining autonomy. Thus, the question of African women’s disempowerment and the issue of gender in art and society are all fundamentally tied, on the one hand, to historical ignorance and on the other hand, to continuing efforts of Western imperialism to denigrate the worth and value of African women. Gender is a hydra-headed monster of euromodernity and Western imperialism that aggressively regrows severed heads to obscure all possibilities of a different vision of reality. Critical decolonial analysis is required to pierce through its chimera. But to really think through and beyond gender’s epistemological barriers, we require another social organizational principle to help reimagine new realities. Utilizing ọdinani allows us to do just that and to see that art is a votive center of transfiguration.
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