

BOOK REVIEW

Ndubueze L. Mbah. *Emergent Masculinities: Gendered Power and Social Change in the Biafran Atlantic Age*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019. 309 pp. List of Illustrations. Appendix: Lineage Charts. Glossary. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$34.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-0821423899.

Emergent Masculinities is a groundbreaking study about Ohafia, the only matrilineal Igbo society. Most historical scholarship on masculinity has focused on the colonial and postcolonial eras, taking the late nineteenth century as an imagined baseline. Pushing back the exploration of masculinities into the precolonial period, Ndubueze Mbah presents the *longue durée* of a gender system in which women dominated men economically and politically. The book tracks how the process of achieving hegemonic masculinity changed in Ohafia, from cutting heads to gathering slaves, and then to accumulating commodities, academic degrees, and houses. As the first study to deploy such a deep historicization, the book radically alters our understanding of the construction of masculinities in West Africa. Mbah explores the gendered socio-political changes brought by the Atlantic slave trade, the Atlantic “legitimate trade,” and the era of European colonialism. Scholars have treated the Atlantic age and European colonialism separately, and most gender historians have focused on the colonial and postcolonial periods. Mbah shows how the Ohafia dual-sex system, in which women enjoyed political and economic autonomy, evolved beginning in the sixteenth century. After 1750, Ohafia men asserted themselves by participating in the Atlantic slave trade and then in post-abolition mercantilism. British colonial rule ended women’s socio-political dominance and brought new ways to achieve hegemonic masculinity.

Mbah uses “Atlanticization”—the interrelationships between Atlantic trade and gendered socio-cultural transformations that shaped Ohafia and Caribbean planter societies—as an analytical framework. In Biafra, he explores the articulation of trans-Atlantic economies in the lives of men and women, including slaves. The book reveals how Ohafia and Jamaica, the main destination of slaves from Biafra, were interlinked. Mbah excels in his methodological sophistication and innovative use of sources. He consulted the national archives of Nigeria and the United Kingdom; accessed

published sources that range from the British Parliamentary Papers, travelogues, missionary accounts, and colonial ethnographies to an unknown autobiography published in a Nigerian journal in the 1930s; and conducted over 250 interviews. The book is enriched by an analysis of oral traditions, rituals, war songs, and dances.

Emergent Masculinities is organized into five chapters. The first chapter historicizes Ohafia's dual-sex socio-political system, in which men and women managed their own affairs and created institutions such as age grades and title societies. Ohafia groups settled in the middle Cross River between the 1550s and 1650s. Matrilineity, a concept borrowed from non-Igbo neighbors, became an organizing principle. Women controlled the farmland, dominated food production, and served as breadwinners. Men seeking escape from female dominance transformed hunting, warfare, and secret societies into male pursuits. They achieved *ufiem* (hegemonic) masculinity through cutting heads and celebrated successful yam farmers for their *ogaranya* (wealth) masculinity. The chapter shows the *longue durée* of a female-dominated agro-economy and a male-centered militarism.

Chapter Two looks at changes brought on by the Atlantic age and its impact on the dual-sex socio-political system and on hegemonic masculinity. The Atlantic slave trade brought military institutions like secret societies and performances such as war dances and songs that venerated male heroism. After 1750, men's activities shifted from headhunting (which was intended to pacify a frontier settlement) to slaving, in response to regional and overseas demands. Men sold captives through Aro traders in exchange for locally manufactured goods and European commodities. The war drum and the war dance honored men who cut "heads" (male heads or captured women and children).

Chapter Three examines the Atlantic slave trade and the legitimate trade as interlocked gendered systems. Most captives from Biafra ended up in Jamaica. On both sides of the Atlantic, female slavery corresponded with expanding agricultural production and the use of women's wombs for social reproduction. For Ohafia men, slave ownership constituted *ogaranya* (wealth) masculinity, which marked their socioeconomic advancement. Slave women in Ohafia negotiated their bondage through their incorporation as wives and mothers. Female Igbo slaves in Jamaica challenged their bondage through abortion, infanticide, and motherhood. Legitimate trade increased the demand for female slaves and intensified social stratification, leading to the rise of wealthy men and a few women as *ogaranya*.

Chapter Four examines how colonial emancipation took gendered forms. Emancipation led to the political subjugation of women and to the access of power by formerly marginalized men. Legitimate trade, Christianity, and colonial rule transformed *ogaranya* masculinity. Life histories exemplify these gendered processes. Kalu Uwaoma's fascinating autobiography narrates how he moved from being a debt slave to becoming a warrant chief, Presbyterian elder, and British knight. He acquired wealth in money, people, land, and material objects to demonstrate his *ogaranya* status and to overcome

the stigma of slavery. His story shows the political and economic opportunities under colonial rule which were open to men but not to most women.

Chapter Five turns to women's responses to Atlanticization, colonialism, and Christianity, which undermined their political authority and conferred breadwinner status to men. Uncoupling masculinity from maleness, Mbah examines how two unusual women became innovators of masculinities. Otuwe Agwu and Unyang Uka refused to conform to Presbyterian ideals of femininity. Instead, they embraced the now dissident sexuality of female husbands to secure their status. Agwu purchased membership in the masculine *dibia* guild, acquired wealth as a diviner, built a modern house, and married a wife. Uka, a wealthy trader and moneylender, wore male garb, married several wives, and distributed her resources. In his analysis of these non-conformist gender performances, Mbah engages with queer theory by looking at sexuality as power politics that extend beyond sexual acts.

This rich book places gender at the heart of an African-centered Atlantic framework. It emphasizes continuities over the *longue durée* and historicizes male power rather than assuming a stable patriarchy. The dynamic structures of the Atlantic age, including its material culture, reshaped gender identities and practices in West Africa. *Emerging Masculinities* is a milestone in the historiography of masculinities in Africa, and as such it deserves a broad readership.

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