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Colonial Power and Relational Being: An Ontological Study of Igbo Women as Presented in Colonial Archives

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the ontological construction of Igbo women in British colonial archives, exploring how colonial power not only inscribed but also distorted gendered subjectivities through ethnographic description and photographic representation. Engaging key colonial texts — notably Sylvia Leith-Ross's *African Women* (1938) and G.I. Jones's *The Art of Eastern Nigeria* (1984) — this study critiques the mechanisms through which Igbo womanhood was rendered legible to colonial authority: not as lived subjectivities but as static figures defined within hierarchical, gendered, and racialised paradigms. Positioned within the broader scope of postcolonial historiography, African feminist critique, and ontological studies, this paper contends that these representations, while attempting to map 'truths' about Igbo culture, in fact reveal profound gaps between colonial knowledge-making and indigenous epistemologies. The project identifies and confronts the reductive and homogenising tendencies embedded within colonial ethnographic discourses, in which Igbo women were often framed as informants, cultural exemplars, or aesthetic artefacts to be catalogued. However, counter-archives such as Mbari houses — richly symbolic, spiritually potent sites of creative expression — present an alternative archive through which Igbo women's relational being, metaphysical agency, and cultural sovereignty are foregrounded. Through a comparative and interpretive methodology, the paper reveals how such indigenous forms of knowledge resist the ontological violence of colonial representation and instead embody a nonlinear historiography rooted in relational presence, spiritual aesthetics, and communal renewal. Ultimately, this research offers a critical model for decolonising both archival practices and gendered historiographies by centring African epistemologies and indigenous aesthetics.

Keywords: Igbo Women, Colonial Archives, Relational Being, Mbari Houses, Ontological Violence, African Feminism, Colonial Ethnography

Introduction

The art, culture, and socio-political structures of the Igbo people have long been of scholarly interest, particularly within the context of colonial Nigeria. This interest,

often deeply entangled with imperialist motives, was amplified in the aftermath of the 1929 Ogu Umunwanyi — popularly referred to by colonial authorities as the "Aba Women's Riot." This pivotal event, where thousands of Igbo women mobilised against British indirect rule, disrupted colonial assumptions about African gender roles and catalysed a series of ethnographic and administrative responses. One such response was a growing academic and bureaucratic interest in "understanding" Igbo women — a project which, under the guise of anthropological inquiry, often served to reinforce imperial control (Achebe xvii; Watson 331).

This essay adopts a postcolonial and ontological lens to explore how two influential colonial works — Leith-Ross's *African Women* and Jones's *The Art of Eastern Nigeria* — constructed, flattened, and institutionalised specific readings of Igbo womanhood. These texts, alongside their accompanying photographs and archival materials, are not merely passive records but active instruments of knowledge production — tools through which the colonial state sought to produce legible and governable subjects (Stoler 2002). In examining these sources, the study does not merely ask what was written or photographed, but what ontological assumptions underpinned these representations: What kinds of being were Igbo women permitted to have? Whose values shaped their depiction? And how did such portrayals travel — epistemically, politically, and historically — into present-day assumptions about African femininity?

The analysis proceeds in three interlinked movements. First, it interrogates the ethnographic foundations of Leith-Ross and Jones' works, tracing their entanglements with colonial administrative structures and racialised epistemologies. Second, it turns to Mbari Houses — intricate artistic and spiritual edifices — as sites of ontological resistance and indigenous knowledge. Lastly, it situates these historical constructions within contemporary discourses on gender in Nigerian historiography, exploring the ongoing implications of archival violence on African feminist thought. Drawing upon scholars such as Ifi Amadiume, Edouard Glissant, and Achille Mbembe, the paper argues that Igbo women's relational ontology — defined not by Western individualism but by community, spirituality, and cyclic temporality — has continually resisted colonial legibility.

In so doing, this study not only challenges the fixity of the colonial gaze but also foregrounds the generative potential of indigenous aesthetics as historical texts. By reading Mbari Houses as counter-archives and sites of embodied memory, the paper seeks to reorient the historical narrative toward an African-centred epistemology — one that privileges nuance, opacity, and relational being over colonial orderings of knowledge. It ultimately contends that a decolonised historiography must begin not with what was seen, but with what coloniality refused to see.

Interrogating Colonial Ethnography in Southeastern Nigeria

The colonial archive is not a neutral repository of knowledge but a curated structure of power and vision, a site where imperial authority inscribed meanings onto colonised subjects in ways that served its own epistemic and administrative needs (Stoler 2002; Mbembe 2002). In the context of Southeastern Nigeria, this archive frequently relied upon ethnographic texts and visual records that constructed Igbo women as knowable, governable subjects. Sylvia Leith-Ross's *African Women* (1938) and G.I. Jones's *The Art of Eastern Nigeria* (1984) exemplify how the colonial gaze functioned through intertwined textual and photographic apparatuses. These works attempted to impose coherence on what colonial observers perceived as a fragmented and "primitive" social order, often misunderstanding or deliberately mischaracterising Igbo gender dynamics in the process. What emerged from this entanglement was not merely a

record of observation, but a reification of stereotypes—narratives that continue to shape understandings of African womanhood in both academic and popular domains.

Leith-Ross's *African Women*, in particular, has elicited sharply divergent responses. Some early anthropologists, such as Vischer (1939), praised the work for its ethnographic richness and for offering a vivid portrait of Nigerian women's daily lives. Others, like Watson (2013), have rightly interrogated the subjective tone and implicit biases that permeate the text. While Leith-Ross aimed to produce a coherent narrative about Igbo women's roles in society, her framework remained deeply entrenched in the imperial ideologies of her time. She was, after all, writing as a white British woman — herself subject to the gendered norms of her society — about African women embedded within radically different ontological, spiritual, and sociopolitical systems. This structural asymmetry problematises her position as both observer and narrator; as postcolonial feminists like Mohanty (1988) have cautioned, such ethnographies often universalise Western gender paradigms, rendering African women as "others" who can only be known through Western categories of analysis.

The methodological tensions in *African Women* are evident from its opening pages. Leith-Ross's stated rationale for focusing on the Igbo — "because they are the most numerous, the most adaptable, the most go-ahead, the most virile and at the same time the most primitive" (19) — encapsulates the contradictory nature of her gaze. The juxtaposition of terms such as "go-ahead" and "primitive" creates an epistemic dissonance that simultaneously romanticises and infantilises the Igbo people. Her attempts to nuance this contradiction — by acknowledging that "there is no typical portrait one can draw" (20) — are undercut by the very structure of her analysis, which divides the Igbo women she encounters into neatly bounded categories based on degrees of "sophistication." These categories, ranging from "Primitive Woman" to "Sophisticated Woman," are not neutral descriptors but reflections of a racialised developmental schema in which cultural value is equated with proximity to Western modernity.

This effort to produce legibility out of cultural complexity mirrors what Édouard Glissant has termed the "violence of transparency" — the drive to render opaque realities into comprehensible narratives for the Western eye (Glissant 1997, 221). Leith-Ross's ethnography seeks not to dwell within the opacity of Igbo relationality, cosmology, or gender fluidity, but to sort, define, and translate these realities into digestible forms. This is especially clear in her treatment of spiritual practices and artistic expression. Her descriptions of Mbari Houses, for example, are filtered through a lens that trivialises their symbolic and religious depth, reducing them to aesthetic curiosities rather than sacred, metaphysical spaces that reveal the Igbo people's understanding of life, death, and regeneration.

G.I. Jones, by contrast, adopts a more cautious and ostensibly objective tone. His photographic documentation of Eastern Nigerian life in the 1930s — now held at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge — is often framed as a valuable archive for understanding precolonial and colonial-era Igbo culture. Yet Jones's work is not free from the imprints of colonial ideology. While he is less overtly interpretive than Leith-Ross, the very act of photographing and cataloguing Igbo art and ritual as "specimens" or "types" reflects an anthropological impulse to arrest and fix meaning. His subsequent publication, *The Art of Eastern Nigeria*, recontextualises these images with taxonomical commentary that often employs terms such as "crude," "exaggerated," and "lewd" (83–86), echoing the racialised aesthetics of primitivism prevalent in 20th-century European art discourse (Picton 1986). These descriptors not

only betray Jones's biases but also reveal the limitations of visual ethnography when separated from indigenous systems of meaning and embodied experience.

Taken together, Leith-Ross's prose and Jones's images form a representational apparatus that transforms Igbo women into colonial subjects: at once aestheticised, pathologised, and instrumentalised. Their work exemplifies what Ariella Azoulay (2019) calls the "imperial rights of representation" — the assumption that colonial agents could unilaterally interpret, reframe, and disseminate the visual and cultural expressions of the colonised without reciprocity or accountability. In doing so, they denied Igbo women the right to narrate their own being, reducing them to signifiers within a colonial grammar of difference.

Yet despite the distortions within these texts, their very opacity — their inability to fully capture the relational and metaphysical depth of Igbo life — becomes a site of resistance. The contradictions, silences, and misreadings within colonial ethnography reveal the limits of imperial knowledge and open space for re-narration. Scholars like Ifi Amadiume (1987), Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí (1997), and Nkiru Nzegwu (2006) have shown how indigenous African gender systems frequently elude binary classification and resist colonial attempts at categorisation. These scholars argue for a return to indigenous epistemologies that prioritise fluidity, reciprocity, and spiritual continuity — frameworks that cannot be reduced to the rigid binaries of male/female, primitive/civilised, or spiritual/profane.

Thus, a postcolonial reading of Leith-Ross and Jones is not merely a critique but also an opportunity. It allows us to identify the fissures within the colonial archive, the moments where relational being seeps through the cracks of representation. By paying attention to what the archive omits or misrepresents — to what it *cannot* contain — we are better equipped to reclaim histories that have been silenced or distorted. This is particularly crucial for understanding the ontological presence of Igbo women, whose roles as ritual leaders, economic agents, and spiritual mediators challenge the very foundations of Western gender theory and epistemology.

Mbari Houses and the Act of Art Appreciation

1. Aesthetics, Ontology, and Colonial Misrecognition

The colonial dismissal of African art as primitive or decorative reflects a deeper ontological violence — a refusal to acknowledge African systems of knowledge, representation, and spiritual embodiment as legitimate or complex. Igbo artistic expression, especially in sacred spaces such as Mbari Houses, posed a particular challenge to colonial sensibilities because it refused to conform to Western aesthetic categories of symmetry, permanence, or individual authorship. In colonial literature, Mbari Houses were often exoticised, dismissed, or misunderstood. While Sylvia Leith-Ross and G.I. Jones documented these structures in their respective works, their interpretations remained filtered through Western paradigms of artistic merit and utility, often ignoring the cosmological and communal functions that these structures held in Igbo society. Such interpretations reinforce a troubling epistemological hierarchy wherein African artistic production is relegated to the margins of aesthetic discourse, serving as ethnographic curiosity rather than ontological text.

In postcolonial and decolonial studies, countering this erasure involves repositioning such artistic forms not as artefacts to be interpreted from without, but as modes of being, archives of memory, and dynamic agents in the production of meaning. Scholars such as Herbert M. Cole (1969), Chika Okeke-Agulu (2015), and John Picton

(1986) have worked to rehabilitate the aesthetic and ritual dimensions of African art by grounding analysis within indigenous cosmologies. From this perspective, Mbari Houses are not merely artistic expressions but ontological declarations — public manifestations of community, spiritual balance, and metaphysical rhythm. They operate within an Igbo worldview in which art is not an external object to be evaluated, but an embedded process of renewal and relational being.

2. The Politics of Exhibition and Epistemic Expropriation

Colonial narratives often justified the large-scale removal of African artefacts by claiming that African societies lacked the capacity to properly appreciate or preserve them. In this way, artistic appreciation became a racialised and colonialised discourse — one in which the West positioned itself as the rightful steward of African creativity. The archival data is staggering: the 2024 *African Collections Futures* report notes that over 350,000 African artefacts are held across University of Cambridge museums alone (Namusoke 2). The scale of displacement — with similar volumes held at institutions such as the British Museum, Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, and overseas collections in France, Belgium, and the United States — reveals the systematic extraction of cultural capital from the continent under the pretext of preservation.

G.I. Jones's *The Art of Eastern Nigeria* presents a meticulous catalogue of Igbo sculptures and ritual objects, many of which were either collected during his travels or photographed in situ prior to their removal. He acknowledges that "most of the finest works now in museums and private collections were made and collected during the early colonial period" (Jones 15), implicitly situating the colonial moment as the golden age of Igbo sculpture, and simultaneously legitimising the extraction of these works. While his tone appears more clinical than Leith-Ross's, his approach still reproduces the logic of colonial salvage — the idea that the value of African art is fully realised only when curated within Western institutions. This epistemic expropriation turns spiritual and communal works into dislocated artefacts, severed from the ontologies that gave them life.

By contrast, the artworks in Mbari Houses were never meant to be collected, preserved, or circulated in the Western sense. Built with natural materials and left to decay, these structures embodied an entirely different relationship to time, matter, and memory. As Cole (1969) observed in his landmark essay *Mbari is Life*, their temporal impermanence was not a flaw but a theological principle. The decay of a Mbari House signalled the completion of a spiritual cycle and the need for renewal. To interpret these forms using Western archival logic — which privileges durability, fixity, and ownership — is to fundamentally misread their purpose and meaning.

3. Sacred Aesthetics: Form, Function, and Fluidity

Mbari Houses were constructed primarily as offerings to the Earth goddess, Ala, and embodied a sacred trinity of aesthetics, ethics, and cosmology. Their creation involved entire communities, including specially chosen artists, diviners (dibia), and ritual leaders. Each house was a unique expression of collective creativity, featuring sculptural representations that ranged from deities and ancestors to satirical portraits of colonial figures — including British soldiers, white doctors, or mermaid-like "mammywater" spirits (Achebe 1997, 18). These images, rendered in mud and painted with natural pigments, were neither static nor purely representational. They engaged in a complex metaphysics of presence — what Mbembe (2017) has described as "the aesthetics of emergence," wherein art becomes a site of spiritual activation rather than a material object.

Leith-Ross, however, misinterprets this form. Her account describes the sculptures as garish, unrefined, and puzzling — unable to appreciate the abstract, symbolic layering of meaning that permeated each structure. Her language often betrays disdain or confusion, framing the artistic process as lacking symmetry or coherence. In doing so, she overlooks the communicative and relational functions of Mbari art — its ability to mediate between the visible and invisible realms, between the human and divine, between tradition and transformation. This dismissal reflects not only aesthetic bias but ontological limitation: the colonial gaze simply could not perceive the multidimensionality of African artforms grounded in ritual temporality and cosmological flux.

Jones, too, despite his more empirical framing, uses descriptors such as "crudely formed," "bawdy," and "disproportionate" (83–86), reducing these spiritually significant forms to visual oddities. His invocation of metaphors like "hobgoblins" and "snake-charmers" reinforces the idea that Igbo spirituality is not only foreign but grotesque — a spectacle to be documented and classified. Such language, while masked in anthropological neutrality, participates in the very colonial grammar of dehumanisation that the archive must reckon with.

4. Mbari as Counter-Archive

Despite these distortions, Mbari Houses resist colonial erasure by virtue of their relational ontology. As counter-archives, they enact a different model of historical presence — one that does not rely on textual inscription or visual accuracy, but on ritual embodiment and community memory. In their refusal to be permanent, Mbari Houses challenge the imperial logic of the archive itself: they are ephemeral, nonlinear, and affective, evoking what Glissant (1997) terms the "right to opacity." This opacity is not a lack of knowledge, but a mode of being that resists translation into colonial frames of legibility.

In this light, Mbari becomes more than an object of aesthetic curiosity — it becomes a mode of historiography, a living architecture of memory that foregrounds collective creation, cyclical temporality, and ontological multiplicity. As Amadi (1976) and Achebe (1997) have argued, these forms do not merely reflect culture; they *perform* it, inscribing spiritual truths into material forms. Their intentional decay reflects a cosmology where nothing is fixed, where being is relational, and where renewal is inscribed into the fabric of existence.

To read Mbari Houses on their own terms, then, is to engage a different kind of archive — one that prioritises process over product, participation over observation, and relationality over representation. It is to read not through the imperial gaze of order and taxonomy, but through the poetic lens of emergence and becoming. And in doing so, one finds in these structures a form of ontological resistance — a refusal to be fixed, defined, or extracted.

Women: Gender and Narratives in Nigerian History

1. Disrupting Assumptions of Gender Powerlessness

The colonial project in Nigeria, particularly in the southeast, was not simply a political or economic intervention but also a profound epistemic intrusion that reconfigured local understandings of gender, power, and social roles. Leith-Ross's assertion in *African Women* that Igbo women "have rather more power than is generally thought" (21) points to a subtle contradiction within the colonial gaze: while imperial actors often viewed African women as passive or oppressed, they were also confronted by

evidence that defied these expectations. The Ogu Umunwanyi of 1929 — a large-scale anti-colonial protest led by Igbo women — had already demonstrated a highly organised and politically savvy female collective consciousness, one capable of challenging the British administrative structure. This event alone complicated British assumptions of patriarchal universality and gender subordination.

What Leith-Ross encountered in her travels was a culture in which gender operated along significantly different lines from those familiar to Western society. However, rather than allowing this recognition to destabilise her assumptions, she attempted to reconcile the unfamiliar with familiar interpretive frameworks, often rendering her analysis reductive. As Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí (1997) argues in *The Invention of Women*, colonial ethnographers often imposed a Eurocentric gender binary onto African societies that did not historically organise social relations in such strict sexual terms. The result was the projection of Western patriarchal logics onto societies where social roles were determined more by seniority, kinship, and ritual status than by sex alone.

2. Indigenous Gender Systems: Beyond the Binary

Igbo social organisation was historically characterised by complementarity rather than hierarchy — a relational configuration in which men and women held distinct but overlapping responsibilities in political, spiritual, and economic life. Scholars such as Ifi Amadiume have argued that precolonial Igbo society recognised gender as a flexible category — one that allowed for women to become "husbands," "male daughters," or political leaders, depending on context and performance (Amadiume 1987, 4–7). These fluid roles were not symbolic anomalies but institutionalised practices rooted in communal values of adaptability and accountability.

Leith-Ross's observations provide evidence of this complexity, even as her interpretations fail to grasp its ontological significance. Her narratives are punctuated by moments of surprise at the leadership and independence of Igbo women — their control over trade networks, their spiritual authority, and their ability to negotiate power within familial and communal structures. Yet she repeatedly returns to a framework that measures their status in relation to European norms, creating a distorted picture in which Igbo gender roles appear to be in flux primarily due to colonial "civilisation," rather than longstanding indigenous dynamics.

Furthermore, her interpretations are framed within what Lugard, in his Foreword to *African Women*, termed the colonial state's "difficulty" in applying indirect rule in Igbo regions — owing to the absence of clear centralised male authority structures (Lugard 5). This admission inadvertently reveals the colonial state's incapacity to engage with decentralised and gender-inclusive forms of governance. In reality, Igbo women's assemblies, market associations, and spiritual roles often held considerable influence, challenging not only local patriarchies but also colonial hierarchies. The failure to recognise these forms of agency was not merely an oversight, but a deliberate act of epistemic suppression — one that would have legitimised alternative models of power had they been acknowledged.

3. Postcolonial Interventions: Reclaiming Gendered Historicity

Postcolonial African feminists have been instrumental in uncovering and theorising these suppressed histories. In addition to Amadiume and Oyěwùmí, scholars like Obioma Nnaemeka and Nkiru Nzegwu have argued that decolonising African gender studies requires not only an attention to indigenous knowledge systems but also a rejection of the universalising tendencies of Western feminist theory. The Igbo context

provides fertile ground for such an intervention, offering a historical example of gender relations predicated on fluidity, performance, and communality — not fixed identity or legal subordination.

The archival silencing of this complexity — through texts like *African Women* or administrative documents that excluded women's political structures — has contributed to a persistent misreading of African women as marginal actors. This misreading has contemporary consequences. It underpins donor policies, NGO programming, and development narratives that seek to "empower" African women without acknowledging the histories of power they already inhabit. In this light, colonial texts do not merely distort the past; they help construct a present in which African women must continually prove their agency within a framework that once sought to erase it.

Thus, the recovery of Igbo women's historic roles is not only a matter of archival correction, but a political act of epistemic justice. It asserts that African women were not waiting to be discovered by colonial observers, nor were they simply reacting to foreign impositions. Rather, they were — and are — ontological agents in their own right, navigating and shaping their societies through relational, spiritual, and material means.

4. Between Nostalgia and Modernity: A Gaze Interrupted

Leith-Ross's writings often betray a conflicted relationship with the "progress" she observed among the Igbo. On the one hand, she valorised women's industriousness and social independence; on the other, she mourned the loss of "authenticity" in the face of Western influence. Her criticisms of Western habits — from siesta-taking to dress codes — offer a strange nostalgia for a precolonial past she could never fully understand. As she remarks somewhat wistfully: "It is not his own feet we expect him to stand on, his own African feet firmly planted in the tribal path, but on newly made, insufficiently balanced, uncomfortably shod, semi-English feet" (253). Such moments of ambivalence reveal the fragility of the colonial civilising mission — its inability to fully justify its own impositions, and its creeping awareness that it had disrupted more than it had preserved.

This ambivalence resonates today. Nigeria, over six decades after independence, still bears the structural legacies of its colonial encounter — in its legal system, education, gender norms, and governance models. Gender struggles persist, not solely due to indigenous patriarchy but also due to the imposition of colonial systems that replaced fluid gender roles with fixed, hierarchical binaries. Yet within this landscape, Igbo women continue to assert agency — from historical figures like Ahebi Ugbabe (Achebe 2011) to contemporary leaders such as Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Obiageli Ezekwesili, whose activism, writing, and diplomacy signal a re-emergence of female leadership rooted in tradition yet navigating modernity.

Leith-Ross may have misunderstood the ontological depths of the women she studied, but her unintended legacy is that she captured — albeit through a distorted lens — the evidence of a society in which gender was not destiny, but a site of negotiation, fluidity, and resistance. It is in this very contradiction — between what she saw and what she failed to see — that we find the space for re-narrating history, reclaiming ontology, and decolonising the archive.

Conclusion: Ontological Violence, Relational Being, and Decolonising the Archive

This study has examined the colonial representations of Igbo women through ethnographic and visual records, specifically focusing on Sylvia Leith-Ross's *African Women* and G.I. Jones's *The Art of Eastern Nigeria*. It has shown that these works, although often framed as pioneering efforts to document African cultures, participated in a broader colonial project that sought to render African women legible, manageable, and ultimately governable within an imperial framework. Through textual generalisations and photographic taxonomies, the colonial gaze operated not only as a representational tool but as a mechanism of ontological violence — a process through which the being of Igbo women was flattened into a series of typologies that bore little resemblance to the complexity of their lived experiences.

What this essay has argued, however, is that even within these distortive texts and images, one can locate the traces of a deeper resistance — the persistence of relational being that eludes colonial capture. The colonial archive, while vast and imposing, is not impervious to rupture. As scholars such as Saidiya Hartman (2008) and Tina Campt (2017) remind us, reading "against the grain" of the archive involves attending to its silences, its gaps, its failures to fully colonise the narrative. Within Leith-Ross's awkward formulations and Jones's aesthetic judgments, we find not just evidence of imperial control, but the outlines of what the archive could not contain: a gendered ontology grounded in community, spiritual accountability, and fluid agency.

Mbari Houses, positioned here as counter-archives, offer a critical intervention in this discourse. Far from being static structures or merely decorative art, Mbari Houses manifest an Igbo cosmology that resists colonial temporalities and epistemologies. Their decay is not a sign of neglect, but a theological statement; their form is not "crude," but encoded with metaphysical meaning. They defy the Western logic of preservation and instead perform history as a living, cyclical process — one that implicates the community in acts of remembering, mourning, celebration, and renewal. In this sense, Mbari is not merely a cultural product but a mode of historical writing — one that privileges emergence over fixity, rhythm over record, and being-with over being-seen.

This ontological difference is critical. While the colonial archive relied on visual and textual legibility, Igbo modes of knowledge production have long privileged opacity, multiplicity, and relationality. Glissant's insistence on the "right to opacity" (1997, 189) resonates strongly here: to be opaque is not to be unknowable, but to refuse the violence of reductive comprehension. Igbo women, in their roles as priestesses, traders, mothers, political organisers, and artists, embodied a being that could not be mapped neatly onto the binaries and categories of colonial logic. They were not "primitive" or "sophisticated," but part of a complex metaphysical ecosystem in which power flowed through kinship, ritual, economy, and cosmology. To represent them otherwise — as many colonial texts did — is to erase not only their agency but their mode of being-in-the-world.

Decolonising the archive, then, is not simply a matter of recovering suppressed facts or reinterpreting colonial texts. It is a deeper epistemological and ontological task: one that demands we interrogate the foundations of our knowledge systems, question what counts as evidence, and re-centre indigenous ways of knowing and being. As Nkiru Nzegwu (2006) asserts, African feminist thought must begin from African realities, not merely as a postscript to Western theory, but as a generative and autonomous field. This includes engaging with the aesthetics, languages, temporalities,

and philosophies that animate those realities — from Mbari Houses to market assemblies, from oral storytelling to embodied ritual.

The implications of this approach are far-reaching. For historians, it requires a methodology that is attuned to absence as much as presence, that sees in silence not a void but a refusal. For feminists, it means recognising that African women's agency does not always look like its Western counterparts — that it may emerge through ritual, through motherhood, through negotiation, or through collective action. For archivists and curators, it necessitates a reckoning with the ethical responsibilities of holding and displaying artefacts whose meanings transcend material form. And for all of us, it calls for a humility in the face of other ways of being — a willingness to dwell, as Glissant urges, in relation rather than domination.

In the case of Igbo women, this means moving beyond the colonial portraits of "primitive woman" or "sophisticated informant," and instead listening for the voices that were excluded, the gestures that were misread, the lives that were archived not to be remembered, but to be controlled. It means recognising that relational being — rooted in community, cosmology, and care — is itself a form of resistance. And it means acknowledging that the project of historical justice is not only about the past, but about how we imagine and build futures that honour complexity, fluidity, and life beyond the archive.

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