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PRESCRIPTIVE AND PROSCRIPTIVE FEMALE GENDER  
ROLE PROVERBS IN TONY UCHENNA UBESIE'S *ISI  
AKWU DARA N'ALA*

**Abstract:** Traditionally, the Igbo culture is remarkable for its prescriptive and proscriptive gender stereotypes for women. Most of the time, if a woman does not subscribe to these gender roles, she is considered a bad woman and sometimes, ostracized. In this paper, I look at prescriptive and proscriptive gender role proverbs in Tony Ubesie's novel, *Isi Akwu Dara N'Ala*. I show that Tony Ubesie's work, though fictional, is grounded in the Igbo culture, as Ubesie bases his story on Igbo oral proverbs that portray Igbo traditions. In doing so I argue that *Isi Akwu Dara n'Ala* is more of a propaganda designed to prescribe and proscribe gender roles to Igbo women, who found freedom and independence, due to their roles as sole providers for their families during the Nigerian-Biafran Civil War. The novel is therefore an attempt to re-subjugate Igbo women to Igbo men after the war.

**Keywords:** Igbo proverbs, Tony Uchenna Ubesie, *Isi Akwu Dara N'Ala*, Nigerian-Biafran civil war, proscriptive and prescriptive proverbs.

**Introduction: Proverbs in Igbo Culture**

The Igbo society is a hierarchical one and so respect, for people, deities and institutions is paramount. As such, the culture places a lot of emphasis on the art of communication. Mastery of communication skills is highly valued and the Igbo employ a wide range of styles, such as "folktales, birthsongs, folksongs, riddles, tongue-twisters, or even the Igbo poetic insult (*iko onu - insult.*)" (Agbada, 1994) in communicating. Proverbs are, however, the most important and most employed in conveying messages and in general communication. The Igbo culture is also a highly gendered one, where there are strictly laid down rules, grounded expectations and code of conduct for both Igbo men and women. It is therefore not a surprise that many proverbs

serve as dictums that prescribe as well as proscribe code of conduct to the citizenry. They also establish and reiterate gender stereotypes. It is a general saying in Igbo that “proverbs are the oil that Igbo people use in eating yam”, and Chinua Achebe also says so in *Things Fall Apart*. However, Emenanjo also warns that, “much as proverbs form the oil with which the Igbo eat their speech, proverbs do not form the soup” (“Some First Thoughts” 59 cited in Nwachukwu-Agbada, 1997). This is because though yam may be the traditional staple food, it is not the only food. *Fu-fu*, another staple food of the Ibo, is also very important and is eaten with soup. Oil is also an ingredient in soup. While proverbs may be important in garnishing speeches, it should not be the only important aspect of speech. Therefore, the use of proverbs should not be overdone.

Understanding the importance of yam in Igboland will help us to understand the importance of proverbs. Yam is the most important staple food in Igboland and many festivals and rituals are centered around yam. It is also very important, mostly because traditionally, yam is considered, “the king of crops” (*Things Fall Apart* 29) and thus, traditionally, it was produced exclusively by men, while most of the other crops produced by the Igbo are seen as women’s crops. Indeed, Achebe expresses it more clearly in *Things Fall Apart* where he reported that “Yam stood for manliness, and he who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a very great man indeed” (*Things Fall Apart*, 29). It is therefore a symbol of patriarchy. There is hardly any festival that does not involve yams.

Yam features in the Igbo cosmology as some believe that it was *Chukwu* (God), who caused yam to grow from the grave of Nri’s son after God asked Nri to kill his son and daughter during a period of penury. Cocoyam grew from his daughter’s grave<sup>1</sup>. For this reason, “Nriland is recognized as the cradle of Igbo civilization and the center of further dispersal” (Manus, 250). In fact, yam farming is a marker of the Igbo calendar year. The ratooning of yams in August, which is the initial harvesting of yams when one just cuts off a portion of the tuber without uprooting the entire plant, is the Igbo New Year. It is marked with lots of celebrations that are accompanied with masquerades. Achebe also confirms assets in *Things Fall Apart*, “Men and women, young and old, looked forward to the New Yam Festival because

it began the season of plenty – the new year" (36). The harvesting period in every part of Igboland is the period of entertainment, wrestling, courtship and marriage and the period that yams are planted in the farms is a period of penury when gods are appeased and lots of sacrifices are made to ensure a great harvest. Yams are traditionally eaten with palm oil. They are used in offering sacrifices to gods and to *Ndi Ichie* (ancestors) as well. When used in sacrifice, they are roasted and mixed with palm oil before being presented to gods, or to ancestors. Therefore, saying that proverbs are the oil that the Igbo use in eating yams shows how important proverbs are among the Igbo.

Proverbs enable Igbo people to talk in a coded language in order to maintain secrecy, so that plans could be made and discussions held in the presence of a non-Igbo without him/her understanding what was said as proverbs are filled with signs and symbols. These symbols could be animals, plants or natural phenomena that have been ascribed special meaning by the Igbo based on their characteristics. An Igbo person can thus speak completely in proverbs or not say more than two sentences without one of them being a proverb, and he/she can definitely not finish a speech without infusing it with proverbs.

As has been said earlier, Igbo proverbs simply portray the Igbo culture. They "record the history, experience, the trauma, and the tension of a society at every stage in its evolution" (see Nwachukwu-Agbada, 1990, 1994) as well as prescribe and proscribe roles for the Igbo citizenry. And, since the Igbo culture is highly gendered as mentioned earlier, some Igbo proverbs are prescriptive, which means that they prescribe roles and some are proscriptive which means that they also forbid roles, (Prentice and Carranza, 2002). However, most of the time, it is women to whom (forbidden) roles are prescribed and proscribed. Because of the importance and role of proverbs to the Igbo, many writers of Igbo descent incorporate Igbo proverbs in their creative works to convey their message.

### ***Methodology***

To effectively discuss prescriptive and prescriptive gender role proverbs, I will use the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, an approach that analyses power relations in discourses. CDA also studies dominations and asymmetrical power dy-

namics not only in discourses of all forms, but in ideologies, beliefs and practices within cultural groups. CDA confronts all inequality in leverage in gender relations that “appear disguised as conceptual metaphors and analogies” (Wodak, 8 cited in Amoke and Nnamani, 147), and “assumptions that are treated as if they were common sense” (Agbedo, 1), but which rather function for the servicing and sustenance of “unequal relations of power” (Fairclough, 84). According to Amoke and Nnamani, “analysis of texts... is an important aspect of ideological analysis and critique. ...Embedded in and disseminated through discourse, ideologies influence the way individuals make sense of their world, the way they act and interact. The centrality of power in CDA stems from the latter’s interest in the discourse of domination, where power undergirds social structures and clearly manifests in social action lopsidedly” (147). They however insist that power is “jointly produced by both the dominated and the dominating” (147), as people can consent to their domination, which is then reiterated in the cultural discourses of the people. Amoke and Nnamani go on to say that “Feminists and gender theorists find CDA attractive owing to the shared border with issues of common interest among them”. I therefore use this approach so that I could take a critical look at gender role proverbs, and why Tony Uchenna Ubesie uses them in his post Nigerian-Civil war novel *Isi Akwu Dara N’Ala*.

Igbo literary giants such as Pita Nwana, Chinua Achebe, F. C. Ogbalu (who published a 162 paged book on Igbo proverbs), and Tony Uchenna Ubesie, to mention but a few, all infuse their works with Igbo proverbs, though some translate them into English. Also, many Onitsha Market Literature pamphleteers also weave Igbo proverbs into their works. In this paper, I look at prescriptive and proscriptive female gender role proverbs in Tony Uchenna Ubesie’s *Isi Akwu Dara N’Ala* and insist that though fictional, *Isi Akwu Dara N’Ala* is grounded in the Igbo culture portrayed through his use of Igbo proverbs. Igbo proverbs portray Igbo ideas, beliefs and traditions. Ubesie’s excessive use of them confirms what Goddy Onyekaonwu said: "Ubesie is very consistent with his use of [proverbs] for the reinforcement of his key ideas. This is perhaps why he is interested in using as many of them as possible" (cited in Agbada-Nwachukwu, 129). However, I also argue that the female protagonist, Ada, is not a faith-

ful representation of the Igbo woman of the period portrayed in the novel, hence, that the novel is not a true representation of the period and therefore a propaganda geared towards the re-subordination of women after the Nigerian-Biafran Civil War of 1967 to 1970.

***Tony Uchenna Ubesie (1949-1993): The "Igbo Literary Genius"***

Born in 1949, Tony Uchenna Ubesie was only twenty-three years old when he published his first two novels in 1973. His writing was a direct response to F. C Ogbalu's calls for the Igbo to write in the Igbo language in order to promote, and establish the Igbo language and encourage its readership. After Pita Nwana's *Omenuko* (1933) and D. N. Achara's *Ala Bingo* (1937), there was a long period of literary lacuna of works by Igbo authors until 1958, when Chinua Achebe published *Things Fall Apart*, though in English language. In 1967, Léopold Bell-Gam published *Ije Odumodu Jere*. However, this novel, though in Igbo language, is based mostly outside of Igboland and the author is not an Igbo man. Starting from 1973, T. U. Ubesie wrote several novels in Igbo language, which include *Isi Akwu Dara N'ala* (1973), *Ukwa Ruo Oge ya Odaa* (1973), *Mmiri Oku Eji Egbu Mbe* (1974), *Juo Obinna* (1975) and *Ukpana Okpoko Buru* (1975). Though rooted in Igbo cultures and traditions, as well as sometimes, on real historical events, all of his novels are creative and fictional works; and for this reason, Ernest Emenyonu describes him as the Igbo "creative genius" (Emenyonu (2003, 755-756), given that he was the first to write major creative works that truly reflect Igbo cultures and traditions in Igbo language.<sup>2</sup>

The interesting thing about the titles of all his works with the exception of *Juo Obinna* is that they are all Igbo proverbs. *Isi Akwu Dara N'ala* is the short form of the Igbo proverb, "*isi akwu dara n'ala edetula aja*", meaning that the bunch of palm fruit (red oil palm) that falls to the ground is soiled (All translations are mine). In other words, it has become dirty. *Ukwa Ruo Oge ya O daa* means that bread fruit only falls when it ripens, in other words, that there is a time for everything, or that everything has its season. *Mmiri Oku Eji Egbu Mbe* coming from the saying "*Mmiri oku ka-eji ebu Mbe*", literally means that it is hot water that is used to kill the tortoise, referencing that there is a

technique or means of doing things. And *Ukpana Okpoko Buru* is the short form of “*Ukpana okpoko buru bu nti tiri ya*”, meaning that the insect that is caught by the noisy bird, Okpoko (the Crow, which crows loudly and hardly moves alone, making it hard not to hear it), must be deaf. This proverb is an equivalent of another proverb, “*Onye Ugbọ gburu bu nti tiri ya*”, anyone who is killed by a train must be deaf, because both the train and Okpoko make loud noises whenever they are in movement and should be heard by someone or an insect in good time to escape from harm. The use of these proverbs even in the titles serve as tips off the iceberg, to already alert the reader as to the moral lesson, content or action of the novel.

***Prescriptive and Proscriptive Female Gender Role Proverbs in “Isi Akwụ Dara N’Ala”***

*Isi Akwụ Dara N’Ala* begins with a prologue and ends with an epilogue that are written entirely with proverbs despite Emenanjo’s disapproval of the belief that “the only way of writing good Igbo is by forcing strings of proverbs down the throats of readers” (“Some First Thoughts” 58). According to Nwachukwu-Agbada, “Ubesie happens to be one of the Igbo novelists to whom these observations are directed. Emenanjo demonstrates what he means by referring to Ubesie’s *Ukwa Ruo Oge*, which contains some 301 proverbs in its 76 pages” (“Traditions and Inventions”, 129). I beg to reproduce the prologue and the epilogue here with their translations, as I intend to show that Ubesie used proverbs that are at the same time prescriptive and proscriptive gender role stereotypes that he substantiates with the story that he weaves together in the body of the novel. In so doing, he dehumanized and denaturalized Igbo women by misrepresenting them through the character of his female protagonist, Ada, whom he made to place more value on material wealth than on her family, children and duties as a wife.

Okwu Mmalite	Prologue
Nwata riwe ihe, taa arụ n’aka, Olee aka o ga-eji tinye ọzọ n’ọnụ?	If a child is eating and bites his hand, Which hand will he/she use to put another food in His/her mouth?

<p>Nwanyị lelịa di ya, Ike akpoo ya nkụ. N'ihị na di nwe ụlọ Bu aka ogoli na-ehi n'isi. Maka na nwayi chupụ di ya, Isi eruo ya ala.</p>	<p>If a woman looks down on her husband, She will suffer. (lit. Her buttocks will dry up.) Because it is the husband who owns the home. He is the hand that a wife uses as pillow for her Head. For when a woman drives her husband out of the Home, she will be humbled.(lit. her head will Reach the ground)</p>
<p>Onye na-amaghi na o ga-echi ozo Mechaa chie ozo, O chowa igbanye eriri ozo ya, O gbaruo ya n'ikpere ukwu. Maka na ogoli riwaa onu, O kwuwaa onu. Ma, mbe fegharichaa O daara awo</p>	<p>If one who is not expecting to be a chief later Becomes one, when s/he wants to wear his/her Chieftaincy regalia, s/he makes sure that it Reaches To his/her knees. For when a wife has eaten more than she should, She speaks more than she should. However, after an insect has flown all it wants, it Will fall for the frog.</p>
<p>Ugo chaa achaa Ma ugo ebela ebe. Onye ugo bere n'isi Bu onye nwuru anwu. Ugo rie awo, Mma ya aruo, Maka na isi akwu dara n'ala edetula aja !</p>	<p>May the eagle soar but not perch. Whomsoever the eagle perches on his head Is a dead person. If the eagle eats a frog Its beauty will fade. For the head of palm fruit that falls to the ground Has been soiled.</p>
<p>Okwu Ikpe azu</p>	<p>Epilogue</p>
<p>O buru na mmadu Chukwu kere eke Di ka iriro puru n'ubi, Ndi mmadu gara iji ukwu zogbuo ibe ha. Ma onye na-emegbu nwa ogbenye, Ya cheta na Chukwu kere ogbenye, Maara ihe kpatara o ji kee ogbenye,</p>	<p>If people created by God Are like plants in a farm, Some would have trampled others to death. But whoever is maltreating the poor Should remember that God who created the poor</p>

<p>Maka na onye karijị mmadu  Akaghi chi kere onye ahụ.  A si na anụ ụmụ nwanyị gburu,  Anaghị agbaputa ọbara.  Ma, e nye nwanyị maara ihe anu ka o  gbuo,  O chọọ nwoke nọ nso ka o gbuoro ya,  Maka na o kwesighi na nwanyị ga-  egbu anu ụlọ  Ma ya fọdụ na ọ gbaputaghi ọbara.  N'ihị na nwata chọọ ka ọ hụ ike ya,  Isi asụọ ya n'ala.  Ogaranya na-eri anụ, ya cheta  ogbenye.  Maka na ogaranya nwụọ,  Ogbenye esoro buru ozu ya.  Onye huru nke ọ na-eri taa,  Mara na echi di ime.  Maka na oke riwe, ghara inye awo,  Awo riwe nke ya, oke ebewe akwa.  Na ya gara inyetu awo mgbe ya na-eri.</p>	<p>Knows why He created him/her,  For the person who is greater than  someone  Is not greater than the God who creat-  ed him/her.  It is said that an animal killed by a  woman  Does not bleed.  So if a wise woman is asked to kill an  animal, she Looks for a man nearby to  kill it for her,  For a woman should not kill a domes-  tic animal  Even if it did not bleed.  For if a child tries to see his bottom,  His/her head will hit the ground.  The rich who is eating meat should  remember the Poor.  For when the rich dies,  The poor will help to carry his/her  corpse.  Whoever sees what to eat today  Should know that tomorrow is preg-  nant.  For when a rat eats without giving to  the frog,  When the frog eats, the rat will start  regretting Why it refused to give to the  frog when it was Eating its own food.</p>
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As you can see, both the prologue and the epilogue of the novel *Isi Akwu Dara N'ala* are written entirely in proverbs and other wise sayings. However, when you look closely, you will see that most of the proverbs show consequences of actions and what one should not do in order for something else to not happen and what could cause someone to regret it later. They warn people to play fair as one good turn deserves another and people need one another either in life or in death. No one is an island, so, if the rich does not need the poor when alive, the rich will need the poor to carry his/her corpse when s/he is dead. These proverbs are thus prescriptive as they show cause and effect. However, some of them are not gender specific as the author



employed generalized subjects such as “someone”, “a child”, “people”; as well as animals such as the eagle, insects, the frog, etc.

The other proverbs that are not addressed at impersonal or non-human subjects are addressed specifically to women. While some of them proscribe roles to women (“It is said that an animal killed by a woman does not bleed. So if a wise woman is asked to kill an animal, she looks for a man nearby to kill it for her, For a woman should not kill a domestic animal even if it did not bleed”); some tell women what their place is with respect to their husbands, (“The husband is the hand that a wife uses as pillow for her head”), and others state what will be the consequences of certain actions if women take them, thereby prescribing roles to women, (“If a woman looks down on her husband. She will suffer (lit. Her buttocks will dry up) because it is the husband who owns the home. For when a woman drives her husband out of the home, she will be humbled (lit. her head will reach the ground)” [...]) “If a wife eats more than she should, she speaks more than she should.” These proverbs clearly show the cultural subordination of women to men and prove women to be the inferior “other” in a man’s world.

Thus, while Ubesie addresses some unspecified subjects and women, he refuses to address men directly which makes one wonder if the entire proverbs are not directed solely at women. If one assumes this, then the person might not be wrong as the author fleshed out the context of the prologue and the epilogue in the fictional story of the novel. One should bear in mind that this novel is purely fictional as the author states clearly and with this in mind, this novel gives an insight into the mental workings of Tony Ubesie and his regard for Igbo women. By refusing to use proverbs that address men directly in this work, Ubesie indirectly is asserting that men are the “norm” and the “standard”, while women are the “other” who should be told how to behave in a man’s world, confirming Grace Okafor’s definition of otherness in her article “African Literature and Beauvoirism”<sup>3</sup>:

Otherness is a theory of objectification of women in a world where men constitute the center and the standard. It clarifies the predicament of women in the social, political, and cultural life in terms of their marginalization

and construction as inferior reflections of the standard which is male: woman as man's inferior Other. It clarifies the central/marginal, standard/other dichotomy. 'Otherness' is a universal concept based on the patriarchal order of society in which the authority of the father is paramount and permeates all facets of life. Thus, the concept can be applied in the criticism of African traditional orature and modern written literature. (2)

***“Isi Akwu Dara N’Ala”*: Synopsis and Gender Bias**

Tony Uchenna Ubesie's *Isi Akwu Dara N’Ala* is a fictional tale about the effects of the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War on the Igbo moral ethics, and how the war turned everything, especially gender roles, upside down. It shows that though the war might have been between Biafra and Nigeria, that the real war was fought at the family level as the war tore many families apart and made many people lose their respect for the Igbo tradition. It depicts women as abandoning their roles of submissive and respectful wives, as well as nurturing and loving mothers. These qualities are seen as innate feminine qualities. Ubesie, through this novel, wants to prove Igbo women's disobedience to Igbo culture and their insubordination to their husbands in times of men's difficulties, as the Igbo proverb that says that “*ukwu jie agu, mgbada abiara ya ugwo*”, meaning that when the tiger breaks a leg, then the deer demands its payment. However, as I tend to prove, it is rather a case of “*Ikuku kuo, a hu ike okuko*” (when the wind blows, one sees the buttock of the fowl), as the war destroyed so many myths about men as the heads, providers for and defenders of the Igbo family.

*Isi Akwu Dara N’Ala* tells the story of Ada who, despite having a good job, did not have a husband and is therefore always unhappy. After being deceived by so many men, she finally meets and marries Chike, a young but very rich man, who has businesses all over Nigeria and money in American banks. Without wasting much time, he marries her and she becomes a housewife. She bears two children, a boy and a girl and is always treated well by her husband who makes sure that she has everything she needs and that she wears the latest fashion among women. Unfortunately, the war breaks out and for no reason whatsoever, Ada changes. Her materialism, which we never

know about becomes manifest when Chike asks her to gather a few things so that they could run back to their village since the city in which they live has fallen into enemy hands and the city is being bombed down. Instead of doing that, she disobeys her husband and starts making soup as well as carrying all of her expensive clothes. This almost causes them the life of their son as the car breaks down and they cannot find one another in the commotion caused by bombs falling everywhere. Soon after arriving home, their village falls into enemy hands and they have to flee from there. Ada repeats the same thing of going after material things and eventually they settles in another village. Due to the change of currency, and the rationing of money by the banks, Chike is unable to access his money and he is forced to start selling off the little possession he has left. Ada becomes more and more disrespectful and eventually asks Chike to raise money for her to start doing petty trading. Chike sells his bed to raise the money. Unfortunately, Ada becomes wild and turns herself into a whore. She sleeps with Army officers and soldiers. She would claim to go to the market, but would go to spend the time with her lovers instead.

Eventually, when Chike cannot bear it any more, he beats her up mercilessly. Ada abandons Chike and her children, and moves to a neighboring village, where she engages in "*Affia attack*", by crossing the enemy line and going into enemy zone to purchase salt and other food items that she trades on. She makes a lot of money, which enables her to slaughter several chicken daily and to entertain her boyfriends constantly, while her husband and children are starving to death. Chike is reduced to begging her on his knees for money and food for him and their children. Later, the army takes her apartment from her and she is forced to return to her husband, but she makes it clear to Chike that she has become the boss and is no longer ready to respect or submit to him. Her boyfriends even visit her in her home and she asks her husband to eat on the floor, to enable her to entertain her lovers at the table. If Chike as much as makes a comment, she would threaten to have him conscripted into the army and to have one of her lovers send him to the war front so that he could be killed. Eventually, she succeeds in getting him conscripted into the army, and by the time the war ends, Chike returns from the war and realizes that his younger brother who is in the army

too, has moved their mother, as well as Chike's children, away from where they were before and that Ada has moved in with one her numerous lovers.

Chike recovers his businesses, which a white man was running for him in Lagos during the war and he is thus able to access his money in an American bank, and to rebuild his life and wealth. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about Ada, who is impregnated and abandoned by one of her soldier boyfriends, as he returns to his own wife and children. She goes back to beg Chike to take her back, but Chike who can hardly recognize her, made mockery of her and in a humiliating way reminds her of how she has treated him and their children during the war. Even her children reject her as well. The novel ends with Chike saying this to her:

Onọdụ I nọ ugbo a na-ewute m nke ukwu. Ma, I burula onye ndi mmadu luforo alufo na di. Mu bu Chike anaghi eri ihe eriforo erifo. Nne, were ego a gbaa ugbo lawa be nna gi, ma buru n'uche na o dighi ihe ga-eme ka m lukwaa gi ozọ, maka ne ISI AKWU DARA N'ALA, EDETULA AJA.'" (205) (I find your condition now very painful. But you are now a second-hand wife (meaning that many men have married you). I, Chike, do not eat left over food. Woman, take this money to pay for your transport back to your father's house and bear in mind that nothing will ever make me to marry you again FOR THE HEAD OF PALM FRUIT THAT FALLS TO THE GROUND HAS BEEN SOILED. )

So here again, we see the proverb used to compare a woman to leftover food and soiled palm fruit because she has been involved with other men than her husband. In reality, a man is free to do whatever he wants without being reprimanded, punished or corrected by the wife because a woman never tells her husband to return to his father's house since he is already there.

When a man provides for the family, he expects the wife to perform domestic chores and tend to the children, but that is not the case when a woman is the breadwinner among the Igbo. In fact, in a recent 2001 study carried out by Rose Uchem in her dissertation that is based on her research on an Igbo community living in the United States of America<sup>4</sup>, she finds that though

Igbo women in the United States make more money than their husband do most of the time, that “there is still not much sharing of the domestic work by the Igbo men. Rigid gender roles still operate and weigh heavily on the women, who thereby carry a double work load of wage employment and domestic labor” (16). Such is the case in the novel. When Chike is the breadwinner for the family before the war, Ada stays home and caters for the children, as well as does all the house chores, whereas, when she becomes the breadwinner during the war, she is still the one doing all the house work as the author writes, “*O bụ ezi okwu na o bụ ya (Ada) na-akpata ihe ha na-eri, ... Chike nwe ya onwe ya, nke bụ na o bụ ya nwekwa ego ya.*” (83-84) (It is true that she (Ada) is the breadwinner ... but it is Chike who owns Ada, which means that he owns her money as well.) Thus empowered, when he suspects Ada of adultery, he beats her up so badly that she bleeds profusely from both the nose and the mouth (*Mgbe Chike mechara ike ya, o wee meghee uzọ. Obara si Ada n’imi na n’ọnu na-enuputa. O dewere ọnu ka awọ na-eje okwu nwanyi?*) (81) – “When Chike exhausted himself (from beating Ada – emphasis, mine), he opened the door. Blood was oozing out profusely from her nose and her mouth. Her mouth was like that of a frog that is going to marry a wife”).

Throughout the entire beating, though the neighbors and her mother-in-law for whom she is also providing food heard her screaming and calling for help, they did not come to her rescue because women are considered their husbands’ properties and a husband has the right to treat his wife as he deems fit without interference from anyone. This confirms what Okenwa Olisah (The Strong Man of the Pen), one of the Onitsha Market Literature Pamphleteers, writes in his pamphlet “Ibo Native Law And Customs” (1963) in which he has recorded many Igbo customs from interviews that he has conducted with Igbo elders from different Igbo villages and communities. He states that during traditional Igbo marriages, the middle man (intermediary) would ask both the suitor and the girl to be married some questions to make sure that both understand what they are getting into. One of the questions the girl is asked is “In case, he happens to be annoyed and give you beatings, would you bear that?” (15), and the girl would answer “I will bear it.” And he would ask the suitor “If this girl happens to act foolishly and stupidly, can you bear

that?” and the intending husband would answer “I can bear that”. Traditionally, therefore, abuse comes with the marriage package as everybody expects that the man should beat his wife if he considers her actions foolish and stupid and, of course, it is the man who decides which actions are foolish and stupid, and thus requires the woman to be beaten by way of correction. However, while the man is quick to exercise his traditional right to beat his wife, he conveniently ignores the part where he promised to bear her “foolishness and stupidity”. Women are also so brainwashed that they encourage men to do this as we can see from Chike’s mother who keeps quiet, while his son beats his wife to a pulp and yet, when Ada decides to leave him, she is considered a bad woman. This reiterates the comment by Amoke and Nnachukwu that power imbalance is jointly produced by both the dominated and the dominating.

***Igbo Women, Before, During and After The War: What Changed?***

We have seen the traditional and patriarchal assigned gender roles for women and how they are expected to behave. Let us now consider how plausible the story of Ada is and if this image is a true representation of Igbo women, especially of the period represented in the novel. After reading the story of Ada, one is convinced that Ada is indeed a bad woman and deserves what happened to her at the end of the story. However, let us not forget that the narrative voice of this story is a man’s voice who weaves a fictional story to buttress and underline his misogynistic ideas about Igbo women. He paints Igbo women really black as well as prescribes roles to them, while brainwashing them to accept abuse as normal as he clearly states, “Ma, onye jee di, o di mma, o di njo, ila azu adighi ya. Onye si na be di ya gbaa oso, o nweghi mgbe o ji abụ ezi ihe. O masi ya, ya buru di nwanyi ahu na-emegbu ya ndi mmadu anaghi ele onye obula si na be di ya laa be nna ya ezigbo anya” (1). (When a woman marries, whether the marriage is good or bad, there is no going back because it is not a good thing for a woman to run away from her husband. Even if the husband is maltreating the woman, people do not look kindly on any woman who leaves her husband’s home to return to her father’s house.)

Ellima C. Ezeani maintains the same by saying that “appearances are very important”<sup>5</sup> in an Igbo marriage and that “couples at the very least are expected to present a façade of stability for their children.”<sup>6</sup> He went on to say that “many marriages persist in spite of domestic difficulties which at times could result in violence and death. But no matter how terrible a marriage is, the woman bears the greater burden of maintaining its stability. Invariably, she will receive less public sympathy in the event of a break-up.”<sup>7</sup> However, the war has altered these ways of thinking, as women discovered their inner strength and abilities to stand on their own. The war has made them realize that they are actually the pillars and backbone of the families and that made them raise their values. Many of them could no longer go back to the gender role status quo, and have started questioning their roles and traditional social status. Many no longer want to remain in the background, while their husbands take credit for everything, and some do not want to attach themselves to men at all, desiring their independence more than answering married women. In short, the war has caused a redefinition and a reinvention of the Igbo woman. Brenda F. Berrian holds the same view that the author Flora Nwapa “reinvents the African woman” in *One is Enough* by disproving that a woman must have a husband to attain respect and success, even self-realization. (“Reinvention” 54; taken from Mary D. Mears, 154).

Many Igbo authors and critics have expressed their views as well as carried out interview-based research on some Nigeria-Biafra Civil War survivors and have reported their findings. Christie Achebe’s 2010 article, “Igbo Women in the Nigerian-Biafran War 1967-1970: An Interplay of Control”, confirms through numerous interviews that:

Traditionally, women were the nurturers, traders, and peacemakers of society. The shrinking of food sources during the war was a direct assault on the capability of the women to successfully carry out what they perceived as their traditional role. It was an attack that impugned their very reason for being—to oversee the health of the nation. This was a war of survival that was making a mockery of the women’s self-worth and integrity and was threatening to strip them of their status in society.

They had to modify their role to fit the new emergency. Women were determined to recover the control that was slipping in this domain of their life. (794)

Considering the war as personal attack on women's self-worth and integrity is not an over-statement, since indeed it is women who are traditionally in charge of feeding the family, especially in polygamous homes, where the man is just a glorified head and each wife is a matriarch in her own branch of the family. Women thus engage in "Affia (market) attack" by crossing the border and going into the enemy zone in disguise, to procure food and clothing as well as medical supplies and other survival items for their families, whereas men, such as Chike, go into hiding with the pretense that they are protecting their families. This of course is pure irony as they are only protecting themselves, while sending their wives to the war zones, thus exposing them to danger. The women become wealthy through their involvement in the "affia attack" are known as the "Cash Madams" (Mears, 2009, p. 145).

Clearly, women took the most risks during the war as they kept Igbo people from total starvation since the Biafran section was cut off and did not get outside help. It is women who risked their lives to go into the enemy zone to get food. It is women who made sure that their children, husbands and families were clothed. Some joined the army and provided nursing, and other medical services to the wounded because traditionally, many women kept shrines as priestesses, so they already knew so much about herbs. In fact, many of them even worked as bomb manufacturers and served as decoy to help the Biafran soldiers escape to safety. Some also were used as "troop comforters" (Egodi Uchendu, 409). They hid their husbands and male family members from being conscripted into the army. In Jane Bryce's findings, Igbo women "joined civil defense militia units and, in May 1969, formed a Women's Front and called on the Biafran leadership to allow them to enlist in the infantry" (33). Ifi Amadiume also reports that:

Women fed and sustained the economy of Biafra through 'attack' trade, which involved market trips through enemy front lines. Women mobilised Biafrans for all public occasions. Women formed a strong core of



the militia, task forces, etc., while mothers cooked for and fed the whole Biafran nation. Women became the cohesive force in a shifting, diminishing people who were slowly losing what they saw as a war of survival. (183)

However, many women who were in abusive and loveless relationships used the opportunity to abandon their marriages. Many women found their inner strength and ability to survive independently, and away from their husbands. Traditionally, marriage in Igbo land is not based on love, but on family compatibility, the perceived or assumed ability of the man to provide for his wife and children and the ability of the woman to bear children, especially male ones to carry on the man's lineage. So, during the war, marriages declined and according to Christie Achebe, there was even a hair style referred to as *di gbakwaa oku* (husbands go to hell/to hell with husbands), which is the same thing that Ada says to Chike after he beat her mercilessly and she runs off to be on her own. Thus again, roles changed with women launching the "attack" on hunger, starvation and death, while men cowered and went into hiding. Therefore, it is women who kept the Biafran nation going.

This is collaborated by Flora Nwapa, who carried out her own evaluation of the war effects on Igbo women in three novels: *Never Again* (1976), *One is Enough* (1981), and *Women are Different* (1986). Also, in an interview with Maria Umeh in 1995 ("Poetics" 26, cited in Mary D. Mears, 160), Nwapa maintained that the Civil War liberated Igbo women because, during the war, women "saw themselves playing roles that they never thought they would play. They saw themselves across the enemy lines, trying to trade, trying to feed their children and caring for their husbands" (ibid). Besides these tasks, they equally felt good about "their economic independence. So what they used to tolerate before the war, they could no longer tolerate after the war" (ibid). Thereafter, according to Mears,

if a woman discovered her marriage did not give her 'satisfaction' or that her in-laws (who used to be all powerful – my insertion) were worrying her because there were no children, 'whatever the case may be', the woman could 'just decide to leave that family and go to

the big city,' to Lagos, an urban world in which the woman was 'anonymous, where nobody seemed to care what [she did] for a living. (160)

Not only that, according to Mears, "The 'Cash Madams' found it necessary to move to Lagos after the war in order to remain economically independent. They do not define themselves solely by marriage and children." (ibid) Therefore, the war both liberated and empowered Igbo women.

However, the character of Ada is faulty because Ubesie makes her abandon her own children, even though she is living comfortably. Moreover, portraying her as someone who for no reason whatsoever suddenly becomes a bad woman is absurd, and speaks a lot about the author's sexism. In the story, it is Ada who runs after military men, but according to Egodu Uchendu's findings through direct interviews of the civil war victims (bracketed inclusions are mine for emphasis): "Most acts of prostitution and cohabitation were not initiated by the girls (read women). There were many cases of abduction by federal soldiers in Biafra and Aniomaa. In instances where soldiers directly approached girls (read women), resistance could result in death. A number of victims were killed in full view of their parents, spouses and siblings" ("Recollections" 409).

However, Ubesie chooses to portray Ada, a mother of two children, as willingly abandoning her children and running after soldiers without coercion or force. Also, she is portrayed as being wealthy and slaughtering many chickens in a day. Why then does she not move to a big city after the war to settle down as other "Cash Madams" do? If she is so desperate to be on her own, why does she suddenly feel the need to redefine herself by marriage to the same man she abandons for no plausible reason? All these disparities prove that the author's representation of Ada is faulty and far from the truth about the capabilities of Igbo women. It is indeed a minimizing of their resourcefulness and a vain attempt at placing women in "their place", while replacing men on an imaginary higher pedestal.

As we have seen from the recorded history of women's role during the war, women were involved in the "affia attack" wars whereby they cross the enemy line to go in search of food, to penetrate the enemy zone where they go to market and smuggle

goods into Biafra so that they and their families could survive. But Tony Ubesie again twisted his own tale in a misogynistic way, he minimized this heroic and valiant action by women by presenting it as if women were doing it only for selfish reasons, as Ada was doing.

***“Isi Akwu Dara N’Ala”: Just Fiction or Propaganda?***

*Isi Akwu Dara N’Ala* was published in 1973, three years after the Nigerian Civil War. Clearly, the war had exposed many Igbo men’s weaknesses and made many women lose respect for their husbands who proved to be cowards during the war. Many of them went into hiding to avoid being conscripted into the army as Chike was doing, and in so doing, they could no longer provide for their families and many Igbo wives and mothers were forced to become the sole breadwinners and to cater for their families. Yet, the men continued to demand unalloyed submission and respect from them. Just like Africans discovered the vulnerability of white men when they fought side by side with them during the Second World War, which led to Africans seeking emancipation from colonialism, so did Igbo women realize their own strength and this gave rise to an increased divorce rate and break-up of marriages and families. Ubesie’s novel serves to remind women of their patriarchal assigned gender roles and to place them back under the man. Painting Ada in a negative light and making her lose everything at the end is a way of casting fear and doubt in the minds of those who might consider the option of breaking out of their marriages, even if they are being abused.

In presenting this one-sided tale in which we do not hear the voice of the woman, Tony Ubesie presents himself as misogynistic, sexist and having no regards for Igbo women. He casts Igbo women in a negative light and takes away from their qualities of loving and nurturing mothers, because no matter what an Igbo woman does, she does take her responsibility towards her children seriously because traditionally, men do not occupy themselves with children. Tradition forbids them from doing so. An Igbo woman’s crown is her children. Children are one’s insurance and chief investment against old age. An Igbo woman would rather go naked and hungry than not provide and care for her children. She can condescend and humble herself to any lev-

el for her children. In fact most of the time, the only reason an Igbo woman will stay in a bad marriage is because of her children, as she would fear that her children will be maltreated by a co-wife, or that her children will be sent to the father's relatives who will maltreat them as punishment for her running away. Since children are considered to belong to their fathers especially in patrilineal Igbo communities, women are not allowed to take their children with them back to their places of birth.

Given the new found freedom that Igbo women found and experienced during the war, with many of them moving to big cities to live independently with their children after the war, it is quite clear that the author of *Isi Akwu Dara N'Ala* makes his female protagonist fail and be humiliated at last, and to crawl back to beg her husband to take her back as a cautionary measure to prevent women from doing so. This is wishful thinking, as well as propaganda geared towards scaring Igbo women who seek liberation and independence from their traditional gender roles of inferior, subordinate beings, into falling back and accepting those roles and positions again. The character of Ada is therefore not a sincere portrayal of Igbo women.

Tony Ubesie making his male protagonist remain unforgiving and to overlook the effect that the war had on people is drawing a very strict line between men and women and tearing up the Igbo family. In this regard, the tale of Chimamanda Adichie's novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) counters that of *Isi Akwu Dara N'Ala* because it tells the story of a couple's travail during the Biafran war. In Adichie's version, it is the man, Odenigbo, who cheats on his wife, Olanna, by sleeping with and impregnating a village girl. In a state of anger and emotional weakness, the wife sleeps with Richard, her twin sister Kainene's English boyfriend. Odenigbo and Olanna later forgive each other and even take in the child born to Odenigbo by the village girl. Thus, Adichie, unlike Ubesie lays the burden on both of them and shows that both of them are fallible people with emotions and that it is not only the woman who can act foolishly and stupidly, but that men can too. Adichie also shows that the burden of forgiveness is not only the woman's and that it takes two to build a strong home and family. Everyone has a role to play to maintain the peace and the continuity of a family.

### **Conclusion**

Tony Uchenna Ubesie's novel *Isi Akwu Dara N'Ala* is based on some prescriptive and proscriptive gender role proverbs which dictate roles for women as well as serve to brainwash women to subordinate themselves to men and not to protest against their maltreatment at the hands of their husbands. He does so by creating a female protagonist who maltreated and abandoned her family during the Nigerian-Biafran Civil War, and who ends up being rejected both by husband and her children after the war. This story is supposed to serve as warning to Igbo women that they cannot be anything without their husbands; that children can do without their mother if she is "a bad woman" and that the society as a whole will reject the person. In so doing, Ubesie shows himself as sexist and without regards for Igbo women as the story does not do justice to the qualities of Igbo women as hard working women, loving wives and nurturing mothers, nor does it portray them as fair players. The novel does also not reflect the events of the period invoked in the novel. *Isi Akwu Dara N'Ala* is therefore a propagandistic work, whose aim is to brainwash women into continuing to submit to enslavement and subordination instead of seeking independence and an end to the oppression of Igbo women.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> See Ikenga Emefie Metuh, 4-5

<sup>2</sup> Pita Nwana, who was the first to write and publish in the Igbo language, wrote a biography *Omenuko* (1933); D. N. Achara's *Ala Bingo* (1937) does not really portray the Igbo culture. It is more exotic than grounded in Igbo culture and traditions; F. C. Ogbalu's initial works were on promoting the Igbo language and Achebe's classic novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), though about the Igbo, is written in the English Language. But Ubesie published all his novels in the Igbo language.

<sup>3</sup> C. G. Okafor. "African Literature and Beauvoirism: The Example of Selected Women's Action And Women Writers". Web. 12 Jul. 2012. <<http://soar.wichita.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/10057/1266/Beauvoir.pdf?sequence=1>>.

<sup>4</sup> Rose Uchem, "Overcoming Women's Subordination in the Igbo African Culture and in the Catholic Church: Envisioning and Inclusive Theology with Reference to Women" *dissertation.com*. Web. 12 Jul. 2012. <<http://www.bookpump.com/dps/pdf-b/1121334b.pdf>>.

<sup>5</sup> Ellima C. Ezeani. "The Igbo: Why They Are the Way They Are". Web. 13 Jul. 2012. <<http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/articles/elimma-cezeani/the-igbos-why-are-they-the-way-they-are.html>>.

<sup>6</sup> Op cit.

<sup>7</sup> Op cit.

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