



## Akwali Songs of Awkuzu Women of South East Nigeria: Implications for Feminism, Gender and Women Empowerment in Igbo Culture

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Received 12 June 2023; accepted 26 August 2023  
 Published online 26 October 2023

### Abstract

This study has investigated in a feminist manner, the seeming absence of scholarship of oral poetry on the emancipation and empowerment of women in the traditional Igbo society. It has done this by using the lamentation (*akwali*) songs of Awkuzu women in South east Nigeria. Using feminist theory, the research explored various recorded *akwali* songs in Awkuzu to: ascertain the cause and effect of gender imbalance among females and their male counterparts that necessitated the use of *akwali* songs to achieve gender equality and women empowerment in Awkuzu. Thus, the study aimed to demonstrate that oral poetry is an effective tool for initiating social change in traditional African society.

**Key words:** Akwali Songs; Awkuzu women; Feminism; Gender; Women empowerment

Igwedibia, A. (2023). *Akwali* Songs of Awkuzu Women of South East Nigeria: Implications for Feminism, Gender and Women Empowerment in Igbo Culture. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 27(2), 38-43. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/13204>  
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/13204>

### INTRODUCTION

Awkuzu was one of the progenies of fifth child of Eri his only daughter called Iguedo, who is also said to have borne the founders of Ogbunike, Awkuzu, Umueri and Nando. Awkuzu which is the colonial era of the name "Okuzu" is presently located in Oyi Local Government Area of Anambra State and bounded by Umunya and

Nteje in Oyi LGA, Ifitedunu, Ukpo and Ukwulu in Dunukofia LGA, Nando and Igbariam in Anambra East LGA and Abba in Njikoka LGA, all in Anambra State of Nigeria. Awkuzu is divided into three main parts: Ezi, Ifite and Ikenga. Each part is further divided into sub-villages. As a community, Awkuzu is famed for population which gave it the sobriquet "Ibilibe Ogada" (the locus swarming fame). The climate of Awkuzu is tropical humid with wet and dry seasons annual rainfall between 1300-3000mm. these areas are characterized by high temperature, rainfall and humidity. (Coined from Wikipedia. <http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki>).

Like every part of Igbo land, Awkuzu people have wonderful and revered cultural practices. These cultural practices are mostly performed with certain rituals. Some of these practices are a no go area for women. They are strictly for men. There are some that are reserved mainly for age mates, gender, married, single, youths, adults, elders, children, those born in a particular market day, by initiation, by association etc. Certain cultural practices in Awkuzu are seen as evil practice while some are upheld. It is one of these evil practices that women of Awkuzu have stand their ground to change and have brought about social change and societal transformation.

Pre-colonial Awkuzu is a male oriented or dominated society. It is completely a patriarchal society where men are the pillars, the voices, ears, eyes and the breathing of the women. A woman has little or none to say on issues concerning the politics, economy, religious and social well-being of *Ndi Awkuzu*. Women are largely ill maltreated. They are heavily placed under the side of evil cultural practices simply for the deliberate plan of subjugation by their male counterparts. The Awkuzu women have used various means to portray their level of insecurity mete out to them by the males in their immediate society. It is against this male chauvinism that Awkuzu women's *akwali* songs evolved. They used these songs in an interesting manner to ascertain that "A Woman

Speaks,” borrowed from the radical, warrior, African American feminist poet, Audre Lorde. *Akwali* songs indeed has brought about the emancipation the Awkuzu women designed for. It has accounted for social change and gender equality.

In studying oral poetry, do we fully account for the issues of gender inequalities among African societies? This work engages on the seeming absence of scholarship of oral poetry on the emancipation and empowerment of women in the traditional Igbo society. It does this using lamentation (*Akwali*) songs of Awkuzu women of south east Nigeria. Oral poetry is a form of poetry that is composed and transmitted without the aid of writing. Oral poetry in Africa includes folktale; song such as laments, praise songs, work songs; folkdrama; myth; and, closely related, legends and historical recitation. Before the emergency of Western education in Africa, oral poetry was a source of education, social engineering and entertainment. Through various dance groups by both men and women, chants, masquerades, folktales, cultural archetypes are established and these go a long way to enriching the cultural, social and political lives of traditional African societies. Scholarly works on oral poetry by Ighile (2013), Adeiyongo (1991) and Keil (1979) are on the issues that have no relevance to gender imbalance in Africa or Igbo society. While some of these scholars might help in understanding of oral poetry, this work focuses on the *akwali* songs of Awkuzu women. It aims to understand how songs became drivers of social change visa-a-vis gender mainstreaming and equality in Awkuzu community. It is already known that it was the ritual performed by men of Awkuzu in the past in which virgin girls and not virgin boys were used for propitiatory sacrifices that necessitated the lamentation (*akwali*) by women. The research intends to find out how through lamentation (*akwali*), these women were able to achieve emancipation and how this could be a template for feminist struggle.

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## LITERATURE, SOURCES AND EMPIRICAL STUDIES

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Henning (2018) has observed that gender inequality is apparent in politics, education, employment, social involvement, economic development and human dignity across the globe. For Branisa, Klasen, Ziegler, Drechsler and Jutting (2014), gender inequality is seen as a major problem for development. The alarming issue of gender inequality has galvanized global leaders' efforts, to support the adoption and implementation of policies that assure gender equality and empowerment of women. Adeola (2020) maintains that, “considering the wide array of challenges for women, available statistics show that overall, gender inequality remains at high level in the continent of Africa.” Enyinnaya (2012) asserts that

gender identity is, “one’s deep-seated sense of maleness or femaleness” as “a reflection of an individual’s labeling by others.”

Ezeifeke and Ogbazi (2016) in their paper entitled “Feminist Understanding in Selected Traditional Igbo Songs: Contemporary Igbo Women Voice,” has investigated selected traditional Igbo songs and argued that they provide a good niche for gender construction, negotiation and contestation. The study has found that whereas men’s songs emphasize hegemonic masculinity, striving to hold tenaciously to the reins of social and political control, women’s portray various attitudes to the masculinised social order as compliant, ambivalent, didactic and resistant. The paper concludes that the selected songs speak for what can best be called “compromise feminism” in Igbo gender performance.

Ivana Salinovic (2022) has stated in her essay entitled “Gender Discrimination in Education in Croatia” that the hypothesis was that the findings would most certainly show a huge difference between female and male students’ experiences and effects of gender discrimination, but the results have actually shown a very mixed picture and the original hypothesis was somewhat disapproved. Instead of finding out that girls experienced a lot of gender discrimination, it turned out that it was the boys who believed that in their previous and current education, there was no equal time distribution between genders, they noticed that the language was not gender-sensitive, teaching aids were not adopted to the genders. They were also the ones that pointed out that the discipline path was not the same for everyone, and they were the ones that teacher’s gender had more influence on and were the ones that experienced more gender discrimination.

This study proposes to go beyond mere documentation and sociological analysis to investigate in oral poetry (*akwali* songs) that highlights gender inequality in Awkuzu community.

### Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the framework of Gender Reform Feminism. Gender Reform Feminism is a term coined from Judith Lorber’s idea of feminism. Lorber pointed out clearly that the feminisms of 1960s and 1970s were the beginning of the second wave of feminism. They are liberal feminism. Their roots were, respectively, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century liberal political philosophy that developed the idea of individual rights, Marx’s 19<sup>th</sup> century critique of capitalism and his concept of class consciousness, and 20<sup>th</sup> century anti-colonial politics and ideas of national development. Gender reform feminism put women into these perspectives.

### Liberal Feminism

Theoretically, liberal feminism claims that gender differences are not based in biology, and therefore that

women and men are not all that different—their common humanity supersedes their procreative differentiation. If women and men are not different, then they should not be treated differently under the law. Women should have the same rights as men and the same educational and work opportunities. The goal of liberal feminism in the United States was embodied in the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which was never ratified. (It said, “Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on account of sex.”) Politically, liberal feminists formed somewhat bureaucratic organizations, which invited men members. Their activist focus has been concerned with visible sources of gender discrimination, such as gendered job markets and inequitable wage scales, and with getting women into positions of authority in the professions, government, and cultural institutions. Liberal feminist politics took important weapons of the civil rights movement — anti-discrimination legislation and affirmative action — and used them to fight gender inequality, especially in the job market. Affirmative action calls for aggressively seeking out qualified people to redress the gender and ethnic imbalance in working places. That means encouraging men to train for such jobs as nursing, teaching, and secretary and women for fields like engineering, construction, and police work. With a diverse pool of qualified applicants, employers can be legally mandated to hire enough different workers to achieve a reasonable balance in their workforce, and to pay them the same and also give an equal chance to advance in their careers.

The main contribution of liberal feminism is showing how much modern society discriminates among women. In the United States, it was successful in breaking down many barriers to women’s entry into formerly male-dominated jobs and professions, helped to equalize wage scales, and got abortion and other reproductive rights legalized. But liberal feminism could not overcome the prevailing belief that women and men are intrinsically different. It was somewhat more successful in proving that even if women are different from men, they are not inferior.

### **Marxist and Socialist Feminisms**

Marx’s analysis of the social structure of capitalism was supposed to apply to people of any social characteristics. If you owned the means of production, you were a member of the capitalist class; if you sold your labour for a wage, you were a member of the proletariat. That would be true of women as well, except that until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, married women in capitalist countries were not allowed to own property in their own name; their profits from any business they ran and their wages belonged to their husband. Although Marx recognised

that workers and capitalists had wives who worked in the home and took care of the children, he had no place for housewives in his analysis of capitalism. It was Marxist feminism that put housewives into the structure of capitalism. Housewives are vital to capitalism, indeed to any industrial economy, because their unpaid work in the home maintains bosses and workers and produces the next generation of bosses and workers.

### **Development Feminism**

Addressing the economic exploitation of women in post-colonial countries on the way to industrialisation. Development feminism has done extensive gender analysis of the global economy. In addition to gendered economic analysis, development feminism addresses the political issue of women’s rights versus natural cultural traditions.

### **Methodology**

The research was largely quantitative, whereby interviews of the surviving women that participated in the *akwali* festival was conducted to sample their opinions on how they were able to achieve the feat. Men of the generation, who constitute the patriarchal structure, were also interviewed, in order to understand how they willingly participated in that gender-mainstreaming that achieved gender equality and consciousness in Awkuzu community. These constituted the primary sources. Furthermore, the women were encouraged to relive the performance so that the songs could be recorded, transcribed and thoroughly studied. State-run libraries in Eastern Nigeria were visited to see if there are other variants of such lamentation poetry or elegies, which served as secondary sources. The study adopted feminist theory as its framework to investigate the seeming absence of scholarship of oral poetry on the emancipation and empowerment of women in the traditional Igbo society using *akwali* songs of Awkuzu women of south east Nigeria.

### **Significance**

This study will open up the notions of oral poetry and gender studies by, revealing the various factors which are at play with these phenomena in Awkuzu community. The project will document such songs as *akwali*, which have never been documented as resource material for further researches in feminist and gender studies, specifically, in the relevance of orality in gender studies.

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### **DATA ANALYSIS**

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About five *akwali* songs have been presented for analysis. The researcher has described and illustrated how each of these songs are performed. The songs are organized according to the messages they want to pass using each of them.

## SONG 1

### IGIDIKWU

*Igidikwu igidikwu oo Aye*  
*Igidikwu igidiukwu oo Aye*  
*Ana nta ana ebe akwa*  
*Anava ebe na va enwero mmadu Aye*  
*Mmu be anyi ayeee Aye*  
*Ndi be anyi ayeee Aye*  
*Oti ive etina mmu agboo*  
*Itie mmu agboo itie ajo ive Aye*  
*Ocho okwu achona mmu agboo*  
*Ichoo mmu agboo ichoo ajo okwu Aye*  
*Oli anu elina eyim agana*  
*Ilie eyim agana ilie ajo anu Aye*  
*Okpa nku akpana aniribo*  
*Ikpaa aniribo ikpaa ajo nku Aye*  
*Igidikwu igidikwu oo Aye*

Igidiukwu igidiukwu oo Aye  
Igidiukwu igidiukwu oo Aye  
small villages are crying  
They are crying because they have nobod  
Our children ayeee Aye  
Our people ayeee Aye  
Let he who beats not beat not beat women  
Beating women is an aberration Aye  
Let trouble makers not touch women  
Touching them is a taboo Aye  
Let he who eats meat much not eat chameleon  
Eating Chameleon is abomination Aye  
Let he who fetches firewood not fetch from bramble  
Fetching from bramble is a taboo Aye  
Igidiukwu igidiukwu ooo Aye

The above song is very deep and characterized by the emotional outburst of painful and powerful feelings recollected in tranquility. The women perform these lyrics tying dark wrappers on their breast through their knees leaving naked the upper part of their body. They also appear bare footed with earthen pot filled with dust

of smoke on their head. The earthen pot is decorated with palm front. It is a song of quest for liberation of women. they used this particular song to emphasize how it is a taboo and abomination to kill, beat, touch or devalue women. They likened doing this to one who eats Chameleon and one who fetches from a bramble.

## Song 2

### EEMGBA

*E e mgbā ee*  
*E e mgbā ka anyi na ayova ay ova kwe (2x)*  
*Anu a e e*  
*Anu a ka anyi na ayova ayo va kwee*  
*E nwude ee*  
*E nwude ka anyi na ayova ayo va kwee*  
*E gbu e e*  
*E gbu ee ka anyi na va ayo va ekwee*  
*Obo obo*  
*anyi etiwa ite kulu mmili nava ee (2x)*

We challenge them for wrestling  
They agreed  
We challenged them for fight  
They agreed  
We challenged them for liberation  
They disagreed  
Then with courage and audacity  
we confronted them  
Triumphed and we are  
emancipated

The above song demonstrates the strength of Awkuzu women in fighting the unjust treatment on them in their own land of birth. The song was used to challenge the impression that women are weakling. They mapped out various strategies to make their points that the virgins girls should no longer be used for annual sacrifice to the gods of the earth for procreation. They posited the fact that human life is sacred and should be accorded that respect.

They performed this song by tying a single white wrapper on their breast down to their knees. The white signifies liberation for them. The song normally takes place at the village squared *Ebe Igbu*. *Ebe Igbu* is the meeting venue of the living and the dead. This song is really a song of confrontation through which their emancipation was accelerated.

## Song 3

### IYOLOLO

*Iyololo ndele a a Aye ooo*  
*Ka o na ede Aye (2x)*  
*O kachalikpo ejego egwu na eke*  
*ata mali ive bu agboo*  
*Ka O na ede Aye*  
*Mmu agboo onye emena ka*  
  
*Nweke Nkechi na Okuzu*  
*Ka O na ede Aye*  
*Isiagana okpum adakwa ee okpu eze agboo*  
*Ka O na ede Aye*  
*Iyololo ndele aye ayo aye ee*  
*Ka O na ede Aye*

The brave one has gone to battle array  
Let it be announced (2x)  
The smart one has gone for dance  
to understand the power of a young girl  
Let it be announced  
Let no women act like

Nweke Nkechi in Awkuzu  
Let it be announced  
Women my queenship crown is touching the ground  
Let it be announced  
The brave one has gone to battle array  
Let it be announced

The song is so deep in bringing out this evil practice under the umbrella of culture and tradition. The song is

performed by the virgin girls themselves. The girls appear in dark wrapper around their waist and the red wrapper

around their breast. The upper part of their body is left naked and their stomach is naked except the palm front that is tied around it. This song is performed bare footed

at *Eke Ata*, the meeting venue of the three major clans of Awkuzu (Okuzu aka na ato). This song accompanied with its emotional exhibitions condemns this barbaric act.

## Song 4

### **JELUE**

*Jelue jelue jelue*  
*Jelue na ama ogboo*  
*Jelue jelue jelue*  
*Jelue na isi oji oo*  
*Jelue jelue jelue*  
*Jelue na ivite mmueri*  
*Jelue jelue jelue*  
*Jelue na ama ogbolo*  
*Jelue jelue jelue*  
*Jelue na ezi okuzu*  
*Jelue jelue jelue*  
*Jelue na ivite okuzu*  
*Jelue jelue jelue*  
*Jelue na ikenga*  
*Jelue jelue jelue*  
*Jelue na amaabo*  
*Ebe ikolo na agbogho tolu eto*  
*Va ji okpa awa imo ooo*

Go to, go to, go to  
Go to ogbo kindred  
Go to, go to, go to  
Go to isi oji kindred  
Go to, go to, go to  
Go to ivite mmueri kindred  
Go to, go to, go to  
Go to ogbolo kindred  
Go to, go to, go to  
Go to Ezi Awkuzu  
Go to, go to, go to  
Go to Ifite Awkuzu  
Go to, go to, go to  
Go to Ikenga  
Go to, go to, go to  
Go to Amaabo kindred  
Where gender equality supposed to be practiced  
And see progress

This particular song demonstrates the height of power struggle and reaffirmation of women's identity in Awkuzu. Women of Awkuzu laments through this song on the unbearable injustice with regard to their gender. They also convey through the performance of this song that their subjugation is felt in every kindred, villages and clans of Awkuzu. These places are expected to practice gender equality makana nwanyi bu ife (women are meant to be valued). They perform this song tying dark wrapper from their breast to their knees with jigida (beads) on their waist and carrying oil lamps on their head. The oil lamp signifies that women should be appreciated because they are light and source of progress in the society.

for women. Women of Awkuzu were admirably celebrated during *Uta* festival. This festival was celebrated in every third month of the year in Igbo calendar before the emergence of Christian religion. The feast usually took place for complete one week. During the feast of *Uta*, women are celebrated at the family level, kindred level, clan level, village level and town level. *Uta* festival was occasion of new cloths for women, assorted foods and drinks, different dance steps and beautiful songs. The praise singers for women were not left out from this huge celebration. This festival was used to heal the wound of the ill treatment the women passed through that necessitated the *akwali* songs. The *Uta* festival was an indication that a woman should be allowed to speak. *Uta* festival opposes the assumption in patriarchy that casts women as weak, as voiceless and as powerless by suggesting that the new Awkuzu women have arrived to break the silences of history, to assert their right and to oppose any attempt to silence them. *Uta* introduced the new women of Awkuzu that we have never seen before, women who were articulate, bold and can speak their mind. Women driven by an energy or synergy. A synergy that opposes men's domination and/or subordination of women. When women speak, they destabilize male logics; women reject the traditional phallogocentric value system. Women reject the false images of women embodied in phallogocentric narratives. These new women that Awkuzu women introduced are the women that can stand on their own, toe to toe with men and not be cowed.

## Song 5

### **ANYI EWLI UGO NA AMA**

*Anyi eweli ugo na ama* We have been emancipated  
*Anyi eweli ugo na ama* We have been liberated  
*Mmu agboo eweli ugo na ama* Women have been emancipated  
*Anyi eweli ugo na ama* We have been empowered

The above song is a song of emancipation by the women of Awkuzu. It is a song that indicated the outcome of their struggle for gender equality and social change. It showed that struggle over the years has given them better places in Awkuzu and Igbo society at large. This song has buttress the point made by Judith Lorber with Development Feminism. In her view, Development Feminism addresses the political issue of women's rights versus natural cultural tradition. The song of emancipation ushers in *Uta* Festival (the feast for women).

## **UTA FESTIVAL (WOMEN FEAST)**

*Uta* festival was a replacement of the annual killing of virgin girls for sacrifice. It was a feast totally dedicated

## **FINDINGS**

The interviews conducted, observation of the women's performance and listening to the recorded five *akwali*

songs have informed the researcher that the women of Awkuzu succeeded in initiating social change and gender equality in Awkuzu through *akwali* songs. The researcher discovered that oral poetry is no doubt a viable tool for societal transformation. Contemporary African women are encouraged to keep up with the feminist struggle until gender equality are achieved to a very large extent.

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## CONCLUSION

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This study has looked at *akwali* songs of Awkuzu women with a particular interest to finding out how the women of Awkuzu were able to initiate social change and gender equality using those songs. This study has concluded that Awkuzu women of South East Nigeria has brought about social change and gender equality by abolishing the evil practices of annual festival of killing the virgin girls for sacrifice. This is in line with the postulations of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women Forum held in Beijing in 1995. The popular slogan of that conference was “human rights are women’s right and women’s rights are human rights.” The platform for action document that came out of UN conference condemned particular cultural practices that are oppressive to women-in-fanticide, dowry, child marriage, female genital mutilation. The 187 government that signed onto the platform agreed to abolish these practices. The Awkuzu women were able to abolish one of these evil practices through *akwali* songs and came up with a new woman with a different orientation about the position of women in Awkuzu. Oral poetry is indeed an effective tool for initiating social change in traditional African society.

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