A SOCIO-RELIGIOUS REPRESENTATION OF *AMOSU* (WITCH) PHENOMENON AND THE VICTIMHOOD OF ELDERLY AND POOR WOMEN IN ENUGWU-UKWU, SOUTH-EAST NIGERIA

ONYINYECHI PRISCILLA C. WARIBOKO *

ABSTRACT

The categorization of certain elderly and impoverished women in Enugwu-ukwu community, within the Igbo cultural context in Nigeria, as "*amosu*" (witches) represents a form of gender-based violence, manifesting an implicit reinforcement of asymmetry in social and gender dynamics. This labelling not only dehumanizes these women, but also disrupts social harmony, fostering conflicts within the community. Grounded in Catherine Acholonu's 'motherism' theory, this ethnographic study interrogates the intricate relationship between women's longevity, poverty, and accusations of witchcraft in Enugwu-ukwu. Using observation in-depth, unstructured interviews, focus group discussions, and existing publications that we have analyzed through the narrative analysis method, the research explores how factors such as religion, poverty, gender injustice, ignorance, and physical aging blemishes foster the accusation of elderly women as witches in Enugwu-ukwu community. It also scrutinizes the active involvement of women in accusing and oppressing their fellow women who are elderly, questioning the approach of indigenous feminist theories concerning witchcraft-related violence against women. The study advocates for a novel indigenous feminist theory that comprehensively addresses the unique challenges faced by Igbo women. It emphasizes the interconnectedness between Igbo realities and ongoing gender injustices in a contemporary Igbo community. Furthermore, it calls for gender justice, respect for women, particularly in the context of motherhood, and social responsibilities towards aged women, in order to foster social cohesion in Enugwu-ukwu. This research significantly contributes to the enrichment of feminism (womanism) in Africa and specifically within the Igbo cultural context.

Keywords: gender-based violence, witchcraft accusations, indigenous feminist theory, Igbo culture, motherism.

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* Associate Professor, Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Port Harcourt, e-mail address: *onyinyechi.wariboko@uniport.edu.ng*.

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INTRODUCTION

In Africa, resolute efforts against gender inequity, injustice, and oppression have recently emanated from scholars and women's rights activists who clamour against gender mistreatments and amplify the voices of disenfranchised rural women. Yet, a glaring silence shrouds the pervasive *amosu* (witchcraft) accusations targeting elderly and impoverished women, particularly among Igbo people, in south-eastern Nigeria.

Labelling individuals, especially elderly women, as witches (*amosu*) in many Nigerian communities is dehumanising, representing a form of cultural violence that is hardly addressed. The accusation, together with the status of poor and elderly Igbo women, highlight a distressing gender issue seldom explored in the extensive literature on African women's oppressions. This challenge may stem from the reluctance to question this deeply rooted belief and practice among Igbo people.

Despite the persistent advocacy for gender justice and the principles outlined in International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the victimhood of these women persists. Ironically, women are often the accusers and persecutors, perpetuating the dehumanization of other women and undermining the concept of motherhood (Wariboko, 2020), so revered in Igbo culture. This situation disrupts social cohesion and harmony, engendering conflicts in society.

In Enugwu-ukwu, a prominent town in Anambra State, south-eastern Nigeria, evidence abounds of this gender-based violence against its senior female citizens. This practice, constituting an implicit endorsement of disparity in social and gender relations, turns the blessing of aging into a nightmare for elderly women. Unfortunately, this age-old issue is seemingly impervious to the influences of civilization, education, or modern religion.

Therefore, the questions of this study are: Why are elderly and impoverished women accused of *amosu* in Enugwu-ukwu? Why do fellow women play a role in accusing and oppressing their elderly counterparts, perpetuating this dehumanization despite calls for gender justice? How does the hybrid African Christianity contribute to sustaining this practice?

Grounded in Catherine Acholonu's Afrocentric feminist theory, 'motherism,' this ethnographic study interrogates the *amosu* phenomenon. Using observations, interviews, focus group discussion and the existing publications, this paper explores the correlation between women's age, socio-economic status on one hand, and their likelihood of being accused of witchcraft in Enugwu-ukwu – Nigeria on the other. Employing qualitative and inductive research methods, it interrogates the spate of witch accusations, witch hunt and persecution of some elderly women of low socio-economic status in the community. This inquiry also examines the plethora of assumptions and unsubstantiated claims in the construction and expression of *amosu*, vis-à-vis social and gender relations among the people. Furthermore, the paper investigates the role of fellow women in accusing and oppressing elderly women, as well as the role of hybrid African Christianity in perpetuating this practice. The

study also beams its searchlight on the lax deportment of extant indigenous feminist models on witchcraft-related violence against women. Underscoring the urgent need for a more comprehensive understanding of the unique challenges faced by Igbo women, the study addresses the significant gap in literature. The data we gathered are analysed using the narrative analysis method. In a nutshell, this paper is comprised of a theoretical framework; a historical and social index of Enugwu-ukwu community; an exploration of *amosu* phenomenon in Igboland and Enugwu-ukwu in particular; the interplay between feminist theories and *amosu* phenomenon in Enugwu-ukwu, and a recommendation section, championing reverence for motherhood in Enugwu-ukwu community.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research, exploring religion and gender in Africa, uses 'motherism,' an Afro-centric feminist theory developed by Catherine Acholonu, as a guiding framework (Acholonu, 1995). This indigenous theory emphasizes reverence for African women, particularly those in rural areas, both as biological and metaphorical mothers.

Acholonu advocates for motherism as an alternative to feminism, proposing an inherently African theory to elucidate women's roles on the continent. Drawing on gender roles in Nigeria's patriarchal society, she accentuates the rural woman's significance as a connection of Africans to Mother Earth, embodying the indispensable mother essence (Acholonu, 1995, p. 118). Wang'ondu (2019, para 3) echoes a similar sentiment, asserting that motherism is "a maternal form of feminism that sees rural women as performing the necessary task of nurturing society." Despite its limitation, by excluding urban women who are active in the gender inclusiveness struggle (Ezeigbo, 2012), motherism values motherhood in alignment with cultural feminism, emphasizing its ecocentric nature and the connection between motherhood and the earth.

This study is particularly interested in motherism due to its indigenous and cultural feminist roots, suggesting that women's distinctive traits may contribute to a just society (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2014). Examining the Enugwu-ukwu *amosu* phenomenon through the lens of motherism, the research aims to substantiate Catherine Acholonu's theoretical assumptions in a typical African society. There is hardly any uniformity of values, thoughts and lifestyle among the African nations, so this 'Afro-centric' feminist theory needs to be validated in specific case scenarios in African communities. By addressing a limitation that arises from the generalization of this Afro-centric feminist theory, the researcher, an insider in Enugwu-ukwu culture and practices, validates the theory of motherism within the Enugwu-Ukwu traditional society. By investigating the intricacies of this specific community, the research will substantiate the theoretical propositions of 'motherism' while acknowledging the necessity of considering local variations in values and lifestyles across African communities. This approach addresses the limitation of generalization, ensuring the applicability and relevance of the theoretical framework to the unique sociocultural dynamics of Igboland.

ENUGWU-UKWU: HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL INDEX

Enugwu-Ukwu is the name of a community in Anambra State, south-east Nigeria. Enugwu-ukwu literally means 'top of a high hill,' and the community holds a pivotal place in Igbo history. Owing to the fact that in Igboland, communities are traced to progenitors and are named after them, Enugwu-ukwu is widely recognized as the first son of Nri, the mythical progenitor of the Igbo people. Enugwu-Ukwu's status as Nri's first son and therefore the paternal head of Igbo people is however a subject of controversy. Regardless, a substantial part of Igbo communities acknowledge his status and significance as an heir to the Igbo progenitor.

Topographically, as its name goes, Enugwu-Ukwu is perched on a high hill, boasting of natural features such as streams, lakes, and springs with distinct ontological significance. The community comprises eighteen villages, each contributing to its cultural and historical richness. The population estimates for Enugwu-Ukwu vary widely, ranging from 450,000 to 600,000. The community is known for its enterprising spirit which has engendered both growth and migration.

Enugwu-ukwu people are markedly religious. Their worldview is based upon the belief in the Supreme Being, *Chukwu*, and myriads of male and female deities – *Ngene* and *Ogwugwu*. There is also a strong belief in ancestor veneration, necromancy, totemism, reincarnation, priesthood, witchcraft, and soothsayers (Agwuna, 2005). While a considerable number of Enugwu-ukwu's inhabitants identify as Christians, there is a nuanced syncretism in their religious practices. The fusion between traditional beliefs and Christianity reflects the dynamic cultural and religious landscape.

The people of Enugwu-ukwu are also characteristically enterprising. In pursuit of better opportunities, a substantial number of Enugwu-ukwu indigenes have migrated to major cities within Nigeria and globally. This migration contributes to the diasporic index and to the complexity of society. Essentially, Enugwu-ukwu stands as a rich tapestry woven with historical significance, geographic splendour, cultural diversity, and a dynamic interplay of traditionalism and modernity.

THE PHENOMENON OF *AMOSU* IN IGBOLAND

The *amosu* phenomenon among the Igbo in southeastern Nigeria is a longstanding socio-cultural aspect, integral to their culture (Agbakoba, 2012; Okpalike, 2016). Etymologically, Ifesieh (1989) references "*aja amaghi me osu*" (sacrifice to atone for wrong deeds to osu), suggesting that *amosu* has evolved from "*amaghi me osu*" (wrong deeds to osu) (p. 241). *Osu* signifies a caste dedicated to *arusi* (an oracle) among the Igbo, distinguished from freeborns and feared for their supposed mystic power linked to the oracle. The assumption is that an *osu* is *amosu*.

On the other hand, Nwamu (2019, para 5) emphasizes that "a witch is not *amosu* in Igbo," challenging the conventional view. Nwamu's perspective on *amosu* differs from the prevailing belief that associates it with individuals possessing

malignant magical powers, capable of transforming into animals such as a bird, cat, rat or an insect, attending nocturnal meetings and causing havoc in the society. It is in this latter sense that Mbiti (1976), Idowu (1973) and other academic sages of African traditional religion approach witchcraft in Africa.

Okpalike (2016) acknowledges the complexity of witchcraft among the Igbo, asserting that for the Igbo, *amosu* has become an explanation for anything perplexing, thereby discouraging further exploration of root causes in challenging life situations. When explanations about negative life situations are not handy, people assume these are simply the handwork of *amosu.* For instance, illnesses that defy medical intervention are attributed to activities of witches, as well as most deaths among the Igbo. Okpalike is however of the opinion that *amosu* does not always mean evil, even though the Igbo continues to see it as malevolent. In his words,

> "*among the Igbo, like other African peoples, witchcraft is the most decried in all the causes of human problems. They are most likely to attribute sicknesses, failure in businesses, strained relationships, failure in examinations, scanty harvests and even natural disasters to the menace of witchcraft.*" (2016, p. 61)

In contrast, witchcraft in some schools of thought is often viewed as benign, with the term connoting 'craft of the wise' and accrediting their outstanding expertise in specific fields, skills or talents. Again, wizards (male witches), both elsewhere and among the Igbo, are not actively pursued. Instead, the term is associated with positive connotations, such as 'computer wizard' or 'football wizard.' This perspective plays out in Igbo society. Unlike the awful experiences of women accused of witchcraft, men hardly face similar dire consequences in Igbo society. Nwamu (2019) humorously notes the contrast in perspectives during a conference on witchcraft in 2019 at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where he sarcastically attributes the live streaming of the conference on Facebook to witchcraft, aligning with the positive idea of wizardry. This juxtaposition highlights the cultural variations in perceptions of witches (female) and wizards (male), emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of the concept of witchcraft among Igbo people.

Igbo Nwere Mmadu Worldwide (2020) asserts that the concept of *amosu* was foreign to ancient Igbo people; hence, *afa* (Igbo divinatory practices) does not provide any insights into it. According to Igbo Nwere Mmadu Worldwide (2020), which is an association that publish Igbo people's worldviews and lived experiences, the understanding of *amosu* among the Igbo lacks certainty. Nevertheless, individuals identified as *amosu* among the Igbo are often accused of causing misfortunes, including bad luck, barrenness, miscarriage, impotence, accidents, premature deaths, natural disasters, drought, poverty, or calamities in both rural and urban areas (Okpalike, 2016; Eboiyehi, 2017; Atata, 2018; Nwamu, 2019; Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020).

Major features of people accused of witchcraft among the Igbo include: old age, low socioeconomic status, disfigured or unattractive facial features, physical

blemishes, peculiar expressions, rapid eye blinking, anti-social behavior, health conditions such as sleep apnoea and mental issues. Stupendously wealthy individuals are occasionally labelled as *amosu* too. For the few who are accused of witchcraft, it is assumed that they magically exchange people's innate fortunes through 'charitable' acts. In other words, when they extend their generosity to other people, they magically rob these people of their innate assets and abilities. Generally, witches are believed to transform themselves into birds or animals and feast on victims' blood through scratches they make on their victim's skin. They are thought to employ magic to cause various misfortunes. They are also said to be responsible for some scientifically described phenomena like sleep paralysis, which is a temporary condition of semi-conscious helplessness of people while sleeping or trying to wake up.

Universally, it is believed that both women and men can be witches/wizards, but the victims of accusations are predominantly older women who are often not well-to-do (Eboiyehi, 2017; Adinkrah, 2004; Jell-Bahlsen, 2011; Platzer, 2018; Nwamu, 2019; Muller & Sanderson, 2020). Nwamu (2019, para. 1) notes that "a witch is often a poor old widow who turns into a bird or other dangerous creature in search of innocent people to harm as they slept in the dead of night."

Identification methods for those labelled as *amosu* include ludicrous and unreliable tools and criteria such as: mere suspicion, aging signs such as wrinkled face, 'rapid eye movement' sleep, dementia, weird or anti-social behaviour, confession (sometimes, arising from 'trial by ordeal' or mental illness), 'prophecies' by religious leaders, or identification by native doctors or 'fellow witches' (Kunhiyop, 2015; Bissada, 2019; Nyabwari & Kagema, 2014; Okpalike, 2016; interviews). Those identified through these processes face persecution, social oppression or even death (Eboiyehi, 2017; Atata, 2019; Nyabwari & Kagema, 2014; Schnoebelen, 2009; Encyclopedia.com, 2020; Okpalike, 2016; Dehm & Millbank, 2018; Igbo Nwere Mmadu Worldwide, 2020).

People across all classes and religious convictions in Igboland are trapped in the web of witchcraft paranoia due to their strong belief in this phenomenon (BBC News, 2019; Egwu, 2020; Encyclopedia.com, 2020; interviews; personal observation). Nwobodo (2021) notes that Igbo communities are transiting fast from communalism, which they were known for, to individualism, as a result of witchcraft suspicions. Religion fuels this phenomenon among the Igbo (Igwe, 2004). Most of the times, those accused of witchcraft are identified by community's religious leaders. In an interview conducted on December 28th, 2022, Mrs Beatrice Nwuzor noted that unfounded 'visions' and 'prophecies' from African Christian pastors are sometimes used to identify *amosu.* Nwuzor opines that these visions and prophecies are often facades to cover up for the pastors' inability to bring about desired solution to the issues of members of their congregation. Some of these pastors use blame game tactics. They blame their relatives or other community members of their congregants as responsible for their misfortunes or unmet goals. The fact that such claim escapes

the laws of logic and rational explanation raises questions about the reliability of hybrid African Christian pastors who propagate these 'visions' and 'prophecies', thus condemning elderly women as *amosu*.

Nonetheless, Nwamu (2019) contends that ground-breaking anthropological research demonstrates that witchcraft does not exist; what exists is the belief in witchcraft, which he considers a mirage. He criticizes the persistent refusal of Africans to outgrow this belief. Therefore, he sarcastically observes that the 2019 conference on witchcraft at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka that stimulated trepidation and outcry in the University and in the entire city, had "witches" in attendance. These "witches", according to Nwamu, were Professors, members of the Christian clergy and many researchers.

In a nutshell, the *amosu* phenomenon reflects a complex interplay of cultural, social, and religious elements, prompting ongoing debates about the existence of witchcraft and the impact of it being invoked to explain natural phenomena such as misfortune, illness and death.

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC DESCRIPTION OF *AMOSU* PHENOMENON IN ENUGWU-UKWU

Enugwu-ukwu indigenes, just like other Igbo people, believe in the existence of *amosu.* For them, *amosu* is someone who has been initiated into witchcraft and has a penchant for causing misery in the community. The features, modes of identification and operation of *amosu* in Enugwu-ukwu are no different from the rest of Igboland, as already pointed out in the preceding section. Misfortunes of all kinds and complex or disastrous life experiences and strange illnesses are all attributed to the activities of *amosu* in Enugwu-ukwu. Unfortunately also, elderly women who lack economic empowerment bear the brunt of this belief in *amosu.* They are often assumed to be witches and are actually accused of witchcraft.

In an interview conducted on 6 April 2021, Mr Odinakachukwu Okoye categorized the *amosu* phenomenon in Enugwu-Ukwu into three: *ili amosu* (eating witchcraft), *ita amosu* (witch biting), and *ida amosu* (falling on or pressing an individual through witchcraft). *Ili amosu* (eating witchcraft) indicates that witches eat the substance that empowers them to become *amosu* by mouth. Okoye however claims that *amosu* could be eaten advertently or inadvertently. *Ita amosu* (witch biting) is used among Enugwu-ukwu people to describe how *ndi amosu* (*amosu* in plural) who are believed to be vampires, bite and then suck the blood of their victims. *Ita amosu* can also be used for any other undesirable activities of *ndi amosu*. Nonetheless, *ida amosu* (falling on or pressing an individual through witchcraft) describes exactly what is scientifically known as sleep paralysis, a situation where one seems to be overpowered or pressed by an external force, inhibiting one from waking up or talking from a semi-conscious state for a couple of minutes. In Enugwu-ukwu, it is believed that the temporary sleep paralysis is an activity of *amosu* trying to strangle a victim.

Furthermore, in Enugwu-ukwu, data from ethnographic fieldwork support the stance of many scholars referenced above, that while men as well as women can be *amosu* among the Igbo and elsewhere, the prevalence of accusations lean towards females in Enugwu-ukwu (interview conducted on December 28th, 2022 with Mrs Florence Nwogor, Mrs Beatrice Nwuzor, Mr Nnamdi Okeke and Mrs Evelyn Aniago). Scholars, as well as other study participants in this investigation, all agree that women are often accused of witchcraft, while men are not, without presenting an explanation. In Enugwu-ukwu, just like elsewhere in Igboland, as earlier alluded, an old and underprivileged woman, with an unsettling or even scary appearance, due to poverty, ill health or stress, represents a typical example of *amosu* (Ms Ngozi Okoye, interview conducted on January 5, 2022).

THE SOCIO-RELIGIOUS REPRESENTATION AND GENDER DIMENSION OF *AMOSU* PHENOMENON IN ENUGWU-UKWU

The people of Enugwu-ukwu, like other Igbo clan groups, hold a belief in the existence of *amosu*. In an interview conducted on October 10, 2021, Mrs Florence Nwogor suggested that certain individuals in Enugwu-ukwu are considered *amosu* based on tragic occurrences such as the death of their offspring or siblings. Additionally, extreme relationship traits such as exceptional niceness or unfriendliness leads to *amosu* accusation in the community.

Anecdotes that instantiate how *amosu* works in Enugwu-ukwu abound. In Enugwu-ukwu, a certain young lady, after a visit to one of the 'prophets' in a nearby community for consultation, insisted that her mother-in-law was a witch and was responsible for her childlessness. On further inquiry, she claimed that she first had a premonition and her 'prophet' confirmed her suspicion. This way, some African pastors and prophets ruin relationships and filial ties. Perhaps, these pastors/ prophets take advantage of Igbo people's belief that *amosu* is responsible for most perturbing life situations to give their unfounded visions.

Another example of *amosu* is the accusation of an elderly woman in Enugwu-ukwu is this: in June 2022, a young lady slumped and died while in the bathroom in one of the villages in Enugwu-ukwu. Her mother-in-law was accused by people who claimed she ransomed her own life in witchcraft coven with that of the young lady who was her daughter-in-law.

In another development, a fierce looking bird was killed somewhere in the community. Shortly after, an elderly woman in that same community died. For some individuals in the community, that was a confirmation that the elderly woman translated to the bird or that the bird housed her spirit, hence her death shortly after. These claims, though popular in the community, remain unverifiable because they belong to the realm of the other-worldly, which is not subject to empirical proof.

The question arises whether poverty and old age confer the *amosu* status to Enugwu-ukwu women. This query was tactically avoided by respondents in this

study and was not acknowledged as predisposing factors to becoming *amosu*. In Enugwu-ukwu, "known" or "confirmed" witches, mostly elderly women with low economic status, face accusations and grapple with vituperations from members of the community as well as other more serious penalties, often spurred by mere 'visions' and 'prophecies.' Once suspected, these women are accused and deserted by the community and sometimes, even family members. This is usually followed by other subtle or more obvious forms of oppression such as treating them unnicely when troubling events occur, such as: disaster, miscarriage, infertility, natural disaster, illness, death or any other failure in the family or community. They are also usually castigated in repugnant songs, mostly by fellow women – kith and kin, daughters-in-law or other women in the community. Women in Enugwu-ukwu, paradoxically, lead the accusation and persecution of fellow women deemed *amosu*.

Nevertheless, arguing against the existence of *amosu* is not easy. For instance, some persons have voluntarily confessed to be *amosu* with relatable malignant activities. These confessions did not necessarily occur as a result of 'trial by ordeal' (a situation where one is unjustly tortured until they own up crimes they did not commit under duress) or mental illness (which is sometimes the case). While acknowledging the probable existence of *amosu,* in line with Igbo people's belief, the socio-religious construction of accusations against elderly women of low socio-economic status in Enugwu-ukwu lacks veracity. It is therefore disturbing that women who are mothers – biological or metaphorical – and are, according to Acholonu's motherism, connected to the Mother Earth essence and human flourishing in the community – can be oppressors. This gender-based oppression is deeply rooted, with women participating in their own subjugation, possibly influenced by cultural imbalances and a patriarchal environment. This long-standing oddity demands attention both in academia and in the society, as it perpetuates a cycle of oppression against elderly and economically underpriviledged women, making us recognize it as a form of gender oppression.

AMOSU PHENOMENON AND DESECRATION OF THE INSTITUTION OF MOTHERHOOD IN ENUGWU-UKWU

The *amosu* phenomenon and the desecration of the institution of motherhood in Enugwu-ukwu, in relation to indigenous feminist theories, are significant issues. Witchcraft accusation against elderly women of low socio-economic status in Enugwu-ukwu creates disharmony in the community, posing a threat to a peaceful coexistence. It not only breeds animosity but also fosters gender oppression and social injustice, disrupting the community's stability, progress, unity, and the overall well-being of humans in the community.

Moreover, the allegations against and victimization of these women in Enugwu-ukwu undermine the revered place of motherhood in the community. This contradicts Acholonu's theoretical model of 'motherism,' which advocates for the valorization and protection of mothers as models and connections to Mother Earth.

Ironically, Enugwu-ukwu's indigenous religion and culture, in theory, secure the place of motherhood and women. The saying, '*Enugwu nnem*' literally, 'Enugwu, my mother' is used to refer to the town as mother or trace affinity with other people from Enugwu-ukwu, especially when they are meeting far away from home. Wariboko's (2020) treatise on *Enugwu nnem* is instructive. Enugwu-ukwu is referred to as a mother of all her indigenes. Culturally, mothers and women are generally valued in the community. However, the *amosu* accusations against women in Enugwu-ukwu disregard the religious and ontological essence of women, further emphasizing the need to address these unfounded allegations.

Despite the existence of indigenous feminist theories such as Acholonu's 'Motherism', Ezeigbo's 'Snail-sense feminism', Nnaemeka's 'Nego-feminism', Ogundipe's 'Social Transformation Including Women in Africa (STIWA)', Hudson-Weem's 'Africana Womanism', Opara's 'Femalism' and so on (Nnaemeka, 2004; Ogundipe, 1994; Acholonu, 1995; Ezeigbo, 2012; Ogunyemi, 1985), there remains a gap in addressing the specific gender oppression represented by *amosu* accusations in Igboland. These existing models highlight the conspicuous plight of African women, either descriptively, analytically or prescriptively, and address gender injustice on the continent, recommending ways to navigate unjust patriarchal terrains. Indigenous feminist theories in Africa have been largely about fairness, complementarity, harmonious co-existence, and peacebuilding in African societies. However, issues situated beyond the conspicuous, such as the religious and ontological essence of women, 'spiritual legitimacy' of women's oppression such as *amosu* accusation and victimization as well as the active role of women in oppressing fellow women, require our attention. This study advocates, therefore, for a more holistic indigenous feminist model that delves into the religious, ontological and spiritual aspects of women's oppression, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive approach in African gender discourse.

VANGUARDING THE REVERENCE FOR MOTHERHOOD AND GENDER JUSTICE IN ENUGWU-UKWU

The imperative for proper gender education and sensitization of Enugwu-ukwu community members regarding the irrationality and injustice inherent in the random acts of accusing elderly women of being witches cannot be overstated. This challenging task will be supported by a more comprehensive scientific literature, exposing subjects that, previously, have been somewhat eclipsed or absent from academia.

Furthermore, there is a need for new indigenous feminist models that can instigate attitudinal changes toward this socio-cultural malady in contemporary Enugwu-Ukwu and among the Igbo in south eastern Nigeria. This serves as a clarion call to African indigenous gender scholars to broaden their scope and be more inclusive in considering and articulating indigenous feminist models. These innovative models should also denounce women championing the oppression of fellow women in any form.

Moreover, to ensure the effective and smooth functioning of Igbo communities, women must refrain from self-aspersion, disdain, and infighting. Strengthening sisterhood and valorization, rather than victimization of women in society, especially by women themselves, fosters processes for socio-religious harmony in Africa and particularly in Igbo societies.

CONCLUSION

In Enugwu-ukwu, there still are numerous cases of elderly and impoverished women accused of witchcraft, subjected to ridicule, abuse, rejection, desertion, and other indignities. This breeds chaos in the community, inflicting hardships on the victims or leading to their premature transition to the grave. This long-standing state of affairs remains untouched by civilization, religion, or education in contemporary times. Instead, religion prods and props the practice. Any incongruities tolerated in Enugwu-ukwu resonate beyond the community, owing to the fact that Enugwu-ukwu is considered the first son of Nri, the mythical progenitor of the Igbo and therefore, the head of many Igbo clan groups. As such, Enugwu-ukwu is a prototype of Igbo culture. It is no surprise that the prevalence of witchcraft accusations against women in other parts of Igboland is no different.

By examining the victimhood of women accused of *amosu* through the lens of Catherine Acholonu's *motherism*, this paper advocates for an Afrocentric theoretical model that addresses gender bias and violence rooted in obscure claims. The paper also calls for a model that focuses less on the broader society and more on women as both disproportionate contributors to and perpetrators of their own victimhood, as well as agents of their own liberation. Thus, the paper calls for a novel indigenous feminist theory that will address this pervasive issue and promote social justice and harmony.

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