

# “Ndom heaved”: Imagining Igbo women in the *Ogu Umunwanyi* (1929 Women’s War) in Echewa’s *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire*

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## Abstract

The power of women to carry out explicit acts of resistance against colonialism has traditionally been of great interest within African literary studies. It is surprising therefore that within the field representations of *Ogu Umunwanyi* (1929 Women’s War) in Nigeria, patronizingly referred to as “riots” in British colonial reports, have received scant attention. This article, in part, compensates for this oversight and asserts the value of one representation of the *Ogu Umunwanyi*: T. Obinkaram Echewa’s 1992 novel *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire*. This article argues that the novel mobilizes a particularly Igbo women’s solidarity, Ndom, to fill out traditional histories and ethnographies of the *Ogu*. Echewa “Igbofies” the war story at various textual levels to alienate Anglophone readers with seemingly untranslatable words, sayings, and concepts with the ultimate goal of communicating an Igbo women’s way of being in the world. Ndom in the novel problematizes conventional Western understandings of time, space, and gender to at once endear non-Igbo readers to a foreign culture while foregrounding the novel’s unwillingness to offer the concept as a totalizing project.

## Keywords

African literature, colonialism, Nigeria, postcolonialism, West Africa

“Teach her to take pride in the history of Africans, and in the Black diaspora. Find black heroes, men and women, in history. They exist.”

Adichie (2017)

The recovery of a distinguished African past that can be mobilized for contemporary concerns has been a staple of African literature since the beginning of the print era at the end of the nineteenth century. In the early twentieth century, the South African

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novelist Thomas Mofolo published the most notable novel of the period, *Chaka* (1925), about the infamous Zulu king Chaka Zulu who reigned during the early nineteenth century, while fellow South African Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi* (1930) drew on Matabeleland in the 1830s. Both novels asserted specific and formidable, if at times brutal, local histories to contest contemporary segregationist policies in South Africa. Other early narratives from authors such as John Dube, Alhaji Sir Abuaka Tafawa Balewa, and S .E. K. Mqhayi also reassert African pasts, while the renowned subsequent generation of Achebe, Soyinka, and Ngũgĩ used historicity to counter narratives in colonial reports, conventional histories, and ethnographies about what it means to be African before, during, and after colonialism. Reanimating African pasts to challenge postcolonial assumptions about gender fell to women writers in the 1960s. Novelists such as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, and Ama Ata Aidoo maintained that restoring Africa via its past necessitated addressing contemporary challenges surrounding the plight of women living in the ruins of colonialism. Adichie's own texts, as well as those of her contemporaries, such as Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi and Aminatta Forna, often engage contemporary challenges for African women via narratives set in African pasts. In light of this long-standing feature of African literature, Adichie's call in the quotation above is not only an appeal to re-examine the historical record for forgotten heroes, but also an invitation to assess extant literature for elided literary heroes, particularly African women.

This article responds to Adichie's request by mobilizing T. Obinkaram Echewa's initially celebrated, and yet now largely forgotten, 1992 novel *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire*. Echewa's uniquely pro-African woman novel fictionalizes the anti-colonial *Ogu Umunwanyi* (1929 Women's War) in Nigeria and places African women at the centre of pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial Igbo life. Although women's roles change in each era, the novel emphasizes a continuity between events as seemingly disparate as the early twentieth century *Ogu*, during the period of colonialism, and the late twentieth century "brain drain" of globalization. Echewa's novel offers us a unique and insightful glimpse into a proud African past in particular because it spends most of its narrative recuperating African heroes from the European colonial period, a time characterized by humiliation in many African societies. Furthermore, Echewa takes an event that while important for academic historians and ethnographers, has failed to secure its rightful place as an inspiring moment in literary representations of Africa. Echewa's take on the *Ogu* deftly demonstrates the ability of literature to move beyond strict factual retellings in the production of culture and memory. In arguing against the elision of this novel and its representation of historical Africans, particularly women, in literature, this essay offers a reconsideration of what should be a more seminal text from a period in African literature (the 1990s) that is often underappreciated outside the South African context. In choosing non-conformist, resistant women (Adichie's "heroes") who straddle the pre-colonial and colonial periods, Echewa argues for a version of African womanhood deeply rooted in the histories of many African cultures. Echewa complements this recovery of historical figures with a complicated cultural and linguistic process that he terms "Igbofication", ultimately supplementing conventional history and ethnography to refigure a moment of colonial resistance by Igbo women as relevant for the concerns of twentieth- and twenty-first century African women.

## I Saw the Sky Catch Fire

*I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* debuted in 1992 to rave reviews from major newspapers, such as the *New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and the *Chicago Tribune*, among many other popular and academic publications. However, the novel and Echewa's literary output as a whole have been largely overlooked by scholars. Prominent Africanist Derek Wright (1997: 254) has termed Echewa a "neglected novelist" whose exceptional work has been understudied. *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* is his most prominent text but beyond an article in *PMLA* in 1999 by Bella Brodzki on issues of translation in the novel, and Derek Wright's article in his edited series *Contemporary African Literature* in 1997, surprisingly little professional scholarship has been devoted to *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire*. In the 26 years since publication, this lack of serious attention to Echewa has meant that his innovative and nuanced techniques of refashioning a version of the *Ogu Umunwanyi* as a creative rewriting of history have not, as yet, been carefully analysed. This essay addresses this oversight by showing the significance of Echewa's Igbofication of English which works to both circumvent issues of translation in African literature as well as to place underrepresented African women as the fulcrum of anti-colonial resistance. The novel asserts the parabolic nature of Igbo society to argue that a story (rather than a history) is the most fitting form for telling the past in Igboland, while emphasizing the concept of collective womanhood, *Ndom*, as a lynchpin for understanding the Igbo perspective of the war.

*I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* tells the story of Ajuzia, a young modern Nigerian Igbo man who is preparing to leave Nigeria to study in the United States. On the eve of his departure, his grandmother, Nne-nne, sits him down for a long discussion about his future and how the family's assets will be handled while he is away. Rather than giving future-oriented advice on how to conduct himself abroad, Nne-nne lectures Ajuzia on the lessons of war. To make her points, she focuses at length on the injustices against women that she beheld first hand in the *Ogu Umunwanyi*. Via her story, we find out that Nne-nne was an important figure in the war, and she reveals the causes of it and the tactics the women used to pursue it. She tells an Igbo women's history of the war by foregrounding the injustices of both colonialism and patriarchy. When Ajuzia returns home just before Nne-nne's death at the end of the novel, he is torn as to whether to return to his studies at the expense of his family. His wife Stella becomes an "oracle, as if the spirit of Nne-nne had invaded her and was using her as a mouthpiece" (Echewa, 1992: 318).<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, Ajuzia decides to stay in Nigeria, invoking *Ndom* in the last lines of the novel as his inspiration.

Unravelling Echewa's use of language and the concept of *Ndom* is as important as the details of the war provided by Nne-nne's story within a story. Nne-nne's personal narrative about the war and Ajuzia's dilemma over whether to stay in Nigeria are the major plot points in the novel, but the distinct features of *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* are how it confronts linguistic and cultural translation via Igbofication and the concept of *Ndom*.

### Multifaceted Igbofication

The process of Igbofication of English that Echewa employs in the telling of the *Ogu Umunwanyi* finds its *raison d'être* in early language debates among authors and scholars concerning whether European or African languages were the appropriate tools to resist

colonialism and express Africa on its own terms via the written word. Without rehearsing the debate too much here, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2007) and Obi Wali (2007), among others, argued that not only could European languages not capture the essence of life and communication of Africans, but that by using European languages one accepted the scourge of colonialism as constitutive of the modern African condition. For these authors, Africa needed to take back its storytelling traditions, and allowing those traditions to be co-opted by Europe was untenable. In contrast, Chinua Achebe (1965) argued that writing in European languages would secure African literature worldwide recognition, while writing in African languages would doom African literature to hyper-local readerships, keeping even other parts of Africa from reading it. A Nigerian writing in Igbo, Achebe's native language, would not be able to communicate with Ngũgĩ's Kikuyu readers. The lack of communication and solidarity of using African languages meant that even though politically the use of African languages was preferable, practically speaking, one needed to write in European languages to be read. This debate has never truly subsided but Achebe's views have largely prevailed. However, even for writers like Achebe, the impetus to express local culture while using a European language has preoccupied considerations of form, particularly in Anglophone African literature. Achebe spoke often about his attempts to keep Igbo sensibilities in his writing in terms of cadence, lexicon, and story structure despite his use of English. Similarly, Echewa inflects his English in *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* with Igbo via several strategies in an effort to Igbofy discourse on the *Ogu*.

In imagining alternative ways of narrating history with an Igbo inflection, Echewa has expressed his strategy thus: "what I try to do in my writing is to subdue it [English] and colonize it" (Das, 2014: 158–59). In reversing the poles of colonial discourse, Echewa imagines himself as the colonizer, wanting to "Igbofy and jazzify it [English]". He explains: "At times this may mean infusing Igbo words and phrases and other times fracturing and resetting English syntax to make it more compliant with Igbo". Instead of trying to tame Igbo for use in English, Echewa searches for ways to undermine the ability of English to function as a totalizing system of signs. Echewa argues that just as jazz was created by playing European instruments "beyond the ways intended by their designers [...] to produce a new form [jazz]", his improvisation on English can produce new sensibilities and forms (Das, 2014: 158–9). We can consider this moulding of English via Igbofication, or jazzification, on multiple levels of the narrative. Within Nne-nne's war story the challenging concept of *Ndom* dominates the narrative while at the sentence level untranslated Igbo phrases and words act as not-entirely-translatable signifiers to English readers.

As a strategy, Echewa's Igbofication aligns with what Bill Ashcroft et al. (2007) term the "metonymic gap". In keeping with Echewa's project, Ashcroft et al. characterize a metonymic gap as a "form of abrogation", defining it as the "cultural gap formed when appropriation of a colonial language inserts un glossed words, phrases or passages from a first language, or concepts, allusions or references that may be unknown to the reader" (2007: 122). They also write that the gap occurs when "texture, sound, rhythm and words are carried over from the mother tongue to the adopted literary form" (2007: 122). The metonymic gap, then, does "not embody the essence of the African world view, but as a contiguous trope it proposes an ability to negotiate that cultural distance of which it is itself a sign" (2007: 122). This attention to form, as partially untranslatable itself and as

a carrier for the untranslatable, has been overlooked in telling the story of the *Ogu Umunwanyi* and scholarship on the novel. If we accept that in the colonial context Brenda Cooper's axiom that form is explicitly "an example of these other worlds, knowledge bases and languages" (2008: 10) then retelling the *Ogu Umunwanyi* via Igbofication provides a much needed formal alternative to traditional histories (such as those by Judith Van Allen, 1976 and Marc Matera et al. in 2013).<sup>2</sup>

Igbofication, then, is a multifaceted strategy that purposefully alienates non-local readers while sharing a fragmented insider's account with local readerships. By examining representative moments of Igbofication, we can understand it on the sentence level as well as gain insight into the nature of its larger usage in the novel. One example comes when an old man is attempting to rape a young woman. She fights him off and tells him that he's "an old man with a weak erection", and he says that she is no virgin and must have "Akpuru disease", with no reference to what the disease is — Onchocerciasis, or river blindness (158). In this same encounter the old man, Aja-Egbo, exclaims "Ikpe nkaraa gi!" (the rulers judge you!) "authors translation", again with no textual gloss as to its meaning for non-Igbo speakers. Clearly he is upset that he cannot rape the woman but the exact nature of his comment is lost on the non-local audience. Thus, while an Igbo linguistic sensibility is deployed to imbue the encounter with the actual language that might be used in such a situation, that same language destabilizes and defamiliarizes non-local readers. A non-local reader must ask herself "Is there something I am missing?" In short, yes there is, but that something has been left untranslated to gesture to the larger untranslatability of culture. This dual action of at once inviting readers into a foreign environment and then using that foreignness to alienate them is the core of what metonymic gaps bring to the novel's retelling of the war. Readers of the novel in English should understand that they are privileged to get an insider's perspective on a culture, but also understand that the novel refuses to entirely equip them for the task. This example comes in the novel before the war and is levelled at an Igbo man, an indication that patriarchy within Igbo society is not spared, despite the war being squarely fought against the British Empire. For Echewa, the war is not a singular event but part of a larger system of degradation and devaluing both of Igbo men by the British and of Igbo women by Igbo men. We see this point resonate later when the narrative condemns Ajuzia for his mistreatment of Stella. The war is a flashpoint for this larger conflict but was neither its genesis nor its resolution. Although this minor example demonstrates the phenomenon of metonymic gaps at the sentence level via untranslated words and phrases, the enacting of metonymic gaps upon the larger ideas and structure of the novel is more striking for the novel's feminist project.

Echewa's alternative war history, while still written in English, makes several claims via its structure that are antithetical to the ethnographies and histories about the war that preceded it. The first claim is that an Igbo historical event cannot be fully represented in English and that even in employing metonymic gaps, readers who are not Igbo women cannot fully comprehend this historical event and those who enacted it. Outsider readers *can* gain a sensibility beyond historical facts by being exposed to fragmented flashpoints of Igbo language, culture, and storytelling and this is part of the value of the novel. By metonymically enacting the irreparable difference between Igbo and English, *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* problematizes any totalizing retelling of the *Ogu*, even its own. That is, the structure of the novel acknowledges unknowability as

the always-already precondition of its representation of Igbo women, investing them with the power to resist the hegemony of cultural and linguistic translation. The novel does not gesture to or strive for epistemological or hermeneutical fullness and totality, but rather accepts the fragmentary nature of knowledge that passes between cultures and languages, and represents this fragmentation in its structure as a benefit. Partial knowledge is the only responsible way of knowing the other for Echewa and he refuses to elide these difficulties for his English-language readers.

Although *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* is a novel, part of it Igbofies the novel form itself, beyond the insertion of unglossed Igbo text. Theories of the novel attest to the form's flexibility as a super-genre capable of adapting and being adapted to suit many purposes. The oral nature of Nne-nne's story works communally with the use of English in that the Igbofication of English does not undermine the language to make it unintelligible, but does indelibly mark, or "colonize", it as Igbo. At the level of large scale narrative devices, the novel depends on Nne-Nne verbally reporting her story to her grandson, Ajuzia. Nne-Nne tells her story to a family member as a means of knowledge production inside a kin group, rather than for a large audience: her story is not meant for outsiders who lack the context to understand it. In other words, it is framed as a narrative device, not as a history as understood in the Western tradition. Instead, it is meant as indirect and parabolic guidance for her grandson to demonstrate the strength of the Igbo people and how he should behave towards women, his wife in particular, in keeping with that tradition. Contextualizing the story of the *Ugo* within a contemporary dilemma focused on a Nigerian man who must choose whether to adhere to the wisdom of his grandmother and wife telling him to stay again welcomes readers into an Igbo space but refuses to fully explain the logic of the decision. Ajuzia recalls Nne-nne's story, reflects on the respect mourners had for Nne-nne at her funeral, and is shocked by Stella's ability to be Nne-nne's surrogate in the debate. How far he has progressed in his studies, the financial cost of such a reversal, and other particulars are unaddressed — *Ndom* is the reason and the reader in English must accept it, even if he or she does not understand it fully.

## Ndom

The most significant coalescing of Igbofication of English and the war's history in terms of language, form, and gender comes in *Ndom*'s deployment during the war. *Ndom* is a term for women and sisterhood not translated, but also untranslatable: it describes a unity among Igbo women who share the assumptions and understandings of their place in a world inaccessible to non-Igbo women. *Ndom* is not explained explicitly at length in the novel; instead it is deployed and it is up to the outside reader to garner what she can about its constitution. The term is only ever translated as "women", and *Oha Ndom* once as "the Solidarity of Women" (42). *Ndom* is a unique way of being in the world for Igbo women that exists outside of war but that was mobilized for it as well. Collective women's identity, and the expanses as well as limits of that identification, is at the core of the novel as *Ndom* is constantly invoked by name as a collective identifier for the women, as well as a pro-woman philosophy. *Ndom* is used to help explain the war but also the collective actions of Igbo women in general.

A few textual examples can help illuminate the concept of *Ndom*. One particularly useful early example comes when *Ndom*, in the form of several hundred women, travel for a day by foot to bring back one of the women's daughters (against the daughter's wishes) who has become a prostitute. With little debate, the women mobilize as a unit and forcefully circumcise her to prevent her from returning to her illicit profession. Here *Ndom* is a shared sense of propriety and an organizing principal capable of direct (and violent) action. This scene and others discussed later contradict the dismissive parlance of colonial reports regarding the women, such as officially naming the war a "riot", by exhibiting their ability to organize and enact a plan quickly. Far from chaotic or riotous, the Igbo women act with precision to achieve a shared goal. Later, when a pregnant woman is harassed by a census taker and several women arrested, the women directly confront colonial soldiers, derail trains, topple telegraph poles, sabotage trucks, and burn buildings. Several colonial soldiers are killed and the colonial government repels the women by killing hundreds of them in several massacres. In a final battle, the women run towards the native soldiers, commanded by white colonial officers, shouting "Kill your mothers!" (209). The soldiers fire on the women, killing over one hundred, but are chased off by over two thousand women who refuse to retreat. The colonial government concedes to abandon the original flashpoint — tax on the women — while maintaining the warrant chief system and their colonial government. The women win against taxation but at a tremendous cost, and the colonial system remains with the unsympathetic, and at times collaborative, male warrant chiefs at its core (Afigbo, 1972: 5). Victories against colonial empires are nothing to scoff at, however, and the ability of a group of Igbo women to change the course of one of the most powerful empires in the history of the world speaks to their power in that moment but also beyond colonialism.

The phrase *Ndom* does not work as a straight translation to womanhood or women's solidarity because at many points in the book *Ndom* is said to speak and think as a singularity, not merely as a consistent ideology. Early in the novel Echewa writes "'The!' *Ndom* said about what Sam-ek had done to Akpa-Ego", voicing disapproval concerning a man sent by warrant chiefs to count the possessions of a pregnant woman (33). In the view of *Ndom*, harassing a pregnant woman as she tries to work is wholly unacceptable, and provokes the women to refuse to participate in the census. Afterwards, Echewa writes: "*Ndom* heaved [...] *Ndom* would not be counted" (41), signifying that this sense of womanhood is a kind of untranslatable sensibility, or even supernatural in nature, in that it defies time and space by instantaneously and singularly pronouncing the result of a shared collective understanding. There is clearly a metonymic gap here in that when the text claims that *Ndom* spoke or reacted in a certain way, it does not mean a consensus of the women was taken and in general they agreed that such behaviour was unacceptable, or that it adheres to a strict programme. Rather, the women act as a single entity instantaneously making shared decisions and acting accordingly. The gap is linguistic as *Ndom* resists translation, but also cultural because the entire concept has no equivalent in English that would make sense of a collective women's identity able to speak singularly and act immediately.

While recent histories attest to complex communication strategies among the women, the novel offers *Ndom* as more than a pro-woman ideology and/or a kinship organizing principle, but as a form of communication itself, in other words a self-realized form that

traverses space in unorthodox ways. Historical texts on the war have reported that the size of the group of women who resisted the colonial authorities was in the thousands and that it ranged over an area of several hundred square miles during a time when telegraphs, telephones, and automotive technology were not used by Igbo women. Clearly a complex and far reaching communication chain organized the women over large swaths of land, but for Echewa the particulars of the chain do not communicate the Igbo women's perspective. Rather than a historically mitigated understanding that articulates the methods the women used to communicate, Echewa allows *Ndom* to move beyond the realm of cultural curiosities and become the organizing principle of the war, as well as its conduit. Whether historians agree is largely immaterial to Echewa as he is interested in the women's story — their shared sensibilities about the power of *Ndom*, not the historians' means of reducing it to a communication network or kinship group. By delving into *Ndom*, Echewa's novel hinges on the acceptance of a shared sense of womanhood, sometimes nurturing and sometimes violent, that could be deployed almost instantaneously despite the manner in which it violates the laws of space in the Western understanding.

The manner in which *Ndom* works spatially to overcome the problem of distance and communication is complemented by how it navigates time. *Ndom* seems to make long-term plans, especially when executing the war, which involves organizing several attacks and kidnapping a white female ethnographer, but also expresses solidarity immediately. At one point early on a call and response occurs when one woman asks "Ndom Uzemba, are you together?" The women respond in one voice "Ya-ya-yah!" The woman continues "What do you say?" and they respond "We say *Kama ihere mee out n'ime anyi, nan ne muru anyi na nna muru anyi gwuu!* [Rather than shame on us, kill all of us!] We say, *Isi ukazi agbaghaisiala!* [The knot that holds the weaving together has unraveled!]" (55). The women respond as one, even volunteering to sacrifice their lives, and speak in parables whose meanings are not readily accessible to non-Igbo readers, likely unfamiliar with the cloth wrappers that Igbo women traditionally wear. In another telling encounter at the beginning of the war, a large group of women confront a police officer who has arrested two women:

"We recognize his face, do we not?" the young woman asked the crowd.

"Yes, we do," the crowd replied.

"What do we recognize him as?"

"*Ogasi Nwa-Beke-e!* [The White man's tattletale!] *Ora otila Nwa-Beke-eh!* Wo-o-o-o-oh!" They broke into *owu* once more. (90; emphasis in original)

In these excerpts, *Ndom* functions temporally as capable of instant shared response. Both the ability to respond instantly in unison and to be a site of long-shared values speak to an Igbo women's unity that outstrips the organizing of men in the novel, making the women more appropriate warriors. Nne-nne presses this point when she tells Ajuzia that "Ndom went to war to avenge the men. Or perhaps to rekindle the courage men had lost. And that is not the first time something like that has happened" (33). Although the point here is not to replace a patriarchal hierarchy with a matriarchal one, it is important to

recognize that *Ndom* galvanized resistance whereas male leadership failed to resist, in part because the warrant chief system effectively divided men. Had women been included in that system perhaps they too would have been unable to consolidate themselves and galvanize opinion to act, but their exclusion meant that there were no female Igbo insiders in the colonial power structure, only alienated female outsiders.

Although *Ndom* resists a straight definition due to its amorphous nature, *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* does crystallize its sensibilities in several key passages as the war progresses. A native police officer threatens to arrest a group of women as they advocate for the release of a woman, asking one of them: "Are you the leader, old woman?" (55). She responds by revealing the nature of *Ndom* to this local man working for the colonial project, who apparently finds this gathering as foreign as some of the white officers:

We have no leader. No one is a leader. I have lived longer than most of these others, but I am not their leader. We are all women together. What makes each of us woman is the same thing that makes all others women. We have the same slit between our legs, the same two breasts, no one has three; we all squat to urinate and to deliver our babies. (55)<sup>3</sup>

After further confrontations with officers, both local and foreign, the women partially define *Ndom* via their own terms and demonstrate an instantaneous access to a shared sensibility. When the old woman asks the crowd of thousands, "Are you a woman?" the following exchange between the woman and the crowd of thousands ensues:

"Yes!" the women replied.

"What makes you a woman?"

"What makes a woman is imponderable!"

"Uncountable!"

"Unfathomable!"

"How many women are there in the world?" The old lady continued.

"*Nnu-kwuru-nnu! Igwe!* Innumerable!"

"What is woman?"

"A knot that is impossible to untie!"

"A river that no one can swim!"

"A knot in a tree that no one can cut through!" (56; emphasis in original)

*Ndom*, then, is timeless, yet timely, as it is constituted by the machinations of Igbo women's cultural production but also reactive to contemporary concerns. For these reasons, it

is a useful weapon against colonialism and readily mobilized for war, but also counterintuitive to outsiders. It is manifold yet singular, eternal yet contemporary, and peaceful yet violent. These characteristics may make it opaque but also demonstrate its applicability across time and space.

Despite these initial claims regarding the universal nature of *Ndom*, its limits become defined as culturally specific when the Igbo women encounter white women. These limits are significant because the Igbo women initially believe that they are at war against the white men of the colonial regime, as the white women are understood as part of *Ndom*. The limits of *Ndom* are established in two encounters when the women meet two different white British women, one named Elizabeth Ashley-Jones, whom they kidnap during the war. The Igbo women initially welcome both of them as women, but ultimately see them as other in part because of their inability to enact the norms of womanhood set down by *Ndom*.

While protesting during the opening of the war, the women stop the passage of a car with a white woman and her baby inside. Thinking that she shares in *Ndom*, they say to her: "Dance with us" (53). When she pauses they repeat: "Dance, White woman, dance with us" (53). The women grab her and begin to show her the steps of the dance but she remains "standing frozen in the middle of a circle of dancers" (53). Finally, they lose their patience and say to her: "Do White people not dance? Are you not a woman? Dance White woman, dance!" (53). This short passage reveals the initial assumptions of the Igbo women and the beginning of the changes of *Ndom* in a colonial context. The women begin with the assumption that the woman is one of them so they invite her to dance. When she refuses, they turn to her whiteness as an explanation. Giving her the benefit of the doubt that she does not know the steps, they demonstrate only to be frustrated again. Finally, they reach the conclusion that whiteness is a barrier to associating and when she welcomes the arrival of colonial policemen they understand that the solidarity of *Ndom* is trumped by the solidarity of colonialists and whiteness. The woman tells the police she is late for a meeting with her husband in a final confirmation that she identifies with the British colonial project more than with a sense of shared womanhood with Igbo women. This initial encounter with a white woman in the book prepares the narrative's more in-depth entanglement with race and *Ndom* via the encounter with Elizabeth Ashley-Jones. These white women clearly participate in the colonial project not as other female victims of its patriarchy, as is at times argued about white women during colonialism, but as perpetrators with white men against Igbo women.<sup>4</sup>

The encounter with Elizabeth Ashley-Jones further defines the important and intrinsic dynamic sensibility of *Ndom* and its usefulness. Ashley-Jones is an ethnographer who asks to observe the daily lives of Igbo women. She is initially welcomed, despite the women not understanding the nature of her work. This signals openness by the women, as well as that the Igbo women at the heart of *Ogu Umunwanyi* were unaware of the fields of ethnography and written history. Ashley-Jones carries a notepad in which she constantly writes, and the women are both in awe of it and suspicious. Their visitor quickly proves to be disrespectful because she refuses to follow explicitly stated rules: she is told to stay behind when a woman is giving birth, but insists on viewing the birth. She is caught breaking the rules and feels ashamed for being reprimanded, writing in her notepad that they were "odd feelings, I thought, for a European to feel towards an

African” (115). As a European, Ashley-Jones proves incapable of identifying with or respecting the women, a fact that later leads *Ndom* to kidnap her as leverage when the war is at its most violent. Previously, *Ndom* did not need to consider race, but it swiftly adapts, belying a history of assumptions by the West that pre-colonial African cultural modes of thinking and living are both ossified in unchanging forms and unsustainable in colonial and postcolonial contexts. We see this adaptability again when *Ndom* proves pivotal in the familial battle between Ajuzia and Stella in which the movement of people and capital in globalization stand in for colonialism. While the salience of *Ndom* for the modern postcolonial world is directly confronted by Ajuzia in his relationship with Stella and his studies, the encounter with Elizabeth Ashley-Jones demonstrates an inherent plasticity in dealing with the trauma of colonialism itself by refining the degree to which *Ndom* enacts universal womanhood.

As an ethnographer, Ashley-Jones employs different narrative techniques than the women to relate past events. However, she is unable to contextualize her own narrative traditions and stories, as she displays in one of many in her scathing critiques of the Igbo parabolic approach. She writes in her notebook that it is “only marginally meaningful” because it is “irksome [...] misdirection” (109). Rather than seeing Igbo storytelling traditions as a viable way of telling history and creating meaning, she understands Igbo traditions as intentionally obscure, meant only to obfuscate meaning rather than carefully and responsibly create a context for interpretation. In other words, Nne-nne’s indirect storytelling would fail on her because of a lack of explicit didacticism. She continues: “The African mind has a tendency to go around in circles. It loathes the concrete and the literal, and prefers the parabola to the straight line, myth and spiritism to science” (109). To add insult to injury, she writes that “What the African ceremoniously disguises as deep thinking is to genuinely deep and complex thought what a baby’s babblings are to a great poem” (110). *Ndom* is precisely the kind of amorphous concept that irks Ashley-Jones here. It is not direct or a “straight line”, but indeed a complex parabola with an inherent gap for a Westerner. Ashley-Jones obviously misses the complexity of the process of articulating *Ndom* and Igbo meaning creation via stories at large. She thinks that Igbo culture “has little interest in articulating itself, and is therefore an inarticulate culture”, thus doing little to narrow the metonymic gap she experiences (110). In other words, Ashley-Jones is the poor reader of African literature and culture, a model for how not to read *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* and other African texts that do not pander to Western audiences. As a character, Ashley-Jones should understand the monumental moment in which she finds herself, but her own privilege as a white woman does not allow her to join in *Ndom*’s emancipatory ideology or actions. More broadly speaking, her presence, as Bella Brodzki points out in one of the few scholarly articles on the novel, is “inescapably allegorical and metatextual in significance, a commentary on its [the novel’s] own status as a postcolonial translation of the colonizer’s misreading of the Other” (1999: 216). The corrective gesture to which Brodzki alludes is unmistakable, and in this context Ashley-Jones stands as metonymic for the violence of European discursive traditions of reading and writing Africans into and out of existence with little regard to, or respect for, their literary and cultural traditions.

This lengthy exposition of *Ndom* serves several purposes. Primarily, it is meant to unpack an unwieldy pro-woman concept at the core of an important, yet underappreciated,

African novel to argue that fictionalized African women can fruitfully add to the historical perspectives on African womanhood. Beyond this immediate purpose, Echewa's deployment of *Ndom* speaks directly to concerns within postcolonial studies, and more recently world literature, about whether Anglophone novels for global audiences can be culturally scrupulous when representing non-Western cultures. I argue above that *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* does indeed pull off this difficult manoeuvre, but one cannot help but wonder whether its fate within the publishing market as now out of print, and within academia as ignored, pronounces a less triumphant judgement. These large-scale questions are beyond the scope of recovering this novel for now, but we must ponder whether Echewa's exile has been due to his unwillingness to eschew concepts like *Ndom* in favour of accessibility for Western readers. Whether Echewa's foregrounding of local circumstances is as disorientating for non-local readers as Soyinka's, Ngũgĩ's, Mofolo's, or Plaatje's is debatable, but I would argue that his work is as important as theirs in recovering African pasts and that African literary scholars should push back against the market and their fellow scholars.

Ultimately, *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* is a destabilizing text that upends expectations regarding Anglophone African literature. Rather than welcoming Western readers and accommodating them, Echewa places the untranslatable *Ndom* at its centre. *Ndom* challenges not only notions of what non-Igbos might imagine were the gender dynamics in Nigeria at the time, but even core notions of time and space are destabilized. One may be tempted to read against this grain, à la Ashley-Jones, but even at the sentence level, untranslated words and phrases refuse easy reading for non-Igbos. These characteristics make the novel a useful comment on the period of its subject as well as of its production, as seen in the frame story of Ajuzia and his eventual refusal to be a part of the brain drain of the 1990s. It is to be hoped that this article can in some small way reignite a needed re-examination of Echewa's groundbreaking work, in particular the potential of the inherent solidarity of *Ndom* in the face of globalization, a force at least as intimidating as the British Empire.

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## Notes

1. Subsequent references are to this (1992) edition of *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.
2. Gesturing to the varied use of structures in Igbo culture, Nne-nne herself points out that one definitive event in the war, the arrest of Ugbala, "comes in many versions", and that the manner in which she escaped "has several versions" (72).
3. This definition is repeated later as well: "No, they had no leaders. They were all equally women, with no one more of a woman than the others. They were all 'cut' the same way, all squatted to urinate and to have babies" (94).
4. This is not to say that European women during colonialism did not suffer under the burden of patriarchy but that they did not suffer under a multicultural patriarchy and that they participated in and gained from the subjugation of colonized women. Any sense of a universal unity of women is understandably difficult to sustain in the circumstances, especially from the perspective of the colonized, which is what the narrative aims to reveal.

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