

## Power and Gender: Women's Dominance in Umulumgbe Funeral Ritual Spaces

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### Abstract

*Power is only activated in use. Among social groups and cultures, death offers an occasion for the exercise of power, thus creating a division of which the dominant position is reserved for critical actors within the ritual space assigned by culture. The thrust of this paper is its investigation of the place of women's participation vis-à-vis men's in rituals associated with funerals. This is important, considering the amount of literature on male dominance over females specially brought to limelight through feminist/gender studies. Most of such studies have explored patriarchy as limiting/denying women's roles as well as frustrating their struggles and access to power. Apart from its investigation of the roles of female actors in funeral rituals of Umulumgbe people, south-east Nigeria, this paper also looks at how these roles link with the ideology of power in terms of the processes of its negotiation and use, taking into consideration the foundations upon which such power is legitimized and structured. The paper concludes with the finding that women assert their dominance over men through 'feminine asserts' associated with culturally assigned funeral ritual spaces, thus overturning, in a very significant way, the idea of patriarchy. This is an analysis of a fieldwork which I carried out in Umulumgbe in Enugu State of Nigeria in order to determine the place of women in Umulumgbe funeral ritual performance.*

**Key Words:** funeral rituals, power, sexuality, death, performance, womanhood, Nigeria.

### 1. Introduction

This is an analysis of a fieldwork conducted in Umulumgbe in Udi Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria in order to ascertain the place of women in their funeral ritual performance. There is a strong belief in Umulumgbe that the spirits of one's ancestors keep a constant watch over the living, and must be appeased through rituals which is performed during funeral. It is believed that people who lived well, died in socially acceptable circumstances, and were given appropriate funeral rites, were allowed to continue the afterlife in a world of the dead. The difference between burial and funeral in Umulumgbe is that burial is "safeguarding" of the body of the deceased on earth while funeral is "safeguarding" the soul of the deceased in the world of spirits (ancestors and gods). So, a funeral performance is very important to Umulumgbe because if any family does not perform it, they will face the wrath of the deceased and the ancestors. A further complication may arise in that another member of the family who will die later will not be feted with a funeral until the pending one is completed. Furthermore, in this study, the term ritual is used to mean a set of actions, performed mainly for their [symbolic](#) value, and it is always performed by people that share the same belief. I have derived this dimension from the definitions of Victor Turner and Richard Schechner. According to Turner, a ritual is "A standardized unit act" (1987: 5). Schechner defines rituals as follows:

Rituals are ambivalent symbolic actions pointing at the real transactions even as they help people avoid too direct a confrontation with these events. Thus, rituals are also bridges – reliable doings carrying people across dangerous waters. It is no accident that many rituals are "rites of passage" (Schechner 1993, 230).

Therefore, rituals are collective memories encoded into actions. Rituals help people to deal with difficult transitions, ambivalent relationships, hierarchies, and desires that trouble the norms of daily life. In addition, the major variable in ritual studies is death. So the question is why is death a definer or transformer of power relations? Death to the living means a termination of bonds, affection, and companionship for the being that has died an invigoration of fear and mystery of mortality, and a moment of sorrow and anxiety.

Death momentarily disorients the social mind. Every social order is put to test in the process in order to understand the meaning of the sorrowful visitation. These disorientations are to be settled in funerary arrangements.

Funerals act as restoration of the disoriented social minds. It is the moment in which the reigning myth is put to consummation. The myth settles the minds through an apparent answer to anxieties affecting the mourners. The funeral event (ritual) is drama in the sense that the myth is enacted. As defined by Turner, a ritual is the performance of a complex sequence of symbolic acts. Therefore, the special natures of funerals, as spaces for subversions of power relations are the fusions of living as well as acting. Drama in funeral rituals don't manifest to the actors as play but as living practices sanctioned by a sacred affiliation and therefore every utterance and actions affect the actors as well as the audience in a profound way.

Once more, there are no clear-cut boundaries between actors and the audience and therefore many times action is directed to others and self at the same time. Turner's idea of liminality and subjunctive mood is at play. It is a moment of reflexivity and subjunctivity. Furthermore, role plays a great significance in funerary rituals. Whoever performs the crucial roles, thus carrying the day as the best condoling performers, have a notch higher influence of power. Performance semiotic analysis is central in this regard. According to Foucault, the results of power elevates the holder to "conduct" and to "lead" others in a "system of differentiation... power is accompanied and mediated by various matrices which manifest as interplays of assets at one's disposal governing the location and magnitude of power enactment, of power relations.

Therefore, in this paper I present the significance of the specific places of women among the Umulumbe as manifested in the funeral ritual. I focus on the specific roles women occupy as the most outstanding participants in funeral ritual, and the gender configurations that govern the people. In the assessment, I establish the relationship between gender studies and social drama. In the process I seek to explain why gender dimensions, as a major social discourse and ideology, is suitably explicated within the understanding of a ritual as a social drama. I also outline the major roles observed in the performance of the rituals in order to illuminate on the specific beliefs on the stakes of a woman vis-à-vis those of a man. I have further reflected on the roles in a critical interpretation of the manifestations of the roles in order to establish power relations between men and women among the Umulumbe whether acknowledged or unacknowledged.

### ***1.1 The Role of Women in the Performance of the Ritual***

Performance of a ritual is a site where traditions and ideologies of the participants are luminously presented because at this moment, the participants are seeking to accomplish fundamental requisites for continuation in life and thus employ every earnest means to appease the stakeholders of life. As a social drama thus, a ritual is to be viewed as an enterprise of social reflection and not artistic form for art sake. This is because social drama is performed by the participants as a functional experience weaved in art with which specific objectives in real life are being addressed.

This means that the funeral ritual is a form of art whose nature and function is closely situated within the social reality (the way people think and organize their lives and specify individual and group values) of the people who enact it. Ritual performance, the aesthetic closely meets the historical (Turner 1988, 5). From this observation, the social dramatic aspects of a ritual provides a very powerful tool of configuring and sustaining people's beliefs, knowledge, and ideologies because, and thus a powerful lens of understanding the nature and functionality of the beliefs, knowledge and ideologies.

From the foregoing discussion, a ritual, viewed as a social drama; as art occupying a liminal position with the quotidian, and as a process whose experience is more prized than the product, is more valuable in examining the politics and ideologies of a people. Subsequently, gender relations are understood from examination of the artistic elements of a ritual because, as said above, an artistic performance is detached from the mundane, it is nuanced, and it is sublime and complex. The case is further supported by Butler's ideas of performativity that a performative genre constitutively powerful because an artistic performance has "phantasmatic" qualities; a magical effect of having ideologies legitimated without question (141). She opines that gender is "tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (1993, 141). From this observation, the "stylized acts" imply performance and the aspect of repeatedness of the performance is suitable related to how a ritual is carried out. A ritual's ideological inclinations repeated over time constitute ideological persuasions whose legitimacy is founded in the repeatedness.

As observed, the major players of every ritual are the women, and the success (or status) of a funeral depends largely on the presence, number and performance of women. This does not mean that men are unimportant in the event but that their role is less significant than that of women. They are in Harding's term "stagehands" or those participants who, while they are very important in the performance, only serve to support the major actors (197). The four major players among women, whose roles have been analyzed here, comprise of the following: the widow, "daughters of the land" (*umuada*), and the co-wives.

Further to presentation of the role of the three major categories of women participants in the ritual, I examine the foundations of gender power among the women of Umulumgbe as portrayed in the performance of funeral ritual. As Butler (1993) puts it, gender is a result of performative repeatedness on beliefs on sexuality (p.141) and that the enterprise of gender is based on the dynamics of power. She further adds that "gender is only real to the extent that it is performed" (1988, p.527). This expression of power is "manifest" only in "acts" (p.524). According to Michel Foucault (1982) in his treatise *The Subject of Power*, power is "a way in which certain actions modify others". This implies that power only exists in practice and when there are subjects to practice the power upon; power is realized when in the process of exercise.

It appears that the space for this practice is culture as Stanley R, Barret, Sean Stockolm and Jeanette Burke note that power is never "a substance of force" but intertwined in culture. He also notes that culture constitutes "power rationality" (468). The Umulumgbe women play the most significant role in the Umulumgbe funeral ritual and thus powerful because cultural traditions and beliefs allow them to occupy the major positions in the ritual. This observation is sustained by Foucault who opines that the results of power elevates the holder to "conduct" and to "lead" others in a "system of differentiation" in which the consequence of the differentiation is "domination" (1982, 789, 792 and 798). Again, Umulumgbe women have gained more significant power than men because of the major roles they have repeatedly performed over time until time itself has legitimated their supremacy.

This study, in assessing the significance of dominance in the performance of the ritual, presents the three matrices of gender power as the major driving factors in role configuration and validation among the Umulumgbe people. To Irigaray, sexuality and gender are both real and apparent, for instance, sexuality is real in the context of the traits of biological differences as a result of one's sex, and on other hand, it is apparent when sexual myths mediate the understanding of a person sexual behavior (34). Considered as one of the most weighty phenomenon and rite of passage in human existence, death is attended to by participants with profundity and strictness to method. As such, because of these strict observations, major arrays of observations with which insights of the participants' philosophies are obtained. For this study, the method is central to the performance of the rituals. The relationship and reciprocity of sex, gender, and power is profoundly manifest in these rituals. This interplay has posited crucial interpretive insights to the gender dimensions among the Umulumgbe.

As examined by Julia Walker, social drama is living in drama as well as dramatizing life (149). Social drama is thus contrasted from the canonical theatrical drama in that the divide between reality and improvisation of the setting and props, and rehearsal is almost absent. What we see in the performance of social drama have close bearing on what takes place in real life. Thus the way in which women occupy the major roles in the ritual of this magnitude imply that women hold colossal power among the people who create (as well as those who consume) the ritual. Butler's dimension of lived repetitive experience of gender consciousness as having truth "making capacities" (141), further supports the argument of this study that the performative aspects of the socio-cultural mediums of a people are responsible for the reification of gender perspectives the people, where the reverse is similarly plausible. As explicated by Foucault, power is accompanied and mediated by various matrices which manifest as interplays of assets at one's disposal governing the location and magnitude of power (141). Some of the assets are directly manifest while others are nuanced (141). In this study I present three major assets available to women which explain why power rests appropriately among the women: motherhood, indeterminateness, and knowledge.

### 1.1.1 The widow

The first major role player in the performance of the ritual is the widow who manifests as the "sacrificial lamb. This participant is particularly crucial in a man's funeral. As the companion of the deceased and a co-founder of the family, she is the one who bears the effects of loss more than everyone does. The widow is required to embrace the grieving in the same way she embraced her marriage to the dead husband. She is therefore playing the embodiment of grieving because her appearance is supposed to remind people of the demise.

She is made to put on black attire during the mourning period and will not participate in ordinary activities such as cooking or farming during the period. Thus, wherever she goes people will remember the deceased through her.

The widow is also a sacrificial lamb for the relief of the crisis. The pain of the loss is to be borne by everybody around but the widow has her part which she plays alone. This part encompasses undergoing the longest and the most involving process during the ritual. She is required to put on the character of the “unattractive” as a form of a “punishment” for the death of the husband, which does not mean she bears the blame for the death, but that a sacrificial lamb is requisite and she plays the role. Immediately the news of death of a man is announced, the hair in the head of the widow is shaved. Knowing that a woman’s beauty is associated with her hair, the shaving is a strategy of denying her that beauty. In theatrical view, she is being donned in the costume of the “unattractive” character. She is then taken to live in seclusion and deprivation for a month, and a further twelve months life of isolation from normal life. In the first one month, the widow is kept to stay in a kitchen where she sleeps on the floor and is never allowed to cook, go to the farm or market, and is always escorted whenever she goes to relieve herself. The widow is also kept indoors by other women for four *Orie* market days after which another widow is sent to fetch water from *Okaeze* River for her to bathe.

The situation implies that the widow plays the role of embodying the spot at which the arrow of death has hit among the people. She then becomes an acknowledgment that the effects of death among people are hard to bear. In the perspective of social drama, it means that redress of the crisis is a challenging one. The widow plays the role of the heroine who must first carry the consequences of fate in order to emancipate herself. She is seen as the sacrificial recipient of undeserved misfortune and evoking in the audience a sense of pity and fear. The sacrificial aspect is to transform the subject to becoming a better person. Comparatively, a widower is also expected to go mourning for a similar period of one year but does not undergo the initial stages of the first one month like a woman such as being excluded from the people, being closely guarded whenever she wants to do everything. The intricacy of a widow’s role in settling their deceased spouse is greater than that of a widower because the sacrificial component is more suitably situated in a woman than a man.

A woman is seen as having the most suitable potential to appease gods than a man. Further, the water from *Okaeze* River, which is used to cleanse and return a victim to custom, (in either a man’s case or a woman’s) is fetched by a woman. Motherhood, the state of being a mother, is the heaviest asset women have which makes the widow revered and accorded the most fundamental roles in the ritual. There is a proverb in Igboland that says *Nne bu isi azu n’adi efu n’ofe* “A mother is the fish’s head that can never get missing in every soup”. As observed by Nancy J. Chodorow, the mother is the child’s “primary parent” (3). The woman has always been associated with the role of biological mothering - pregnancy, childbirth, childcare (xiv) and thus motherhood is the most natural and distinctive attribute of a woman. This is more so the case because a child’s pre-Oedipal experience and knowledge depends on bodily contact primarily with the mother.

This study observed that the way in which the Umulumgbe woman is highly revered in events of this nature is because she strikes participants as belonging to the category of “mother”. Mother has always been revered especially by men because of her being the source and sustainer of livelihood. In Chodorow’s words the “internal world”, “sense of mothering” and “sense of self” are developmental configurations necessitated by the “unconscious communication between mother and child” (viii). The Freudian Oedipal perspective further confirms this condition that the man develops a strong tie with the mother at the expense of the father. As Chodorow further opines, there is a “psychological subjectivity” (xv) of reverence inherent in children by their perception of women as “women mother” (3). Thus the man does not take the superiority of his mother for granted, and are suitably persuaded that women are their mothers. In this regard women hold power vested to them by virtue of the special character and condition of being mothers.

As observed in the rituals, death is a rite that fulfills one’s exit from life on earth. It is thus a celebration of one’s birth and wellbeing while on earth. This can also be viewed as a celebration of motherhood as this is the source of birth and wellbeing. Subsequently, it appears that the participants of the ritual are persuaded that the most suitable actors in the event are the women. As explained by Paul Omukwa (one of the respondents), the mother participates in the special ritual of going for *omugwo* when the baby is born which involves a special woman, usually the mother or mother-in-law keeps company to a woman who has just given birth. This is a practice which is carried immediately a child is born. The mother is to be assisted to settle after childbirth and tutored on parenting skills by her mother or her mother-in-law for a couple of weeks until she regains strength.

In this process, the mother is believed to be imparted with the requisite maternity for the growth and wellbeing of the child. This is a practice that is never done by a man. People in Umulumgbe thus attribute their livelihood to the mothers. As expected thus, a woman's death is more involving than a man's because of the attribute of maternity is.

In Umulumgbe a man is expected to be buried the same day because a man's burial conditions are simple, while a woman should wait because of several customary complications associated with a woman. Unlike in a man's case, the body of a woman can never be buried the same day because some conditions are mandatory. One is that the body must be taken to the family where she was born for inspection to confirm that the person did not die of witchcraft or murder. Secondly, her children must be present, unlike for a man whose key persons are only the first born daughter or son and a few kinsmen. Again the women are the ones to inspect the body to ensure the person died in non-foul circumstances. They are also responsible for guarding the body throughout the night if the body is not buried the same day. Also the women are responsible to ensuring that there is plenty of food in the same way a mother ensures her children get enough food. Thus the roles played by women in the areas explained above imply that women are vested with the power of executing and managing the most important occurrences in life such as death.

The passage a widow undergoes after the death of her husband (the seclusion and deprivation of ordinary life) is another illustration of how maternity is synonymous to power. As noted by one of the respondents, a wife is also a mother and that all women combined are better understood as belonging to the category of mothers. One's wife is thus one's mother by virtue of "taking care of human beings". Therefore the widow is attended to with the greatest solemnity and caution at the death of her husband. The usual order of things is disrupted because her duty of providing livelihood has been breached by the demise of one of the people she is supposed to provide for. This disruption must be redressed in a special way, and as observed, she undergoes a moment of separation at which she communes with the gods and ancestors to intervene so that the same calamity does not strike again. The Oedipal scenarios that seem to prove the power hinging on motherhood is seen in the patterned strategies of choice of the major actors in the funerals. For a man's funeral it is the daughter who owns her father's funeral while for a woman the firstborn son (who is the father of the granddaughter to represent the departed) must ensure a successful funeral for his mother. In the funeral the following scenes support this argument. The first is the value attached to the body of a departed woman. Her body is to be returned to her home upon which her children are required to "purchase" the body for interment where she has been married. This implies that being a mother is not to be taken for granted and that it has a cost.

The widow in the ritual is therefore a major actor in whose role can be summarized into two: to bear the pain on behalf of an imagined cause of death of the husband, and be a reminder to the people of the absence of the departed. It appears that the role cannot be substituted, and that in the case of a widower, the magnitude is not as much as that of the woman. A man whose wife effectively performs this requirement after his death is considered to be enjoying a warm welcome from his ancestors in the spiritual. Therefore, a successful funeral, one in which the departed is considered to have been settled most, is determined by the performance of this actor.

### 1.1.2 The *Umuada*

The *umuada*, which translates to "the daughters of the land" comprise of sisters, nieces, aunts and daughters of the deceased. *Umuada* is a very crucial institution of women in Umulumgbe funeral ritual. It comprises of all the women who are born in the clan. It is an institution of relatives as well as a society of self-help. This means the members are tied to one another because they are "sisters" but more so because they need one another in times of difficulties. The most significant *umuada* in the performance of the ritual is the first born daughter (in the case of a man) or the first born daughter of the eldest son (in case of a woman) of the departed who appear as "the image of the departed". In a man's case, his first born daughter must play the role but may be represented if unavailable. In a woman's case, this position is extended to the first daughter of the first born son, and her presence is very important. Every means is exploited to make sure she is present in the funeral. Whichever the case the position is so crucial to the ritual that the first born daughter is the lead "owner" of the funeral and is only supported by the *umuada*. As observed in the two rituals studied, the daughters played the roles of lead figures. Their positions were held central in the performances. The daughter of the man, for instance, is donned in brown beads and crimson dress which symbolize mourning. Wherever she is in the compound, a group of *umuada* stick close to her to ensure that she is physically present at the most central positions and junctures during key ritual moments and that she gets what she needs.

The granddaughter of the woman is similarly made to appear conspicuously crucial to the occasion. She appears to hold the key and means of executing key steps in the ritual and must thus be depended upon for the success of the event. Thus, the most significant role of this participant is to hold the process of the ritual in unity seemingly because of consolidating focus.

The other significant role of the daughter is to represent the departed and this is more so in a woman's funeral. She is taken as a representation of the person for which the other participants have come to pay their last respect and assist her in securing the best space among the dead. On behalf of the departed thus, this participant provides for and executes the funeral process; if she is young or unable to do so, the other people shoulder the task as "helpers" of the daughter. This is further evident at the time of receiving gifts of the funeral, where most of the gifts are given to her. The other "helpers" (the *umuada*) come in to also "help" in the reception of the gifts. The actor thus plays the role of enacting the presence of the departed. This role is very important in the ritual because the imagined presence of the departed convinces the participants that the process they are engaging in is being received by him or her as targeted. Thus, the participants are interested in how this actor performs. If she remarkably receives the presents, the horse, or the food, it is a sign that the departed and the ancestors are similarly remarkably doing the same.

The second category of the *umuada* is the "others" – the other members of the *umuada* other than the first born daughter (sisters, nieces and aunts of the deceased). They are the women who "own" the home of the departed. The owning involves handling the most crucial tasks in the process, and directing the flow of action in the ritual. They also eat the best meals in the occasion. There is a usually a pig and a goat presented to the family by the in-laws which is specifically to be cooked and eaten by the *umuada* alone. This implies that among the Umulumbe a woman's home does not change when one is married "away" and that her birthplace will always be her home even after death. This is the reason why in the burial of a woman, the body is supposed to be taken back to her home unless it is "bought" back. The buying back is a ritual involving the in-laws paying a price to the relatives of the deceased woman to be allowed to bury the woman in their homestead. This observation has been hinted in one of the funeral songs:

<i>Mete onye di nma enyi</i>	Make a good person your friend
<i>Oh oh mete onye di nma</i>	Oh oh get a good person
<i>I n'eme oyi meta onye di nma</i>	When you are making friends
<i>Maka onunu</i>	Get a good person because of marriage
<i>Maka onunu eh</i>	Because of marriage eh
<i>Maka onunu</i>	Because of marriage
<i>Maka onunu eh</i>	Because of marriage eh
<i>Maka onunu</i>	Because of marriage

In the song, the singer is celebrating the process of a good marriage; the one involving "a good person". To her the marriage is a site for making friends. This is seen at the entry style of the *umuada*; each member ensures that she comes with the most outstanding group of "friends" in terms of number, costume, song and dance, and gifts.

In Paul Omukwa's words, the significance of institution of the *umuada* in every funeral is not gainsaid; that the event is almost entirely driven by the *umuada* alone. He says that without the permission of the *umuada* the funeral cannot take place, and he links this conviction with the *omugwo* ritual which is performed when a child is born among the Igbo. In this ritual, mothers attend to a woman who has just given birth in order to teach her parenting skills. A woman is thus revered here because of being endowed with knowledge of the most fundamental skills in life. The mother/wife motif is being appropriated to justify the centrality of the role of women in the event. The *umuada*, thus, play the role of representing livelihood as implied by the imagery of motherhood/wifeness. This subject implies an acknowledgment that women are the owners of livelihoods of everyone in every family setting.

Another key role of the institution of the *umuada* is to shoulder basic activities during the event such as preparing, serving, and taking of food and drinks. They are charged with the responsibility of ensuring that everyone eats well and eats the right food. This is because in the ritual food is symbolic; the participants consume the food "on behalf" of the departed and the ancestors. Subsequently, the *umuada* play the role of leading in the "taking food and drink."

As they eat the most special food (*okpa*) and drinks (palm wine) in the occasion, the feeling among the participants is that the ancestors of the family are similarly doing so in their world. Further, they will partake in the reception of the gifts of the funeral in similar enactment.

The major aspect which is closely linked with the power of the *umuada*, other than motherhood, is indeterminacy. I have used indeterminacy to refer to that state at which one is indefinite, elusive, or mysterious to understand.

This argument dwells on the nexus of the mystery of the body, mind, and materiality of a woman, and the mystery of death. There seems to be reverence directed to those whose many sides of their nature and lives are either vague or completely unknown. Thus, there is a link between mystery and power. The *umuada* emerge to the Umulumgbe people as occupying the area of the indeterminate, first and foremost, by virtue being women, and more so, being a special category of women - “daughters of the land” who at the same time are wives of other people. In the above context, women are usually the mysterious category.

As Irigaray observes, the phenomenology of a woman has been a central trope in the discourses of gender subjectivities (35). All the oppressive practices as well as emancipative strategies on women have always have got to do with the puzzling nature of the woman. In *History of Sexuality*, Foucault observes that a woman’s body has been a center of mystery because it is “thoroughly saturated with sexuality” (104). Although in his analysis he uses this observation to illustrate how patriarchal systems have taken power from women, there is another way in which women have taken power from men through this concealment. Foucault however agrees that power usually come from “below” (94) and that patriarchal systems have used a strategy of censorship on sexuality of women to usurp power from them (83). This strategy involves negative relation on the sexuality, concealment, masking and limit (83). This explains Umulumgbe’s women supremacy in the sense that their mystery by virtue of their sexuality has left their male counterparts indirectly revering them. There are two major areas of indeterminacy associated with women: the paradox of weakness, and the mystery of aesthetic excellence.

The first puzzling paradox, the mystery of a woman’s weakness, is about the irony of male supremacy together with the myth that women belong to the category of the “weak sex”. This has been paradoxical because women have manifested immense strengths in handling various tasks. The woman’s huge responsibility of feeding the family is one of the most striking features that disrupt the myth of weakness among women. Contrary to this patriarchal discourse, a woman emerges in the web of human activities as having more significant strengths and abilities. In these rituals, there is a way in which power is vested to the women by this virtue. The *umuada* especially the married ones are able to play both the role of being guests (by virtue of belonging to the “other” families where they are married to) and also belonging to the home of the deceased. Other than feeding, all the important tasks are left for the women to execute. These tasks include inspecting, shaving and watching of the corpse. This implies people acknowledge that women are stronger than men and are able to effectively execute tasks which men may not. The strengths of a woman can be further seen in her creativity, dexterity and patience where they seem to immensely surpass men. These attributes appear as assets with which men subtly lend women power to handle tasks of greater profundity. Subsequently, the overall success of a funeral ritual depends largely on women because the core tasks are carried out by women.

The other asset of power is the mystery of aesthetic effect. The idea observed is that beauty is power. As observed in the performance of the ritual, song and dance is the major ingredients to what the participants would remark as a “fine” funeral. Given that this is to a large extent a woman’s duty, there is a connection between this prowess and power. The songs and dancing are to be performed throughout the day and they involve intricate acts which require endurance yet women handle the task to the end. This prowess is what is responsible for the creation of beautiful spectacle, and this ability to exceptionally embellish the occasion is what ascribes women with power. The effect of the power is evident in the way such spectacles move men to shower money on the women.

### 1.1.3 Co-wives

Last but not least, there are the co-wives who play the role of “Enhancers of Spectacle” or “embellishers” of the event. There are two categories in the ritual: the co-wives who are invited by the married *umuada* and those who belong to the homestead having been married by the brothers and other clansmen of the deceased. The group whose presence is felt most are the invitee co-wives. These are the women who enter the performance of the ritual in groups and style. The groups are identified by a member of the *umuada* who has been “married away” because they participate in the ritual as invitees of the member of the *umuada*. They are co-wives in the sense that the women are usually drawn from wives of one extended family or clan.

These women are driven by the belief that an entry of a member of the *umuada* to a funeral ritual is more dignified when it is accompanied by a group of women. The other group of co-wives comprises of those women who are married into the family of the deceased. These co-wives, whether they are invitees or those married into the family play very crucial roles in the ritual.

The “local” co-wives play the crucial role of guarding the corpse, shaving the corpse, and providing support to the widow. They are also expected to support the *umuada* and their entourages. The more the women groups and the more stylish they enter the scene, the higher the esteem will be given to the family of the deceased. As observed, women thus have strong attachment to their homes and a predicament affecting their home is profoundly addressed by the women. At such time of bereavement, they do everything to put this attachment to practice and the best way is to marshal a fleet of her co-wives to accompany her. A high ranking funeral will thus be that which registers a high number of such women groups. These women play crucial roles in the funeral. The first major role is to sing and dance. As noted, song and dance in the ritual is used to keep the ritual lively with rhythm and melody. Song and dance is also used as a vehicle for communing with the deceased, the ancestors, and the gods. They are also means of exchanging words of encouragement and assurance. The song *Jesus i bu chi ji nma* (Jesus the lord) is an example of singing to communing with the spiritual world seeking to have people to be spared from death:

*Jesus ibu chi ji mmaa*  
*Jide ji n’aka*  
*Jesus ibu chi ji mmaa*  
*Jide ji n’aka*  
*Onye I wanyere ya ga eri ya*  
*Wanye m ka m rie*

Jesus you are the one that holds the knife  
 You hold the yam in your hands  
 Jesus you are the one that holds the knife  
 You hold the yam in your hands  
 Whoever you give, is the one that eats it  
 Give me to eat

In Umulumgbe community, Christianity has gained a harmonious nexus with the traditional religion. Consequently, the Jesus easily substitutes the Umulumgbe god, similarly, as church can substitute the shrines of the Umulumgbe gods. Therefore, as the singer addresses Jesus in this song, she has in mind the supreme God who gives and takes life. In the song, the singer engages in a dialogue with Jesus where she pleads with him to give much of yam than wield the knife. The yam is used to symbolize life while the knife stands for death. Being the players of this role, women thus carve a special space for themselves: they occupy the position of interceders of the people to be spared of God’s wrath. They emerge as a category of persons who are specially favored by God. This is confirmed in the song *Abu m ada eze* (I am a princess):

*Ihe n’enye m onu bu*  
*n’abu m adaeze*  
*Mgbe m gaa hapu uwa*  
*Aga m esoro nna m naa n’igwe*

My happiness is that I am a princess  
 I am a princess  
 When I leave this world  
 I will live with my father in heaven

In the above song, the persona is celebrating her womanhood. This is illustrated in the line (My happiness is that I am a princess) in which womanhood is equated to being a princess. This is in allusion to their position of being the people responsible for the funerals of their fathers. As such the singer celebrates her royalty by drawing a connection with the world of the departed. This serves to ameliorate the effects of death to appear that it is the way of re-uniting with the ancestors and a way of attaining full royalty as a woman. As the women go about their tasks they do so passionately because of the consciousness that they are “princesses in waiting” Again women play the role of being the custodians and practitioners of customs of the community. In predominantly oral societies, the traditions are stored mainly in the medium of folklore. As observed, the folkloric mediums in the funeral composed mainly of songs, and the transitions from one scene to the other are marked by songs. This implies that the singers especially the soloists are the persons to be relied upon to offer acceptable procedures of carrying out the event. The song *Omenala* (Tradition), for instance, is an affirmation that the women cherish traditions for the welfare of the community:



<i>Iyoh oo, iyoh oo, obodo anyi omenala</i>	Iyoh oo, iyoh oo, our community's tradition
<i>Iyoh oo, iyoh oo, obodo anyi omenala</i>	Iyoh oo, iyoh oo, our community's tradition
<i>Iyoh oo, iyoh oo, obodo anyi omenala</i>	Iyoh oo, iyoh oo, our community's tradition
<i>Iyoh oo, iyoh oo, obodo anyi omenala</i>	Iyoh oo, iyoh oo, our community's tradition

Given the profundity of the songs in the rituals, and singing being a women's role, the women are thus special persons entrusted by the community to reduce the effects of death among the living. They emerge as suitable healers of wounds caused by death and more so as providers of wise counsel among the living as seen in the song *Ana eje ogu be mmuo* (Can we battle the spirit?)

<i>Ananan eje ogu be mma?</i>	Can we battle the spirits?
<i>Ananan eje ogu be mma?</i>	Can we battle the spirits?
<i>Aniri eje ogu be mma</i>	If we can battle the spirits
<i>Anyi evuru ogu wee jee</i>	We would have gone to fight them

The singer is seen attempting to explicate the nature and implication of death. She insinuates that death is spiritual and that it is the spirits who are vested with the power of deciding who and when to die. This is another element which harmonizes traditional Umulumbe traditional religion with Christianity in the sense that Christianity too acknowledges that death is an effect of "the will of God". As the participants console one another, they exploit this mythical provision because it suitably "demystifies death". This song thus serves to counsel the people, using a strategy of reducing the destructive effects of death with an explanation that it is caused by spirits who they cannot wrestle with.

Another role of the co-wives in the funeral is twofold: presence and to embellishment of the occasion. Each of the women groups enters the scene in style usually as if to outdo each other and their entry offers the much needed spectacle which is believed to be watched by the deceased and the ancestors. Their entry is accompanied by canon shots, song and dance. Usually there is a lead singer or dancer who gyrates vigorously to the tunes seemingly to attract the attention of everyone. As the number of the women groups increase therefore a fascinating spectacle created, which is suitable to not only the participants but more so to the spirits who are felt by the participants as ever being present in the ritual. This is added by their seemingly competing attires and songs and dances. One of the songs of this nature is *Asa idi m mma* (You are good to me):

<i>Asa m oo, idi m mma na m na gi ga ebi</i>	My pretty lady you are good to me me and you will live together
<i>Asa m oo, idi m mma na m na gi ga ebi</i>	My pretty lady you are good to me me and you will live together

The song is a parody of men's romantic expressions to their beloved women. Such song provides light moments during the ritual and is also a celebration of being associated with beauty. The man is parodied as implying that prettiness yields life. As observed during the ritual of the man, the song elicited excitement among the participants and this is the time when the singers are showered with money the most.

The co-wives, seen as an institution is thus as very important category of actors in the rituals, but more so, the institution seems to be a suitable answer to Irigaray's feminist call for unity among women. Reacting to Freudian Oedipal perspective, she identifies and advocates unity of women using the metonymy of mother and daughter relationship. This thought seems to have close semblance with this institution and also that of the *umuada*. To the women this unity is seen as a strategy of confronting male subjectivity and subverting male dominance. The members see themselves as comrades, for instance in the song *Oyi m oma* (My good friend):

<i>Onye n'eme kaa m si eme</i>	Who behaves like me
<i>Onye n'eme kaa m si eme oo</i>	Who behaves like me oo
<i>Onye n'eme kaa m si eme oo</i>	Who behaves like me oo
<i>Ya ka m na-akpo oyi m oo</i>	He is the one I call my friend oo
<i>Oyi mu oma</i>	My good friend
<i>Obuliwo m elu</i>	He has lifted me up
<i>Aya aya oo</i>	Aya aya oo
<i>Obuliwo m elu</i>	He has lifted me up
<i>Aya aya oo</i>	Aya aya

The singer engages in a carnival strategy of celebrating friendships from her fellow women. This is requisite because of the roles they play of accompanying a member during times of crisis like bereavement. The co-wives are revered to perform the above special roles because of the aspects of womanhood.

The aspects of motherhood and indeterminacy further apply in the category of the co-wives; however, knowledge is the aspect which empowers the co-wives most. Foucault identifies a kind of power he calls “epistemic sovereignty” in which he says is vested in an individual by virtue of knowing more than the others (Joseph Rouse, 9, 13). Knowledge is thus equivalent to power and reverence is accorded to the individuals who know than the others who do not. The fact that the women are the custodians of crucial ideas and skills for the execution of the ritual implies that they are vested with a more powerful position than men are in the community. A skilled person is, for instance, more superior than the unskilled.

The women in the rituals appear to own the skills of preparing and interring the body, and the skills of running a funeral. Men appear as helpers while the processes are executed using the knowledge of the women. Thus women among the Umulumbe emerge as the experts of the protocols of such profound events. Considering the intricacy and dreariness of such events, women thus appear as having been subtly vested with the power to offer practical solutions during hard times.

Power is also vested on women by virtue of being the ones who hold better knowledge on parenting. This is evident in the ritual of *omugwo* when a child has just been born as observed by Omukwa (a Respondent). This seems to imply that men do not possess the necessary skills and ideas of parenting as women do. This may explain why men do not participate in the process although they are parents as well. Furthermore, the creativity exhibited by women in the performance of the song similarly suggests they are revered. As explained earlier in the role of the co-wives, the discourses in the song are carefully crafted by the women. This means that women are the ones who know what to be uttered and what not to be uttered in the funeral. It means, unlike men, they are trusted to make the most suitable discourses during the event.

The special role of the local co-wives inspecting the dead to ensure that there was no murder or witchcraft implies that the women possess rare skills which men hardly possess; they can distinguish between the natural and the evil. Thus everyone guards against committing murder or witchcraft knowing that in the event of such an act the women are able to expose it. Similarly, women are seen as possessing the knowledge to intercede on behalf of the people. They appear as knowing best how to win mercy; having the strategies of drawing sympathy from gods and spirits to change course for the people. This is evident in the mercy-begging tone in some of the songs they perform during the rituals for instance the song *Jesus bu chi ji nma* (Jesus the lord). The effect of the song among the participants is a satisfaction that the prayers have been accepted in heaven by virtue of a suitably crafted tone and choice of words.

## **2. Conclusion**

In this essay, I have described and explicated the role of women in the funeral ritual of the Umulumbe, and to assess the implications of the role to power relations between the two genders. I have also illustrated how women play the most significant role in the ritual seemingly outdoing men in the process and that it appears that men participate as mere “helpers” while the main actors are women. Owing to the profound nature of the ritual among the people, I have used the ritual as a valuable mirror of the society, which cherishes and practices the ritual, to explicate the nature and functionality of the apparent supremacy of women in Umulumbe. I have, thus, reflected on the observed roles and sought to illuminate the possible connections of specialty of roles and power. It has emerged that women seem to possess special attributes (which I have called assets) which are usually associated with power. These assets seem to be highly felt among the Umulumbe much more than other African societies, and thus it has emerged that women in this society wield more supremacy than men.

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