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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8w36f2wp>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 22(3)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Teboh, Bridget

Publication Date

1994

DOI

10.5070/F7223016709

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WEST AFRICAN WOMEN: SOME CONSIDERATIONS

Bridget Teboh

INTRODUCTION

The kind of questions that a paper on female agency should ask about West African women must certainly be new questions: ones that aim to elicit what women have done and are still doing as active agents of resistance and change in the complexity of African (past and contemporary) affairs. Chandra Mohanty takes Western feminists to task for having asked the wrong questions, thereby producing "third world women" as a singular monolithic subject, "oppressed by a singular, universal patriarchy". This paper intends to dismantle the "singular monolithic subject," by using the example of West African Women's agency to demonstrate the constitutive complexities which characterize the lives of women in African countries.

The concepts of agency and subjectivity are particularly useful tools for elucidating the cultural and historical specificity of African Women's experience. In this paper, agency is understood to comprise both action and representation. This definition requires the investigation of both the strategies and the subject position of West African Women as agents, in the past and in contemporary Africa. It is argued that Women's agency resides in their communal endeavors and is constantly re-invented in the context of political and social change.

TENDENCIES

What is thought about West African women today? A great deal of literature has been published about African Women. Some compelling popular imagery goes so far as to reduce her to the anguished, helpless mother holding a famished child. In the last 20 years, a group of anthropologists and historians both African and Western have worked in the face of this stereotype to explore and explain the subtleties of West African women's actions and positions in African societies. These scholars have contributed valuable ideas, for instance, about women's central economic role, about the complex interlocking rights and responsibilities regarding the use of resources, and about women's political power (which they enjoyed in the pre-colonial era). Their subsequent declining position through much of sub-Saharan Africa has been well documented in these studies.

One of the achievements of this literature has been the challenge of Western concepts of the individual. The notion of "rational individualism" is problematic for an understanding of female agency in the African context. The concept of male and female is grounded in a profoundly different relationship of the self to the social group. In the African context a sense of privacy and a strong individualism are absent, but this does not mean a lack of self-esteem, or lack of awareness of one's effectivity. Most women live communally (even the urban elite family usually includes extended kin). With a division of labor that places much of the production of food and all child care and cooking in the female domain, it is unlikely that a woman will feel helpless or that she will perceive a need to *find herself* as an individual.

It is important to note that in this context *rights* do not mean the right of an individual to exercise personal liberty, but the inalienable right of each individual to contribute autonomously and authoritatively to the collective good. In this light can be understood myriad and sophisticated ways in which West African women cope daily with their problems. The view that African women are passive and helpless is very misleading and wrong. It is not an easy task to attempt a reconstruction of the African woman, given the existing literature which generally is void of any of her redeeming features. I intend to use for the purposes of this paper the Igbo Women's War, the institution of marriage, innovations in the institution of marriage that came with colonial rule and Christian missions, the status of women in the society and the changes and responsibilities emanating thereof, to argue that African women were not necessarily passive and helpless.

THE IGBO WOMEN'S WAR: 1929

A case in time is the Igbo Women's War of 1929. Women in West Africa evolved and grew out of a context of agriculturally based activities in a patrilineal and polygamous society, typical, in many ways, of African agricultural societies in general. Their communally organized political economy and their gender relations based on bridewealth were deep seated and thriving until, the colonialists came to turn things upside down.

In T. Echewa Obinkaram's novel, *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire*,¹ the author gives us an insight into the background of the Women's War. This novel illustrates how value systems are indigenous and unique in Igboland. Childbirth, the importance of a male child, and social values, all come to light. We learn about the special language used by older women in the community, which, to some people, might be considered raw language -- but is actually the way women talk

among themselves. There is great evidence of the freedom of mind and attitude which speaks of the personality and strength of women in this region.

In Igboland the duality of political and social power wielded by women was evident in two fields:

1) Women in Igboland (and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa) are very important. After marriage, they are affiliated with their husband's patrilineage through bridewealth which legitimized the marriage, secured women's use-rights in lineage land, and established lineage membership for their offspring. The woman becomes responsible to her husband's family, she raises the children, feeds the family, takes care of her husband. These are the very "constraints" and "obligations" of the bridewealth gender system -- to bear children for the husband's lineage, to produce food and offer hospitality, to act as the linchpin in a wide network of affinal kin relations -- provide women the opportunity to exercise political power and authority to make decisions.

2) Women also retained membership in their natal lineage and were expected to participate with their brothers in lineage decisions. Thus, in their hometown, women played significant roles especially to promote peace, to settle polygamous quarrels, and to perform special roles in funeral rites, as they undertook special ceremonies and made special sacrifices.²

The society was well-organized and governed by general rules of what a person should do or should not do (the do's and don'ts). The *umuada* which was a women's group, was responsible for judging and passing judgement on cases. For example, abominations, *alo*, committed by men were sanctioned by punishment of women "sitting on men." These abominations included acts such as, but not limited to the following: hitting a woman on the breast; hitting a woman under menstruation; hitting a nursing mother/woman. Such rules and interdictions were accepted and respected in Igboland, with women playing a significant role socially, politically and economically, until the British arrived.

The Igbo Women's War started in Uloko because women refused the idea of being counted and taxed (like the men had been since 1926). Even though they made more money through the sale of agricultural and textile products, women protected their rights. They refused taxation because it was a colonial idea and because colonial masters, with their victorian ideas promoting the invisibility of women, neglected and undermined women. Women were astute business partners who managed their land and businesses with great negotiating skills and talents. Yet, with the arrival of the colonialists, women lost the political and social power they once wielded. The British came

with a new system of government in Igboland, and instituted a policy of indirect rule.³ However, with indirect rule, Igboland was governed through district officers and "warrant" chiefs, chosen by British Officials regardless of whether or not they had traditional power to govern in the society.⁴ Power thus shifted from the hands of traditional leaders and women to warrant chiefs. Needless to say, these officials and chiefs undermined women's authority. Consequently, *umuada* no longer judged cases because District Officers and chiefs handled them instead, and very often came to inappropriate decisions, due to lack of understanding of the cultural background of the society.⁵ Thus, the British rule did not only change the basis of tradition, but also helped to tolerate abominations and strong male domination.⁶

With the above in mind, the Igbo Women's War against censorship and taxation can be seen as a most prominent act of resistance to colonialism. The resentment of colonial rule erupted into violence the day pregnant Akpa-Ego Nwanyerewa was attacked by Sam-el "the counter" in her compound as she was pounding kernel to produce palm oil.⁷ She refused to give her name, number of children, number of goats, chickens, etc. that she had and in an argument that followed, she got tangled up and was knocked down by Sam-el. Full of self-importance, high officialism, and delusions of grandeur, Sam-el traced the line of authority from himself to the King of England. It is interesting to note the use of King instead of Queen who was the rightful ruler in England. Because of this authority bestowed on him, Sam-el thought he could neglect the traditions and customs of his people by knocking down a pregnant widow. This was clearly a major abomination and women mobilized to protect their rights.

To them, this was a war, and they took it seriously. Messages about the war went to big daily markets and spread to surrounding towns. Women were not afraid of Munchi soldiers from Ugwu Awusa, bearing scars as if scratched by bush cats. As the grandmother in Obinkaram's novel, Nne Nne said, "... rather than shame one of us, kill all of us."⁸ Here, we get the notion of unity as strength and power. The solidarity of women is clear as they realized that they had no choice but to fight. A group of powerful women known as *ndom* (the women's solidarity) hatched plans, prepared acts and counter acts as the war raged on for months. They displayed real war skills and tactics, as they managed war activities in different places.

In Achara Imo near Ahiaba, *ndom* dug hidden pits in the roads as they awaited soldiers. In Mboko and Umu Oba, they cut message wires along train tracks. At Mbawsi and Ogwe, they set fire to the post offices. *Nwa D.C.*, or district commissioner, attempted to buy

peace with *Ndom* by handing over to all chieftancy caps of yellow, who were the cause of the trouble. *Ndom* took the caps but continued fighting. The white man thought he could buy peace by putting chief Njoku Alaribe of Ikputu Ala in prison but *Ndom* set the prison on fire, freed prisoners and "sat on" the head warder and captured chief Njoku. The whiteman took Ugbala hostage and *Ndom* took the white woman hostage (Elizabeth Ashby Jones, a British woman who was doing research in Igboland at the time). Nne Nne illustrates the issue well when she says:

Ndom ! Another name for a woman is pagha...one
by one men marry us, impregnate us and husband
us. But together as *oha Ndom*, we are fiercer than
the first windstorm of the rainy season. Fiercer than
the Imo River in Flood !⁹

She condemns men's cowardice, their weakness and heartlessness. She uses metaphors like "soldier ants," and "empty large snail shells," to depict men as beings without purpose because their formation is scattered during a war. The imagery of a "snoring man" with a burgler around is very vivid. The whiteman's laws and soldiers exposed the impotency of Igbomen who, became downcast, dispirited, sullen and melancholic. It was the custom in Igboland for the men to provide a cow for the women, during the annual Obasi Market Feast. Men, due to heavy taxation, could no longer provide a cow. *Ndom* went to war to avenge the men, and to rekindle their lost courage. *Ndom* also went to war because they felt united in a way that men could not be. This is obvious, given that before the Women's War men had not tried as a united front to resist the colonialists and to fight for their rights.

All that any woman needed to know to join was that women were at war with the government. During the war, they addressed each other as *Nwanyi Ibem*, meaning "my fellow woman," because a woman knows what every other woman knows and she is led by her own intimate knowledge of "their common grief and sense of justice." To *Ndom* this was simply and totally a war, "as inevitable and compelling as a hiccup or belch or urge to vomit."¹⁰ Every woman became a warrior and every town or village in Calabar and Owerri Provinces became a battleground, everything associated with the government became a target. To the British, the Women's War was "an insane, irrational, mass hysteria, a sudden overflow of premenstrual or post partum hormones, a spontaneous combustion!"¹¹ It could be argued that, this is the reason why the British adopted the name "Aba Riots" instead of the Igbo Women's War. Judith Van Allen takes up this issue in her article on the Women's War, and she

maintains that the use of "Aba riots" by the British is a symbol of the undermining and invisibility of women, as evidenced in British society.¹²

IMPACT OF THE WOMEN'S WAR AND OUTCOME

The impact of the Women's War resulted in the following:

- 1) The reform of colonial policy in Eastern Nigeria, as the British realized that they had not taken into consideration the traditional aspects of Igboland;
- 2) Control of the Warrant chiefs' authority after the war, and chiefs were no longer permanent but rotated in courts;
- 3) Women won the tax war, and as such, they were not taxed;
- 4) Women did not succeed in stopping colonialism since it was a stronger force than they could handle;
- 5) Interpreters and court clerks became afraid of public reaction;
- 6) Court messengers realized they were not superior to everyone else in the society;
- 7) The War modulated the behaviour of Nigerians employed by the colonialists, as well as those of British officials and their reform policies;
- 8) Some scholars also believe it forced colonial powers to employ anthropologists to study Igboland and other colonized societies.¹³

Africa had become a part of the world economy unknowingly. Thus, when the world depression set in and caused a reduction in the prices of local produce, such as palm oil, at the same time prices of imported goods increased. This was devastating to the people of Africa. The Women's War corresponded with the end of the depression and women took credit for the increase in prices of local produce. Given the far-reaching impact of the Igbo Women's War, I would say it is grossly unjust for anyone to call these women passive or helpless.

THE INSTITUTION OF MARRIAGE

Another domain that can help us understand the African woman is that of the institution of marriage. An understanding of this institution in the African context is very important, especially given

that the objects and aims of marriage differ in Western and African contexts.

In European communities, it was in the upper classes that marriages were arranged. For instance, in Jane Austin's novels, tea-parties were used as a forum for young people to meet and date. That was accepted as normal since it involved "Westerners". It is rather unfortunate that when arranged marriages take place in Africa, it is interpreted negatively to imply that women do not have rights, and are forced into loveless unions. In West Africa, young people meet and *catch each other's eye* (a Moghamo expression from Cameroon meaning something similar to 'love at first sight') in churches, at market places, annual dances, birth ceremonies, Christmastime, festivals, etc. In Africa, relatives are also employed to search for a suitable partner. A young man cannot just go out and find a girl and come to announce to the family that he has chosen a "wife to be." This is because of the strong family ties that exist throughout the region, and the respect for elders and their knowledge. The family has to approve the "chosen one," or help him in the selection process by investigating the girl and her family, just as the girl's family investigates her suitor's. Questions such as whether or not people in that family die young (between ages 20-30 years) are often asked. If the answer is yes, then the likelihood of a deadly transmittable disease is considered. Are family members of good character or are they criminals? If criminals are present, then the chances of a possible marriage are slim. This selection helps to avoid diseases and deformity in children and it is also a way of exercising control in African marriages and dating styles. It is a method by which the society regulates itself since there are no written laws to this effect. These practices have become ingrained in the people and the society.

In Africa, the main goal of any marriage is to have children who will inherit the compound and continue the family name.¹⁴ In West African culture, the husband and wife form a partnership where the woman has more possessions than the man. Emphasis is on the children, especially male children because the society is mostly a patrilineal society. When a union of marriage is blessed with children, then it has a basis for survival, since the man has no reason to divorce. Love comes after the marriage and grows with the union. As in the traditional setting, there's no room to "know" each other before marriage. The one thing a person knows is that he/she likes the other person's character, their way of doing things, and his/her personality.

The Western argument that *love* is absent in arranged marriages in Africa does not hold because our mothers and grandmothers went into marriage the same way. Evidence shows that, in those days with arranged marriages, there were hardly any divorce cases. However, in

the union of marriage, if one has only girls, one is antagonized and made to feel uncomfortable. This is partly because exogamous marriages provide room for daughters to leave home to go marry elsewhere. As a result, if there is no male child, the family name might disappear.

STATUS OF WOMEN: CHANGE FROM GIRLHOOD TO WOMANHOOD OR TO MOTHERHOOD

A young girl (maiden) in most of the southern coastal states of Africa, from Guinea through South-East Nigeria to Cameroon, is classified as a youth. This classification ends when she gets married and becomes a woman or wife, and further improves when she becomes a mother.¹⁵ The transitions from maiden to woman to motherhood include large ceremonies with specific rites of passage as the girl is initiated and learns lessons on becoming a woman, a wife and a mother, with corresponding duties, obligations, responsibilities, benefits, and privileges. In Batibo, Momo Division, in the Northwest Province of Cameroon, the distinction is between *Mwayi* (girl), *Ayi* (woman) and *Iboht* (mother). In Igbo the distinction is from *Mwabo* (girl) to *Mwunye* (woman) to *Nne* (mother).

Nne is the title given to a woman who has given birth, and this status gives her honor in the society. This is when she establishes her own *chi* to be her protector because she has given birth and is starting her own family. The *chi* is always placed in one corner of the house where the woman lives and she offers it ritual sacrifices. The transition from youth to mother is a mark of achievement for the African woman, and a social accomplishment that also includes special duties. This is the position every African female wishes to reach, and this is where barrenness and infertility become a stigma, given that women's age grade structures are based on the childbearing cycle.

An important change in the status of women comes with age responsibility and respect at menopause. Some women acquire the status of men in different cultures in West Africa, for instance, in Cameroon's Batibo district, the virginity cult was very important in the past. A girl who carried her virginity into marriage brought honor and pride to her family, and such a girl at menopause earns the status of man and can sit in the Council of Men. Another method of acquiring status of men is through the domestic integrity especially in polygamous homes where the Headwife who is the leader of the entire family and the closest friend to the husband is bestowed with a lot of responsibilities. When such a Headwife carries out these functions respectfully and diligently her husband can help her to acquire the status of a man. In Igboland she is called *Nno-Nno* and in Batibo she

is called *Ma'a-Kenn* (meaning "Big Mother"). The last method of acquiring the status of a man comes with economic achievement. A woman who has distinguished herself and acquired economic power and is industrious at menopause earns the status of a man.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF A MARRIED WOMAN

When women get married in West Africa they acquire various responsibilities. These responsibilities follow the pattern of the status of the women in the community. Married women, for instance, participate in rituals of the planting festival by touching the ritual rope which is symbolic of blessings. Married women offer special sacrifices, and participate in village affairs. Married women prepare seeds to be planted and through their fertility the seeds are expected to be fertile and grow to produce healthy fruit.

The mother acquires increased responsibilities because she has to raise her own children. She acquires an agnatic relationship with the clan into which she is married. She respects their totem and participates in all their ceremonies and festivals. She learns about their history until she becomes the keeper of their traditions, since she has to pass these on to the children when educating them.

The reception that a wife gets from her place of marriage (in-law family) is very significant and affects her status in the society. Is she well received by her husband and in-laws? If she becomes a daughter to her mother-in-law, then she is in for a smooth and happy marriage.

She also has communal responsibilities. She becomes part of the association of wives of that community, by belonging to such groups as the Christian Women's Fellowship in the village, and self-help work groups, by which each woman's farm is cultivated in turn. She becomes a choir member in the village church (if she can sing). It is also important that she take responsibility of cooking for neighbours and friends when the need arises. She participates in and promotes women's mutual help during childbirth and sickness. In these groups, women express their views and capabilities without being bothered by men. These are independent areas where women are not linked to their husbands. All of these things come when a woman matures through childbirth and acquires indepth knowledge in the villages.

It is amazing that there is a large amount of literature which lessens women and their status in Africa. Justice has not yet been done regarding the dual responsibilities of the African woman. Not only is she bestowed with responsibilities as a wife and mother, but she is also her father's grown-up daughter with special duties. She becomes, once married, automatically responsible for her own relatives, brothers, cousins, aunts, uncles etc. This usually takes the

form of favors. For example, after childbirth the woman asks her family to look for someone to help care for the baby, usually within the family. This constitutes our "traditional support system." Sometimes an elder sister may have more children than she can care for, so the young wife, takes one or two of the children to stay with her and they become her responsibility. Thus, she takes care of school fees, clothes, and training in trade. This is something of an honor which has advantages since it leads to the apprenticeship system which works well among immediate family.

The women's responsibilities do not end there. She also has extended responsibilities, including those of the husband's age group. For instance, on meeting days, the wife prepares food for her husband and his age group. Thus, her responsibilities are not limited to the husband alone, but to the man's age group. These multiple responsibilities confirm her as an accepted and good wife. They do not make her a slave or a "beast of burden" as some authors claim.¹⁶ These responsibilities give her higher status in the community and add to her sense of fulfilment.

John H. Harris, in his book, *Dawn in Darkest Africa*, makes mention of the fact that women in Africa are industrious and very hard working.¹⁷ They are early risers, who go to the farms where they are constantly either cultivating, planting, weeding or harvesting crops. He indicates that the life of West African Women is difficult because they struggle from childhood to womanhood. His views, like those of his Western contemporaries, are Eurocentric, leading him to perceive what he sees in a negative light. This leads him to incorrect interpretations of what is otherwise an organized group of hard-working women, who deserve praise. An interesting aspect of Harris' work, is the mention of the foods that prevail in West and Central Africa.¹⁸ These are manioca, palm oil *chop*, mbanga soup with beef, caterpillar or buffalo leg, corn flour and cassava leaves and greens. These are cooked in various forms and styles, and constitute the four main staple foods.

An important contribution too, comes from knowledge systems in West Africa. Women acquire this knowledge when they get married. They learn about food taboos (no eggs and caterpillars in Eastern Nigeria and West Cameroon) and about cicatrization. Cosmotology (body marking and decoration) is also one of the important things about which a married woman learns. She learns from the elders what roots and leaves, *uri-Hausa* (Eastern Nigeria) or *burg* (Momo Division, West Cameroon), to collect, and how to mix and prepare them. She also learns and acquires medical knowledge employed in child rearing as a form of first-aid. This knowledge includes which leaves to boil and give children for diarrhea,

constipation, fever, etc., the most common of these leaves is the lemon grass called "fever grass" in West Cameroon or *achere* tea in Igbo. She learns about oils to rub on the skin of the child to make it smooth, and about herbs to use against rashes. In those areas where clinics and health centers are absent, these above mentioned methods are still used today.

Another argument from Harris' report deals with the culinary aspects of a married woman's life.¹⁹ What does she cook? A married woman picks up cooking experience with maturity as a mother and owner of a kitchen. She has to perfect what she has learnt through years of observing her own mother.

INNOVATIONS IN THE INSTITUTION OF MARRIAGE

Colonial rule did not change the institution but merely introduced the registration of marriage. An attack on polygamy resulted from Christianity, in the form of the Protestant and Catholic missions. As a rule, colonial administrations did not legislate on marriage. The impact on marriage, therefore, came from Christian mission authorities, in the guise of promoting monogamy over polygamy. The difficulty that missions faced was that the society was not predominantly polygamous (as some would like to think), since polygamy was a matter of the few who could afford two or more wives. Christian missions associated polygamy with insatiable lust and thus the desire for many wives. Yet, only the rich could afford it, especially given the payments involved such as bridewealth, which christians also opposed vehemently. This attack resulted from the ignorance of missionaries who knew little about bride price and its role in society. Today, most authors and "outsiders" still condemn bridewealth, but as I stated before, it is out of ignorance and lack of understanding of the West African culture. No West African Woman, educated or not, would want to be married without bridewealth, which is a token and a symbol of love. The amount of bridewealth is inconsequential. What matters is its symbolic significance. Generally, the expenditure of the bride's family surpasses the amount of the bridewealth. Most often this bridewealth is requested as a "test-charge" to enable the groom to show that he is capable of raising a new family. This is a good thing for the young couple, and for the woman in particular. Most of the bridewealth goes back as dowry, which is what the girl takes with her into marriage (pots, spoons, all kitchen utensils, bedroom materials, etc.). This is due to the fact that marriage is a give-and-take institution. Besides, bridewealth is the basis for the founding of a new family, represented by the young couple.

Another attack by missionaries was on childrearing. They wanted to create a nuclear family structure for new converts, which meant taking them away from what was standard in their society. They also attacked child spacing of two years or more, as being too far apart. Missionaries feared this would lead to immorality, because of their Western understanding of the word. They wished for one-year spacing, which created problems for couples who had elder children taking care of younger ones. Missionaries also wanted converts to be part and parcel of the missionary church. They insisted on converts' wives staying at home and not working outside in the farms or markets. That is why the first jobs these wives could have were in education and health, and thus most of them became teachers and nurses.

CONCLUSION

Having looked at women's agency, which is understood in this paper to comprise both action and representation, it is no surprise that Chandra Mohanty takes to task Western feminists for having asked the wrong questions about African women. From the above discourse it is evident that through women's communal endeavors and daily tasks, they were active agents constantly reinvented in the context of political and social change. The strategies women in West Africa use to circumvent colonial and neo-colonial distortions of their inherent capabilities are evident in the examples that I have provided. This paper has therefore attempted to shed more light on West African Women. I understand that the paper has not fully exhausted current issues of gender nor has it provided all answers. Yet I would like to look at this work as a contribution to an important debate on the subject of West African women which is contrary to the passive and helpless image that we have come to know from existing literature.

It is important to discuss how to deal with the problem of interpreting the African Woman. It is high time we Africans wake up and do research on issues concerning us. We owe it to ourselves and to future generations to write this research down for future use. It is important not to take results from research findings carried out by "outsiders" as the gospel truth. These authors lack real understanding of the West African Woman. We need to pay more attention to details of specific cultural areas, considering the diversity of groups and cultures in the Continent. Generalizations must be avoided because they constitute a major pitfall. Most important, we need to maintain an Afrocentric perspective in our analysis, and to avoid comparisons with Western culture and Europe. There is an urgent need to see the West African woman the way she is, and we have to report our findings no matter how offensive these may be to the West.

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- 3 A great deal of literature exists on the policy of indirect rule. However, for the purposes of this paper it is not necessary to explore the literature in this context.
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- 13 See J.F.A. Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841-1891* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965). See also, Elizabeth Isichei, *History of the Igbo People* (London: Macmillan, 1976).
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- 17 John Harris, *Dawn In Darkest Africa* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1912), pp. 52-73.
- 18 *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 68.