Uwa Umu-Nwanyi:

The World of Women, The World of Women's Children

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Welcome to the second issue of volume 3 of the *Journal of West African History*—a special issue on "Women and Gender in West Africa." During a recent tribute in honor of Claire Robertson, organized by Hilary Jones and me at the African Studies Association Meeting, I spoke of the need to acknowledge, and give thanks, to the exceptional female scholars who came before us. Female scholars, who under challenging situations, endured, thus paving the way for us, and most important, giving us permission to tell African women's and gender stories on our own terms and in new and exciting ways. In my mother tongue, Igbo, the phrase, *uwa umu-nwanyi*, can be interpreted as a play on words. In the most apparent sense, it means "the world of women," but it could mean, "the world of women's children." I draw attention to these two distinct meanings because this special issue on "Women and Gender in West Africa" not only celebrates "the world of women," it places women at the center of human existence (i.e., the figurative, "world of women's children") and reality; in effect, celebrating humanity as a whole.

In particular, JWAH 3.2 commemorates the work and worlds of West African, West African descended women, and two important West Africanist scholars, Judith Van Allen (now working mainly in Southern Africa), and Ifi Amadiume, who helped shape the field of African women's and gender history. These incredible female scholars changed the dialogue; their work revolutionized the way we think about African women and gender in general, and Igbo women and gender in particular. Thus, I look to Igboland, the world of my mother and foremothers (by extension, "the world of women"), and say, two important and powerful words, *dalu nu*, to express my heartfelt thanks to these exceptional scholars.

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The issue commences with a fascinating article about Liberia's renowned female Kpelle chief. Aptly entitled, "In Search of the Historical Madam Suakoko: Liberia's Renowned Female Kpelle Chief," Timothy Nevin presents the life and times, or the *uwa nwanyi* (i.e., the world of a woman), a fascinating and powerful leader and *zoe* (medicine person, priestess, and judge), Madam Nye-Suah Coco (a.k.a., Madam Suakoko). Nevin tells us that the name Suakoko means "accomplished or respected mother"; and this accomplished mother challenged and broke with gender norms and barriers in the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century. She would become a member of the Kpelle women's secret society called *sande*, and would catch the imaginations of indigenous people and foreign visitors to Kpelleland alike.

By marrying existing scant and scattered information on Suakoko with archival, oral history, and still and moving photographic evidence, a creative and distinctive methodology emerges in which Nevin is able to document in a "coherent and meaningfully way" the *uwa,* or world of the powerful Madam Suakoko, a woman who made a mark handling high diplomacy. He accomplishes this task by asking the important and perceptive questions: Who was Madam Suakoko? What was the source of her power and influence, and what kind of legacy did she leave behind?

In his article, Nevin presents the life history of Madam Suakoko, who witnessed the incorporation of her territory and surrounding regions into the Lone Star Republic. Along the way, Nevin argues that the *sande*, in collaboration with the men's *poro* society, formed the basis for a pan-ethnic governance that operated before and after the incorporation of Kpelleland into the Liberian state.

Furthermore, Niven positions Suakoko as a national (s)hero who did not convert to Christianity but remained faithful to the religion of her the *umu nwanyi* (foremothers before her). An abolitionist of sorts, Suakoko purchased slaves only to free them. Some refused to leave her compound, though. Like several warrant chiefs and female kings and queens of her time, Suakoko saw to the collection of hut taxes. In this way, she could be considered a collaborator. In fact, she would become the only female to be commissioned by the national government of Liberia as a chief of Liberia. The author suggests that with the inauguration of Liberia's and Africa's first female president in 2006, there has been much renewed interest in Madam Suakoko's life.

The narrative that Nevin presents is not simply a story about a "great woman," it is an institutional history of a woman leader who now represents the empowerment of *umu nwanyi* (rural women), while signaling and championing the need for female education in the educational fund named after her.

The next article, "Queer Crossings: Kinship, Gender, and Sexuality in Igboland and Carriacou," emerges out of a reconsideration of an interview that the author

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M. G. Smith had with informants on the island of Carriacou, the conclusions of which, the current author, Andrew Apter, initially found to be "highly unlikely." Apter's quibble at the time had to do with the assertion that the Carriacou lesbian institutions of *madivine* and *zami* had their origins among the West African Igbo, because, as reported by Smith, "they were favored by women of the 'Ibo nation' in Carriacou." Apter found this conclusion problematic; indeed, it was a simplistic attribution of African connections to a diaspora phenomenon. Skepticism would, however, give way to reevaluation and reconsideration after the author saw a claim by Donald Hill attributed to Winston Fleary, and later, read Ifi Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands,* and Nwando Achebe's *Farmers, Traders, Warriors, and Kings: Female Power and Authority in Northern Igboland, 1900–1960.* Apter became convinced that a case for Igbo origins of Carriacou quasi-institutionalized lesbianism could in fact be made by separating gender from sexuality. Thus, his thesis in this captivating article advances out of a (re) evaluation and (re)consideration of Smith, Amadiume, and Achebe. In general, Apter's piece wrestles with the question of how scholars of queer Afro-Atlantic sexualities—"queer crossings"—can situate their studies within *uwa umu nwanyi* (African cultural and historical pathways). Thus, in "Queer Crossings" Apter proposes one "expository pathway" through which West African gender formations and their influence on gender and sexuality in the Americas can be considered.

That an Igbo form of woman-to-woman marriage became sexualized as the lesbian roles of *madivine* and *zami* in Carriacou, Apter argues, shows how flexible West African gender ideologies shaped queer sexualities under radically different historical conditions in the Americas, and he further suggests that these queer crossings also have implications for spirit possession and Afro-Caribbean religions more broadly.

He also visualizes prostitution and lesbianism in the Americas as transformative and undermining of patriarchal authority. In fact, he argues that the empowerment of women in Carriacou as household heads—a distinct male appropriation—and prostitutes transformed them socially and structurally into "men," a reality akin to the female husband phenomenon in West Africa.

Apter provides evidence from Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* and Achebe's *Farmers, Traders, Warriors, and Kings* of female husbands acquiring wealth and then threatening—and, in some cases, "appropriating"—the patrilines of the men they married, thereby subverting gendered expectations in these processes. He concedes that although female–female sexuality was never institutionalized in Igboland, he points to the separation of sex and gender as it is discussed in Amadiume's representation of Nwambata Aku, whose last name literally means "wealth," and Ifeyinwa Olinke, and Achebe's discussion of the *igo mma ogo* phenomenon, Bridget Echena, Mary Odo, and Ahebi Ugbabe's penchant for stealing

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wives for herself and her pushing up against the boundaries of gender fluidity through participation in the *mmanwu* ritual, as a framework or "generative cultural matrix" for the making of female–female sexual relations in Carriacou.

The last full-length article in this special issue is by Jacqueline-Bethel Mougoue. Centering the advice columns of two female West Cameroonian civil servants turned journalists, Ruff Wanzie and Clara Manga, "Intellectual Housewives, Journalism, and Anglophone Nationalism in Cameroon, 1961–1972," extends the argument that West Cameroonian female journalists crafted and preserved a layered Anglophone cultural and political identity in a predominantly French-speaking world by writing the private sphere (family life, romance, marriage) of *uwa umu nwanyi* (women's worlds), including their food cultures, into the public permanent domain of newspaper columns.

For the columnists, *uwa umu nwanyi* was central to the creation of Anglophone Cameroonian political and cultural identity. Therefore, they ingeniously sought to regulate Cameroonian women's behavior in order to influence that identity-making process. For Mougoue, these advice columns directly shaped political processes by intentionally pushing the Anglophone agenda. They were gendered, unapologetic, and strategic in their propelling of domesticity as a foil to help frame political identity, and the nation-building project. The genius of these columns was the journalists' ability to subtly promote female political autonomy without coming across as threatening to the patriarchal social and political structure of Anglophone Cameroon.

Wanzie and Manga strove to use their columns to open conversations about—and change—gender roles. Using indigenous food as a symbol of national identity, Manga was especially vocal in her opposition to Western Cameroonian women who attempted to import foreign education as a form of modernity. She was very much about the preservation of cultural norms. Conversely, a good portion of Wanzie's writing was aimed at urging Anglophone Cameroonian women to participate in women's organizations and nationalist political activities. Lifting Gwendoline Burnle, first woman parliamentarian to be elected to the West Cameroon House of Assembly and cofounder of the Council of Women's Institute (CWI), as an example to emulate, she bemoans what she views as the nonparticipatory tenor of most West Cameroonian women in political activities, using the political activities of women "in Western countries" to shame them into participating in nationalist politics. Women, she argued, needed to convince men, in nonthreatening ways, that they too (if not always) were "up to the task of leading the nation," and would "move hand-in-hand with the men to build a successful and well-to-do nation."

The year 2017 marks the thirtieth and forty-fifth anniversary of the publication of the groundbreaking book, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender*

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and Sex in an African Society, and the article, "'Sitting on a Man': Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women," by Ifi Amadiume and Judith Van Allen, respectively. For me, both authors, at different times and in different ways, exposed me to the dignity of my own history, the history of *uwa umu nwanyi.* They allowed me to see myself in history, later giving me the permission to continue to tell the (her)stories of a different group of Igbo women, the Nsukka Igbo, and by so doing, allowing them to see themselves in history. This task of telling the (her)stories of Igbo women is a task that I have continued to engage in—with much joy and appreciation of the women who armed me with their stories—today. Thus, these "Conversations" and "The Teaching Scholar" forums are my small way of saying "thank you" (*dalu so*) to two women that I hold in the highest of esteem, and that I strive, in all of my own scholarship, to live up to their example. They are generous and remarkable mentors and teachers.

To honor these seminal scholars of *uwa umu nwanyi*, I have gathered a selection of voices. The authors are cross-generational. They are diverse, representing both voices from the Global North and the Global South. They are also gendered men and women scholars, at different stages of their careers. Most are West Africanists, but I also include the voices of non-West Africanists, thus, capturing in their contributions the true essence and reach of these two pioneering women scholars and their works.

The Amadiume pieces appear in the forum, "Conversations," and the Van Allen pieces appear in the forum, "The Teaching Scholar." Each contributor has been given a simple charge: to engage with either scholar in short commentaries that commemorate their pioneering work in *uwa umu nwanyi*.

In the "Conversations" forum, we witness leading and rising scholars, including Lisa Lindsay, Leslie Hadfield, Assan Sarr and Marion Mendy, Lorelle Semley, and Abosede George, participate in conversation with the past and present of West African women and gender history; in particular, engaging with how Amadiume's pioneering book, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, influenced and changed the way we think of gender in African Studies scholarship (Lindsay, Sarr and Mendy, Semley, George); questioned the accepted notion that African women were victims of patriarchy (Lindsay, Sarr and Mendy, George); and questioned the relevance of Western feminist writing about African societies, specifically the Nnobi Igbo (Lindsay, George).

At least two contributors to the forum compared Amadiume's theorizing and conclusions to contemporary scholars of gender and gender theory including Joan Wallach Scott (Lindsay, Semley); Judith Butler, R. W. Connell, and Nwando Achebe (Lindsay). Others stressed the importance of Amadiume's interdisciplinary approach to the study of women and gender (George). Still others highlighted how the flexibility of gender ideology (gender as different from biological sex)

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in Nnobi allowed for the existence of *female* husbands and *male* daughters, and the heterosexual institution of woman-to-woman marriage (Lindsay, Sarr and Mendy, Semley), reflecting on how much gender ideologies changed over time to reflect new forms of wealth, education, and religious practices (Semley). In addition, some contributors underscored Amadiume's argument that Christianity and colonial institutions weakened female authority in Igboland (Lindsay, Sarr and Mendy), whereas others highlighted Amadiume's engagement with the debate between Euro-American feminists and African feminists over motherhood (George, Semley). The "Conversations" forum ends with a reflection piece by Ifi Amadiume herself in which she reminisces about the researching and writing of her book, as well as the contexts that propelled her to pen her groundbreaking book.

Lisa A. Lindsay's "Male Daughters, Female Husbands at Thirty" interrogates *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* through the lens of her first encounter with the book in graduate school, soon after its publication, and of rereading the book today. She notes that one of the most salient points that the book makes is its insistence about the distinction between sex and gender. Lindsay interrogates Amadiume's exploration of gender, sexuality, woman-to-woman marriages, and colonialism's impact on these institutions in Igboland, and she compares Amadiume's book to contemporary scholars of gender and gender theory including Joan Wallach Scott, Judith Butler, R. W. Connell, and Nwando Achebe.

In "Understanding African Marriage and Family Relations from South Africa to the United States," Leslie Hadfield explains the importance of *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* not only for understanding West African, but also South African and American history. She highlights how Amadiume's explanation of the Nnobi dual-sex system encouraged deeper understandings of other dual-sex political systems in West Africa, like Akan Queen Mothers, and allowed her to better teach her students about the different roles that precolonial African women assumed in society. She speaks to how Amadiume's work helped clarify conclusions in her own scholarship on nurses in South Africa. In addition, Hadfield reveals how Amadiume's book has had a practical effect in her faith work, as she serves as a cultural translator, framing understanding between African and Utah families with increased discernment of the variance in cultural understandings of universal titles of "father," "mother," "son," and "daughter."

In "The Ambiguity of Gender: Ifi Amadiume and the Writing of Gender History in Igboland," Assan Sarr and Marion Mendy write that Amadiume was a pioneering scholar who highlighted African women's agency in stark contrast to the ubiquitous image, in European literature, of the African woman as an exploited, subjugated, drudge. As a result, they contend that Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* is in fact "arguably one of the most radical scholarly

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interventions . . . in the growing field of women and gender in African studies." Sarr and Mendy then point to Amadiume's attention to the ways in which Christianity and colonial institutions weakened female authority in Igboland as being one of the main contributions of her work.

In "When We Discovered Gender: A Retrospective on Ifi Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society,*" Lorelle Semley compares Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* to Joan Scott's "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," two treatments of gender published in close proximity to one another. She shows that even though Scott and Amadiume drew similar insights, Scott's work was universally hailed and received as revolutionary, overshadowing Amadiume's contributions. She opines that the difference in reception of these two works had everything to do with the fact that Western scholars have generally "othered" Amadiume: "Americanist and Europeanist feminist scholars often cite Amadiume as an example from 'other' societies and cultures."

Abosede George's "A Philosopher with a Plan: Reflections on Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*" celebrates Amadiume's role as theorist, in particular her intervention in complicating our understanding of the category of "woman." She notes, among other issues, the value of Amadiume's methodological and conceptual queries and explanations, making connections between Amadiume's pioneering work and influential works that followed. She writes, "Amadiume moved beyond a concern with how African societies operated to a more critical examination of just how scholars studied or researched African societies." George ends by reflecting on her own engagement with some of Amadiume's key questions in her book, *Making Modern Girls: A History of Girlhood, Labor, and Social Development in Colonial Lagos.*

The "Conversations" forum ends with a reflection piece from the author herself. In her engaging contribution, "Gender Field Experience, Method and Theory," Ifi Amadiume deliberates on the researching and writing of *Male Daughters, Female Husbands.* She demonstrates how her discipline of social anthropology posed a problem for the kind of work that she was interested in doing, given the fact that the discipline had deep associative origins and frameworks within the colonializing enterprise. In this arresting piece, Amadiume reflects on how empirical data came to her during her fieldwork in the form of social interactions (e.g., her daughter attracted much attention and advice on mothering and traditions of motherhood), while also explaining how her insider positionality—as an Igbo woman from Nnobi, a mother with a young child, and a woman who recently lost her own mother—shaped her understanding and interpretation of empirical data about Nnobi culture.

"The Teaching Scholar" forum features articles that throw teaching pedagogies into conversation with scholarship; in this instance, into conversation with

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Van Allen's important article, "Sitting on a Man." The scholars, Judith A. Byfield, Akosua Adomako Ampofo, Ndubueze L. Mbah, Denise Walsh, Emily Lynn Osborn, and Lynda R. Day, attempt to answer the question: how and why "Sitting on a Man" continues to be that seminal text, 45 years after publication, that scholars turn to for use in their classrooms. Like the "Conversations" forum, "The Teaching Scholar" closes with an intervention by the author Judith Van Allen.

In "Becoming Classic: 'Sitting on a Man' at Forty-Five," Judith Byfield, notes that Van Allen's piece, written at the height of liberation movements across the developing world, became a classic because of its ability to speak to a number of distinct audiences and theses—economic history, colonialism, and women's agency. In addition, Van Allen's accessible prose, Byfield argues, makes her article understandable to a wide variety of readers—both undergraduate and graduate. But perhaps more than anything else, Byfield contends, a large part of what made, and still makes, "Sitting on a Man" relevant to pedagogy is the fact that it is "central to a discussion that is still vibrant"—that of the Women's War—a discussion that also extends to broader conversations about colonialism and its effects on female authority in Africa.

In "Sitting on a Man: Forty-Five Years Later," Akosua Adomako Ampofo explores how she uses Van Allen's "Sitting on a Man" in her master's-level class at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, to explore the students' understanding of Nigerian—and specifically Igbo—gender relations and practices. In her contribution, we witness first-hand how Ampofo uses "Sitting on a Man" in dialogue with other journal articles and texts including Amadiume, Zeleza, Achebe, Oyewumi, Miescher, Barnes, and Ampofo, to name but a few. For Ampofo, *ogu umunwaanyi* was, and remains, an important tool in the Ghanaian classroom for ennobling African women's protest inequity—even at a time when Western feminists claimed that Western modernity would liberate African women.

Ndubueze L. Mbah's "Judith Van Allen, 'Sitting on a Man,' and the Foundation of Igbo Women's Studies" argues that one of the most salient contributions of "Sitting on a Man" was that Van Allen made Igbo women's studies a central component of African colonial studies. By so doing, she inspired later scholars of *uwa umu nwanyi* to engage with how "Igbo women pushed beyond the frontiers of traditional political and economic institutions, and forged new avenues of social mobility and power." For Mbah, "Sitting on a Man" is useful for teaching Igbo and West African history from both methodological and historical perspectives. In his introductory African history courses, Mbah uses this accessible article to humanize his students' understanding of British colonialism, while enabling them to confront "entrenched stereotypes of African women, and offers a methodology for recovering women's voices."

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In "Making it Ethical to Study Africa: The Enduring Legacies of 'Sitting on a Man,'" Denise Walsh contends with the ethics of teaching privileged white Americans students, who for the most part are well-intentioned, yet misinformed, or worse still, presumptuous about Africa. Walsh has her "Gender Politics in Africa" students read "Sitting on a Man" early in the course, to illustrate an example of African women's agendas for themselves (as opposed to American humanitarian agendas for Africa), and to help challenge her students' assumptions about African women as victims. For Walsh, one of the most important outcomes of using "Sitting on a Man" as a teaching tool is that Van Allen upsets her students' assumptions that colonialism brought greater freedom to African women, and especially to disabuse them of the notion that Igbo and African women were passive victims. The article forces her students to be attentive to diverse contexts and "constantly question [their] own gender norms and assumptions." Walsh argues that Van Allen's pioneering work is an example of an "ethical study of Africa," in that it rejects colonial assumptions as it extends indigenous ways of seeing and knowing.

Emily Osborn's contribution to "The Teaching Scholar" forum, "'Sitting on a Man' with Judith Van Allen," highlights what the author sees as Van Allen's challenge to the Western feminist belief of the early 1970s that Western feminism was necessary to liberate African women. Van Allen's article, in Osborn's view, served to interrupt received canon, insisting instead that Western feminism did not enjoy a lock hold on humankind or universal applicability. Osborn writes that Van Allen demonstrates that women's history is essential to political history, while at the same time refusing to romanticize precolonial gender relations in Igboland. For Osborn, Van Allen's most important scholarly intervention was that she established, in accessible, clear, and jargon-free writing, African women as important subjects worthy of scholarly study at a time when women's history was written mostly by, for, and about Western women.

In "Judith Van Allen and the Impact of Her Article, '"Sitting on a Man": Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women' in the Classroom," Lynda Day reflects on her student days, a time in which she was influenced positively by Van Allen's "Sitting on a Man." At the time, reading "Sitting on a Man" helped Day question the metanarrative of a universal subordination of women (as was expressed by contemporary Western feminists). For Day, Van Allen's most important contribution to the study of African women's history lies in her deconstruction of the "presumed value" inherent in Western institutions, her conviction that African women had cultural values that did not necessarily correlate with cultural values of Western societies. These hypotheses stayed with her, and she now uses "Sitting on a Man" as a valuable pedagogical tool across multiple disciplines, as well as advancing her own scholarship. In particular, Day has used "Sitting on

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a Man" in both undergraduate (a women's studies seminar on "Black Women in America") and graduate ("Social Change in Africa") seminars at Brooklyn College to "de-center" Western hegemony in epistemology as served up by Van Allen.

Last, but not least, closing this special issue on *uwa umu nwanyi* is Judith Van Allen's powerful and honest engagement with her own writing of "Sitting on a Man." She had become interested in Africa, early in college, and that interest was sparked by the independence of Ghana and Guinea. Van Allen informs us that she wrote her now-seminal piece out of anger—anger "against everything from the Nixon government," to the University of California, Berkeley, Political Science Department, to her so-called "brothers" in the movement, who met women's early requests for "equal participation with ridicule." She wrote the first version of the article as a graduate student at UC-Berkeley after almost dropping out of graduate school. She recalls the advice and influence of two male political scientists: from Sheldon Wolin, she learned to "Be Bolder!" She was also influenced by Wittgenstein's "language games." Van Allen attributes much of her understandings of the Igbo Women's War to her studies in political theory and a course on British language philosophy. She chose to write a piece on Igbo women because she took an African anthropology course in which she read Victor Uchendu's *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria.* Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* piqued her interest in the abuses of colonialism among the same Igbo people. Van Allen associated her own experiences with the riots in the United States, with the so-called Aba Women's "riots," noting the power inherent in the use of the word, "riots" to discredit the opposition. In her work, she wins the "war of words"—rejecting the descriptor, Igbo Women's "riot," for the more appropriate, Igbo women's war (*ogu umunwanyi*).

It is with great pleasure that I now present volume 3, issue 2 of the *Journal of West African History*.

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