
The Road to Italy: Nigerian Sex Workers at Home and Abroad

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I once nearly crashed a hire car on the road from Siena to Florence. I would have pled temporary insanity, caused by the sudden appearance around a corner of a flock of beautiful black African women dressed in bras and hot pants. . . . They were, of course, prostitutes, some of the 1,000¹ young Nigerians² reckoned to be working in Italy, servicing the estimated nine million Italian men who pay for sex. The girls supply what, it must be presumed, the men cannot get at home—anal sex—and the going rate is [pounds sterling] 150, good money.³

With these unsettling words, Andrew Billen of the *New Statesman* weaves a tapestry of images that throw light on a new and disturbing trend in the Nigerian commercial sex industry—the omnipresent overseas or international sex worker who, in her eternal state of undress, leaves very little to the imagination. It is this same breed of sex worker that affords her European client services, the likes of which could hardly have been imagined, let alone spoken, a decade or two ago in Nigeria. She is a new-age prostitute who elevates “[her] customer [to] ‘king.’”⁴ So who is this woman and why does she do what she does? The key to understanding who and why, I argue, can be found deeply buried in the past, but it is also firmly rooted in the present as well. She is an emblem of traditional notions of sex and sexuality as well as an inherently corrupt and collapsing nation. Her story begins not in the streets of Siena or Florence, but in rural and urban Nigeria,⁵ canvassing all of the “junction towns”⁶ in between.

In an attempt to navigate the contours of this uniquely Nigerian institution of commercial sex work, I provide two short case studies—various in ethnicity (the Igbo and Edo), locality (rural Nigeria and international prostitution), and in the very way the practitioners define and construct their work. The story that emerges, I argue, situates the Nigerian sex worker variously as independent and autonomous; interdependent and, at times, completely dependent on her new age madam (boss, if male), “mama,” or “Mama Lola,” as the case may be.

**“If a woman does not have a husband or a boyfriend,
she can become a friend to her mother’s second bed”
—A Study in Rural “Prostitution”**

This study of rural prostitution takes us to the northernmost region of eastern Nigeria—to a group called the Nsukka Igbo. In an attempt to coax new interpretations from old evidence, I offer a searching analysis of the ways in which this group of Igbo women defined and constructed their trade—that which made it uniquely Nsukka. To this end, consider the words employed by Nsukka people to denote a prostitute. These were varied and seem to have changed over time. Whether or not these names evolved successively or were used interchangeably or concurrently is open to further investigation, but here is what we know. One of the words used was *mgbotó*⁷—this captured the ease with which these women were believed to strip, disrobe, and go naked. *Ikwele* exemplified the “I don’t care” disposition—the “sassy mama with an attitude” sentiment. A third term, *okuenu*, translated literally into “high or blazing fire.” The *okuenu* and *ikwele* could “not care less,” were brazen, up-front, had an “in your face” attitude; in other words, *fu walu anya*—they did not listen to reason.

Adana was another descriptive term which articulated the fact that women of this sort did not get married, but entertained their patrons from “the comforts of [their] home[s].”⁸ The *adana*’s clients, though few, were regular (which suggested forging a relationship), and were often treated to palm wine, *kai kai* (undistilled alcohol), cigarettes, and a wide variety of provisions. The *adana* normally set up a small retail kiosk in front of her home, which not only brought in monetary wealth but also helped attract prospective clients. Some *adanas* maintained palm-wine parlors while others ran full-fledged eateries, called *mama puts*.⁹ *Adanas* were known to cultivate long-term relationships with their clients, in which children were often born. Payment was collected either in money or in kind—with clients volunteering variously to cultivate their “lover’s” farms, buy them foodstuffs, or contribute to the building or maintenance of their homes.

Nsukka people also labeled the prostitute, *akwuna*, which was an adaptation of the southern Igbo term, *akwunakwuna*. In its original context, the word referred to a town in the Ogoja area (Calabarland), where such women were believed to have originated.¹⁰ The adoption of the southern Igbo term *akwunakwuna* could most likely be traced to the period following the Nigerian/Biafran war (1967–1970)—an age that saw the mass return of southern Igbo women to their homelands from all parts of Nigeria.

Okada is the most contemporary phrase for “prostitute” and connotes the ubiquitous motorcycle that has replaced taxicabs in most parts of Nigeria. The term, used widely in urban Nsukka, can be traced to the late 1980s—a period of rough economic times in Nigeria when motorcycles surfaced as cheap alternatives to the more expensive taxicabs. In urban Nsukka, the “prostitute” is currently called *okada* because one hops on her as one hops on the motorcycle—hastily. It is also highly probable that with

"modernity"—especially with the fast-paced nature of time in the urban areas—the indigenous institution in which *mgbotos*, *okuenu*, *ikweli*, and *adanas* performed a wide range of services (including cooking, listening, and conversation) evolved into its present *okada* form, a service that allowed clients only enough time to "hop on and off" the *okada*, hastily.

The English term that was used in Nsukka to describe a "prostitute" was "free woman." When one attempts to deconstruct this term, two variables emerge—how Nsukka "prostitutes" viewed themselves and how Nsukka society viewed them. In Nsukka, the "free woman" was constructed as autonomous, independent, assertive, daring, bold—in other words, *o walu anya*. In this context, the act was presumably viewed with a degree of deference and possibly admiration. The "free woman" was not marginalized by society but asserted herself and exercised a degree of power. The society realized that the services that the *mgboto*, *okuenu*, *ikweli*, and *adana* performed were an essential part of societal living. One Nsukka collaborator explained that the *adana*'s home was well known to all villagers and represented a place where men could "unwind and relax." She further suggested that women in the community were in awe of the *adana* because she was able to forge amorous friendships with numerous village men.¹¹

The society's apparent ambivalence towards this trade, captured in the following adage—*nwa mgboto kponu di, kponu oyi ya na mboro be nneya* (if a woman does not have a husband or a boyfriend, she can become a friend to her mother's second bed)—could be explained by this culture's affirmation of a woman's right to control and use her body before marriage.¹² In this interpretation, the "prostitute" was therefore not engaged in the "servicing of men" but in an assertion of her fundamental right and freedom to do whatever she desired with her own body. The discourse thus departs from western arguments about sexuality and morality, victimization and exploitation, to questions of power and agency, choice and being "in control." Another distinguishing feature of the rural Nsukka institution (of *mgboto*, *okuenu*, *ikweli*, or *adana*) was the notable absence of the male or female pimp who exploited and degraded his or her "girls." Consequently, the *mgboto*, *okuenu*, *ikweli*, or *adana* maintained full control of her body and finances and decided what services to offer, or not offer, a given client.¹³ However, Nigerian sex workers who migrated out of the rural areas into junction towns and urban areas, and especially those who ventured outside Nigeria, found themselves increasingly dependent, and in many cases completely subject to the whims and fancies of their controlling and often times abusive pimps—madam, mama, or Mama Lola. How then did this once autonomous and independent Nigerian sex worker evolve into that brazen prostitute on the streets of Siena who had little or

no power—a sex worker who was used and abused? Furthermore, why did she leave Nigeria for Europe?

Nigerian Sex Workers in Italy—A Case Study in International Prostitution

One need not search too deeply to uncover the possible reasons why Nigerian sex workers left for Europe; in fact, a number of factors can be cited. First, as a result of a gross mismanagement of resources by a series of corrupt army dictatorships as well as the implementation of the International Monetary Fund (IMF)-sponsored Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) in the 1980s, Nigeria is experiencing an unprecedented level of poverty. This crisis has further been exacerbated by a shrinking of the formal economy which has subsequently led to a mass retrenchment of workers and freezing of positions in the nation. Another unfortunate side effect of SAP has been the emergence of a “get rich quickly” syndrome that was encouraged by a general poverty of the mind, body, and soul of the Nigerian nation. This social and economic poverty has afforded Nigerians who have secured, through corruption, positions of honor and admiration in society. It is this guaranteed prestige that Nigerian sex workers and madams have managed to appropriate. When one adds to the equation a general lack of education and vocational training so common among these sex workers, then one can begin to understand why Nigerian girls and women choose to become international prostitutes.¹⁴

Once the choice is made, how then does the Nigerian sex worker get to Europe—Italy in this case? She taps into a complex network of relationships which are in place to shepherd these sex workers out of the country. And several actors are involved in this network. First is the trafficker or sponsor. Often times male, he is the one who provides the financial backing that allows the Nigerian sex worker to travel abroad. These sponsors have agents who work in the embassy of the targeted European nation, which facilitates the procurement of valid travel documents. Tied to this conspiracy as well is a network of corrupt border control officers from neighboring West African nations who also provide documentation that allows these potential Nigerian sex workers entry into their countries. It is from these African nations, most notably Ghana and Ivory Coast, and sometimes as far south as South Africa, that these women then travel by air and sometimes land to their final European destination. Once these travel documents are procured, they are generally recycled many times over, making it possible for different Nigerian women and children to travel at different times with the same documentation.¹⁵

Before the Nigerian sex worker leaves Nigeria, she undergoes a se-

ries of rituals (commonly called *juju* rites) which are designed to break her spirit, instill fear, and ensure total compliance to the decrees of her soon-to-surface pimp. It is a mind-controlling initiation ritual in which the would be sex worker is cajoled into a terrifying shrine by corrupt and conspiring medicine men who force the girl or woman to part with portions of hair (from their heads, underarm, and/or pubis), menstrual blood, and nail clippings—items she believes are used to concoct powerful death-inflicting medicines. A terrifying point during the *juju* rite is when the girl is instructed to repeat after the medicine man several times over: “if I don’t pay, I will go crazy, I will be killed.”¹⁶ In a society where traditional religious beliefs still hold sway, these rituals are effective because the girls believe in the very potency of the medicine.

Once the Nigerian sex worker arrives in Italy, she is immediately sold by her trafficker to a Nigerian madam, mama, or Mama Lola who places the girls and women on the streets for prostitution. The exchange, which occurs in one of the Italian market towns of Livorno, Torino, or Genova, is normally transacted for a \$12,000 fee. After the trade is made, the sex worker’s travel documents are taken away from her. She is then forced into an ongoing sexual indenture rationalized by the exorbitant amount of cash doled out to procure her—monies that she must turn into a sizable profit, often times four to five times the amount initially spent on her purchase. The madam lives alongside the girl and collects all monies earned from prostitution, which she must use to defray the debts incurred during the initial transport of her sex worker. The debt owed the sponsors ranges from eighty to one hundred million Italian lira (\$50,000) and must be repaid in full before a worker is manumitted. This stipulation keeps the sex worker beholden to the madam, who reserves the right to resell her charge in order to recover her debt.¹⁷ In addition to the overwhelming debt owed to her madam, the Nigerian sex worker in Italy must also pay her keep—she is responsible for her accommodation, food, and the mobile phones her madam uses to regulate and control her behavior.

The sex worker typically works two grueling shifts: the first, from 9 P.M. to 5 A.M. and the second, from 10 A.M. to around 8 P.M. She is forced to work these schedules even if it rains, or worse, snows. The Nigerian mama uses threats of cruel and unusual punishment to ensure complicity to her decrees. She also cements her control by reminding her workers of the binding *juju* ritual undertaken in Nigeria before their departure. One sex worker was terrified because her “boss” had just arrived from England and wanted 7 million liras (\$3,500), which she did not have. She consequently was beaten to her near-death. Another testified to the horrific punishments sex workers are forced to endure: “When we don’t earn the money our madam wants, she passes a hot iron on our chest”¹⁸ And thus

continues the never-ending cycle of dependency and abuse Nigerian sex workers experience in Italy today.

By way of conclusion, allow me to reiterate concisely the main argument of this paper. The realities of Nigerian prostitutes vary considerably depending on geography, ethnicity, and levels of dislocation from community and family. In rural Nigeria, sex workers construct their work as a legitimate form of exchange or barter (goods for goods) on the one hand, and a service industry (cash for service), on the other hand. In these positionings therefore, the "prostitute" is engaged in providing a community service, filling a community need. She is not looked down upon by society, but is rather exulted. She is in fact viewed as autonomous and liberated. In another sense, however, the Nigerian prostitute working on the international stage, perhaps as a result of her total dislocation from family, nation, culture, and support networks, finds herself in an extremely powerless position, a situation which forces her to rely on the goodness or badness (as the case often is) of her trafficker and ultimately pimp.

NOTES

¹More recent studies actually put the number of Nigerian prostitutes in Italy at 20,000–30,000. See, Giovanni Germano, Ambassador of Italy to Nigeria, "Human Trafficking as a Transnational Problem: The Responses of Destination Countries," in Tunde Fagbohunge, ed. *The Rape of the Innocents: Evolving an African Initiative Against Human Trafficking*, Proceedings of the First Pan African Conference on Human Trafficking, Abuja, Nigeria. February 19–23, 2001, 119; Don Oreste Benzi, "Report on Nigerian Prostitution in Europe," in *The Rape of the Innocents*, 180; Stephan Faris, "Nigerian Teens Flood Italy's Sex Market," *Women's E News*, October 13, 2002. <<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/790/>>

²The vast majority of these sex workers have been identified as Edo girls and women.

³Andrew Billen, "Devilish Pursuits: Andrew Billen is Unsettled by Sex, Juju and Exorcism in Tuscany," *New Statesman*, 21 January 2002, 1

⁴"The customer is king" is a phrase used by a Nigerian prostitute in Johannesburg, South Africa to describe her feeling towards her clients. See, Plus News: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, IRINNEWS, 24 January 2002. <<http://www.irinnews.org/AIDSreport.asp?ReportID=1199>>

⁵In the interest of space, I will not consider the urban Nigerian institution of prostitution, an institution which is implicitly different from its rural counterpart. I will however make the following point: one of the distinguishing features of rural prostitution is its confinement of the sex worker to her home. However, urban sex workers tend to separate themselves physically and emotionally from their community or homes by relocation to "prostitution" zones, hotels, and broth-

els. It is perhaps as a result of this dislocation that the sex worker or "door knocker" as they are commonly called in Nigeria, relies most heavily on the services of a madam, mama, or Mama Lola, who essentially assumes the coveted role of pimp.

⁶"Junction towns" are those points on a country's highways where truckers stop to rest and patronize sex workers.

⁷The term *mgboto* was also used to separate an adolescent girl from a woman, since, in pre-colonial Nsukka, many of these adolescent girls went naked save a few *jigida* beads worn around their waists.

⁸This clause is borrowed from Luise White's important study (of the same name) of prostitution in colonial Nairobi. In *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), White argues that the practice of prostitution was a form of self-employment that was much more profitable than the wage labor available to women in colonial Nairobi. In this positioning therefore, prostitution became essentially a short term lease of domestic labor and services, involving practices that maintained and reproduced labor—services that included: performing conversational tasks; providing clients with a place to sleep, food to eat, bath water, and selling sexual favors. White's arguments are fundamental to understanding the nature of its Nsukka counterpart.

⁹It is important to note however that not all *mama puts* were run by *adanas*.

¹⁰Chinua Achebe, telephone conversation with author, 28 March 1999.

¹¹Victoria Ugwoke, handwritten interview with author, Ikenga, Ogidi, Anambra State, 24 September 1999. Corroborated also by Erobike Eze, personal communication with author, Nsukka, Enugu State, 26 September 1998.

¹²It must however be noted that this society had severe taboos in place against adulterous relationships after marriage.

¹³Evidence for the construction of this section was gathered from the following collaborators: Victoria Ugwoke, handwritten interview, 99; Erobike Eze, personal communication, 98; Christopher Ezema, conversation with author, Ikenga, Ogidi, Anambra State, 24 September 1999; Selina Ugwoke-Adibuah, interview by author, tape recording, Trans Ekulu, Enugu, Enugu State, 23 October 1996; Igwebueze Ugwoke, interview by author, tape recording, Ihe Obukpa, Enugu State, 6 November 1996; Patrick Ibeneme Ugwuanyi, interview by author, tape recording, Obukpa, Enugu State, 6–7 November 1996; Caroline Ugwu, interview by author, tape recording, Ihe, Obukpa, Enugu State, 7 November 1996; Josiah Ogbonna, Nkofi Edem, interview by author, tape recording, Nkofi Edem, Enugu State, 14 September 1998; Grace Obayi, interview by author, tape recording, Independence Layout, Enugu, Enugu State, 30 October 1996; Nkechi Onah, interview by author, tape recording, Enugu, Enugu State, 28 October 1996; Regina Ocho, interview by author, tape recording, Trans Ekulu, Enugu, Enugu State, 28 October 1996; Boniface Abugu, interview by author, tape recording, Umuida, Enugu-Ezike, Enugu State, 4 October 1996; Michael Idoko, interview by author, tape recording, Umuida, Enugu-Ezike, Enugu State, 25 November 1996; Wilfred Ogara, interview by author, tape recording, Umuida, Enugu-Ezike, Enugu State, 25 No-

vember 1996; Samuel Ezeja, interview by author, tape recording, Umuida, Enugu-Ezike, Enugu State, 25 November 1996; Fabian Azegba, interview by author, tape recording, Umuida, Enugu-Ezike, Enugu State 2 October 1998; Uroke Nwa Iyida Oku [Raymond Iyida], interview by author, tape recording, Onitsha, Enugu-Ezike, Enugu State, 28 September 1998; Simeon Nweke, interview by author, tape recording, Umuida, Enugu-Ezike, Enugu State, 26 November 1996. The author also gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Professor Obioma Nnaemeka in the preparation of this section. Obioma Nnaemeka, email correspondence, 3 April 1999.

¹⁴It has been suggested that some of the girls and women are lured to Europe not for prostitution but on the pretence that they would be given legitimate nine-to-five jobs.

¹⁵Germano, "Human Trafficking as a Transnational Problem," 119–27; and Benzi, "Report on Nigerian Prostitution in Europe," 176–186; TED Case Studies, "The Trafficking of Nigerian Women Into Italy," number 656, January 2002, 1–15. <<http://www.american.edu/TED/italian-trafficking.htm>>

¹⁶Benzi, "Report on Nigerian Prostitution in Europe," 177–178; TED Case Studies, "The Trafficking of Nigerian Women Into Italy," 4; and The Advocacy Project, "Nigeria: Trafficking in Women," <http://advocacynet.autoupdate.com/cpage_view/nigtraffick_sistersofmercy_6_32.html>.

¹⁷Germano, "Human Trafficking as a Transnational Problem," 120; Benzi, "Report on Nigerian Prostitution in Europe," 178–179; TED Case Studies, "The Trafficking of Nigerian Women Into Italy"; and The Advocacy Project, "Nigeria: Trafficking in Women."

¹⁸Benzi, "Report on Nigerian Prostitution in Europe," 177.