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Ethno-pragmatics of *Oñunwa* performance of the Igbo of Nigeria

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This study examines how cultural practices and belief systems are constructed in *Oñunwa* performance – a popular infancy-rites ritualistic lyrics of the Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria. The study applies a combination of discourse approach, ethnography, and pragmatics in the analysis of data, showing how discourse, is representational of sociocultural experience, identity, and social relationships. The discourse of *Oñunwa* features mostly poetry as song texts (lyrics) and dance and exhibits some traditional patterns of behavior and worldview. Data comprise 10 translated texts that were rendered in songs and performed during a session of *Oñunwa* dance of the Ngwa tribe of the Igbo. The study demonstrates that the infancy rites songs generally performed by women, re-enact some culturally determined gender roles as opposed to western popular advocacy of gender equality. Masculinity and femininity in this context are perceived as divine and unchanging, while traditional womanhood is natural, legitimate and inevitable and women affirm, defend and indeed perpetuate it. *Oñunwa* rejects radical feminism and gayism and maintains the cultural position that there is a biological difference between a man and a woman. In all, this study shows how culture permeates our everyday discourses and argues that discourse is indeed a cultural practice.

Keywords: *Oñunwa*; discourse; gender; song-text; culture

Introduction

There has been a growing literature on discourse studies by African scholars that gives interesting insights to the cultural nature of discourse and how social behaviors are expressed discursively. The results show that cultural practices such as greetings, songs, naming, or condolences are not only expressed discursively but are indeed discourses in themselves. Traditional songs among the Yorubas of Nigeria, for example, exhibit features such as turn-turning, and repair mechanisms and are used as instrument of allegations/war, as well as symbolic elements for funeral, entertainment or ceremonies (Lamidi 2002). And according to Agyekum (2008), greeting forms among the Akan of Ghana, are a form of discourse operating as both complex and ritualized pre-sequences that precede the actual message in a lot of interactions. Condolence, a type of greeting among the Yoruba is a discursive behavior aimed at giving a sense of belonging to the dead and comfort to the bereaved (Bello 2002). The concept of naming, another cultural practice which according to Osundare (1993) tells the African story and serves as ‘the door to the

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house of experience, (and) a guide to hidden meanings in the shadowy nooks of time and place' (1993, 3), is discursive and the concept of 'chi' among the Igbos is expressed discursively through naming (Onukawa 2000). The present study is a contribution to the growing research on discourse as a cultural practice, i.e. how the cultural characteristics of the *Oñunwa* dance – a popular infancy-rites ritualistic lyrics/songs of the Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria are manifested in discourse.

Because of their general musical setting, it is conventional that most song forms of literary expression are considered as poetry. And poetry is highly emotive in its expression, often with full rhythm, special vocabulary and style. The significance of performance of this kind of oral literary genre is generally focused on the performer and the occasion of performance. In Africa, most poetic genre types are designed to be performed and serve various social occasions and cultural contexts (Finnegan 1970). Very often, a particular form of poetry predicts the nature of the occasion and purpose of performance-hence, the distinct poetic genres and categories.

Oñunwa dance is a cultural norm/custom usually performed (or acted) when a child is born. It is characteristically a birth lyric that belongs to the chant and recitation (oral) poetry in the *Ngwa* culture. 'Ngwa' is a tribe of the Igbo of Nigeria. '*Oñunwa*' literally means 'rejoicing for the child' although it performs a more serious sociocultural function. As an infancy rites performance, it is basically a mini festivity which announces and initiates the newly born in an established family and clan. It is realized as song poetry accompanied by local musical instruments such as *ekpe* (drum) *oyo* (jingles), *ogele* (gong), *udu* (pot drum), and *ekere* (a type of wooden drum). The dance is derived from the infancy rites tradition of the Igbos, which precedes the rite of passage before adulthood (Uchegbue 1989). 'Infancy rites tradition' is a cultural practice of initiation which begins with the '*Oñunwa*' to the 'rite of passage'. The former is said to integrate the newly born into a family and society. The latter is generally performed mostly for boys at the age of 12 before teenage. At this age a male child is considered to be 'passing' to adulthood. This tradition/custom is celebrated and performed with festivity by the families whose children are going through the rites.

Chants and recitations in *Oñunwa* dance include heroic poetry, birth/cradle songs, children songs, and lullabies (Egudu 1978). The performance sometimes includes religious poetry, tropical, and political songs depending on the choice of the performers which largely determine the contents of the texts and to what extent there could be any verbal variability or improvisation for a variety of purposes. Sometimes, they may choose to modify some aspects of the performance in order to achieve a stronger aesthetic import in response to the audience. Musical and verbal elements of the performance are interdependent. Since the performers are normally in a face-to-face interaction with the audience, they take the advantage of their visual resources to enhance the effect of the dance. Their outfits, gestures, tone, and facial expressions function as additional performance elements for stronger effect. The performances combine words, music and dance – the three major ingredients of sung texts in *Oñunwa*. Dance is a major instrument for involving the audience, mainly women and youths in a practical communal participation. The performers, mostly women, would generally mobilize the audience into active participation by their facial expressions and body movements.

The *Oñunwa* dance is of two types. The first, which is the mandatory, is basically praise performance that welcomes the first born ('opening of the bowel') in a family. A family that fails to perform this is viewed as a disappointment and remains a

constant subject of gossip. The second type is optional; this type follows subsequent births and essentially depends on the discretion, social judgment, and financial status of the family of the newly born baby. On the one hand, *Oñunwa* is viewed as a cultural agent of social integration and brotherhood. On the other hand, it is perceived as cultural acknowledgement of *Chukwu*, the great God of fertility and also recognizes the roles of the ancestral spirits as mediators. However, the pouring of libation to the ancestors, which originally formed part of the liturgy, has gradually been relinquished by modern Christian families. The performance is also perceived as a form of social acceptance of the 'itinerant' child (irrespective of gender) in the land of the living and sometimes functions as an appeal to an *ogbanje* (a re-incarnated child) to stay. On a lighter note, the *Oñunwa* is a festivity that congratulates the parents of the baby and the father in particular; if the baby is a male child, the man is said to have done 'a good job'. *Oñunwa* is timeless and has been a cultural heritage, which perpetuates the culture of the Igbo people from generation to generation. Although, modified in modern times, many of its original features have been preserved.

Ethno-pragmatics in the context of this study attempts to show that *Oñunwa* is a discursive practice, i.e. how discourse (song texts and dance) is involved in the construction of beliefs, knowledge, religion, norms, and values of the Ngwa people. Discourse in this context is viewed as a cultural practice, produced in linguistic communication, involving the construction of meaning in a defined sociocultural and political context (Shi-xu 2005). And because discourse is essentially cultural and affects all we do, say and think as human beings, it becomes necessary to investigate discourse from divergent cultural perspectives to see how this enables us understand the mutually opposing language and performance 'games' as they are played around the world (Shi-xu 2005). This agrees with Hymes's notion of 'ethnography of speaking' which is entirely a social and cultural practice. It is within the context of culture that we can adequately understand and appreciate the differences in the way we think, view, and use language to construct the world. The aim of this study therefore is to show how the discourse of *Oñunwa* (including dance) as a symbolic practice is essentially cultural and reflect the world-view, thinking and belief of the Ngwa tribe of the Igbo of Nigeria with respect to gender questions and assumptions. Some of these assumptions (as the researcher found out in the course of the study) are that masculinity and femininity are divine and unchanging and that womanhood is natural, legitimate, and inevitable.

A number of researches on feminist thought have gained global attention for some decades now. Right from the 1940s when Simone de Beauvoir's *the Second Sex* was first published, there has been a growing interest in feminist literary criticism revealing different perceptions, social prejudices and domination against women especially in patriarchal dominated societies. Murfin (1998) for instance shows that patriarchal ideology is prevalent in literatures written by men, reflecting inherent attitudes and traditions that reinforce systematic male dominance and discursively entrenched in literary works. Ako (2006) in her 'a feminist reading of Graham Green...' also demonstrates that although Green lived during the period of literary and ideological revolutions that affected western cultures and traditions, he still betrayed anti-feminist sentiments. His female characters concentrated on less serious issues and were emotionally and obsessively religious, not minding their self-identity, while men were associated with light, activity, and reason. There is no doubt that the available literature on western feminist ideology is a reaction to the tradition/cultural

idea that there is a biological difference between a man and a woman, which automatically defines their different values and social roles. De Beauvoir, for instance, had argued that gender is acquired as it is no longer possible to attribute the social functions of women to biological differences because anyone can become the gender he chooses (de Beauvoir 1973). And according to Butler (1986), it goes beyond cultural construction imposed on identity but also a process of constructing oneself. Radical feminists believe that femininity limits a woman's capacity and the society must therefore dissolve patriarchy by all means (Dunker 1992; Eisenstein 1988). Also, an extreme blend of womanism and lesbianism argues in favor of 'women's culture' and women's emotional flexibility and celebrates woman to woman sexual bond (Walker 1983).

While a very wide range of literature on feminism and feminist debates exist, there is very little literature that shows that women are not all in support of some extreme postulations of female 'independence' and 'equality' with men. In many African societies, the cultural interpretation of womanhood that recognizes gender roles as a result of the innate biological distinctions is still celebrated. This is perhaps better explained in the 'stiwaniist' idea that women are not warring with men, not the reversal of roles but about building a harmonious society (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994). *Oñunwa* performance celebrates female's traditional/divinely appointed 'subordinate' roles because it is in the so called 'weak' position that the strength of the womenfolk actually emerges.

Methodology

The study applies the ethnographic methodology to answer some pertinent questions about the *Oñunwa* festivity, i.e. who performs the festivity, when, why, and how. For instance, how does the performance reveal the discursive perception of the traditional woman against western ideas about gender parity? What is the relationship of this performance to the general perception of the rural woman about her social roles and what aspects or attributes of the sociocultural context place some constraints on this particular performance? Answering questions about how speakers/performers perform action with words or songs immediately draws upon popular pragmatic principles. Speech 'acts' in this context reveals what the performers wish to establish as gender differences and role, and how the song texts represent their world-view and cognitive self-awareness. The pragmatics of this oral performance is essentially about sustaining some legitimate ideas about gender and creating a pattern that continuously reinforces and perpetuates the traditional concept of womanhood in contrast, perhaps, to western thought.

Hymes's ethnography of speaking (Hymes 1974) (or communication) emphasizes 'language use' as the interaction between speech and social action. Hence, ethnographers investigate situated discourse, which reveals the relationship of linguistic performance and the sociocultural environment. Ethnography of communication recognizes 'both the diversity of communicative possibilities and practices and the fact that such practices are an integrated part of what we know and do as members of a particular culture', (Schiffrin 1994, 37). 'Speech' (in this context, songs) would be viewed as related to and is constructed by aspects of social organization and reflects ideology, i.e. speaker's assumption, values, and beliefs about the world (Duranti 1988). In the study of situated interaction, therefore the social-cultural context is paramount, hence paying special attention to the way in which particular

characteristics of the society affect the structures of variation in language or oral performance (Lavandera 1988) and the various levels of creativity by individual communicators to project some culturally relevant discourse. This enables an analyst to discover what speakers actually say or do in different social contexts ‘whether willingly or unwillingly, consciously or unconsciously, directly, or obliquely’ (Duranti 1988, 212).

I have also applied some aspects of anthropological linguistics, i.e. a study that shows a strong interface between a people’s language and their cultural practices, mirroring how language (also in songs) is used as cultural practice and as a powerful tool for viewing and appreciating the world view of a society (Agyekum 2008). As a methodological strategy however, Shi-xu’s Cultural Approach to Discourse (CAD) (Shi-xu 2005) has been used extensively in the analysis. This position which views discourse as ‘language games’ in competition to each other is a reaction to viewing discourse from solely western perspective while excluding other non-western societies. It builds on the long tradition of research that treats language as symbolic practice that varies in form and function from culture to culture and from place to place. While Shi-xu highlights linguistic communication as cultural practice, she acknowledges also the place of our everyday symbolic systems such as music, dance, art, film, or sport, which captures the focus of the present study, i.e. a linguistic performance (manifesting in lyrics/songs) and dance in Igbo festive discourse as a cultural practice.

The corpus

The corpus comprises 10 written versions of the song texts (*Oñunwa* songs are usually not too many). Analysis will not include some prosodic features or interactional control patterns peculiar to an oral speech genre. The texts are originally performed in Igbo and the original forms are reproduced here as they are performed. The text samples in the corpus are divided into two broad parts based on their contents and functions. Performance (i–iii) announces the occasion as well as sanitizes the atmosphere. Performance (iv–x) touches on several issues relating to male and female social roles. I would like to state here that the corpus is rendered in the *Ngwa* dialect (one of the many dialects) of the Igbo language. The performance was carried out at Umunkiri village (the researcher’s place of birth) in Obingwa Local Government Area of Abia state, in the South Eastern Nigeria. The 36 states of Nigeria comprise a number of local government areas. In the Nigerian political administration, the local government is the third-tier level of ‘grassroots’ government. Because I (researcher) was born and attended my early primary school in Umunkiri and later carried out an oral literature project in this village, I consider myself an insider to the events under study. The data was collected during the oral literature project and I have had an opportunity to interact with some of the women about the issues of gender raised in the songs.

Performance i–iii

- i. *Unu tiwaram oñu na nwam muru nwa e* (shout for joy with me, because my daughter is delivered of a baby)
Refrain

Igbe npaghari ego

Igbe npaghari ego

Igbe...

- ii. *Amuta nwoke*, (if a male child is born)

Mu eburu eghem ga ahia (I pick up my gun and go to the market)

Mu eburu eghem ga ahia...

- iii. *Umu nwayi nwe ahia* (women own the market),

Umu nwayi nwe nkwu (women own the palm fruit)

Umu nwayi nwe oru (women own the work)

Refrain

Ndi ndom, ndom

Ndi ndom, ndom

Ndi ndom, ndom (women, women, women...)

Unu tiwaram oñu na nwam muru nwa (you shout for joy for my daughter is delivered of a child) is one of the general clarion calls that the grandmother of the newly born baby raises to alert other women in the community. Those that hear her would promptly respond by singing the refrain: *igbe npaghari ego, igbe*. This does not have a direct English equivalent but suggests the idea that children are equivalent to wealth. This preliminary performance also announces the sex of the baby. For instance in (ii) the lyric which simply says 'if a male is born, I pick up my gun and go to the market' actually announces that a male child is born, while in (iii) *umu nwayi nwe ahia, umu nwayi nwe nkwu, umu nwayi nwe oru* tell the traditional roles of women and announce that a female child is born. 'Ndi ndom' means 'women,' which the other women respond to at the chorus. This type of 'oñu' (rejoicing) is peculiar and generally understood to announce births.

Performance iv-x

- iv. *Ma obugh obi dim* (without my husband's consent)

Agagh m ama akwa (I won't be clothed)

Ma obugh obi dim,

Agagh m ama akwa

- v. *Anom na nke di m* (I am in my husband's house)

Anom n'ezi di m (I am in my husband's homestead)

Anom n'ezi dim

N'ime ezi di m

Kpom kwem (directly)

- vi. *Nwa e, nwa e, nwa bu ugwu m* (A child is my honor)

Nwa nwoke bu ugwu ji m dobere n'ezi dim

(A male child is the honor that keeps me in my husband's house)

Nwanyi bu uru ahia m ritara n'aka dim

(A female child is a gain from my husband)

- vii. *Unu si utum nwuo* (should my penis die?)

Ya nwula (May it not die)

Unu si utum nwuo (should my penis die?)

Ya nwula (May it not die)

Utu m ji neri aku (The penis with which I enjoy)

- Ya nwula* (May it not die)
Obu utum nwuo (If my penis dies)
Gini ka m geji rie aku (What will I enjoy with?)
Ya nwula (May it not die)
- viii. *Nwa okoro n'elu nkwu* (A young man on a palm tree)
Amu ya n'efe, efe (His private part is flying)
O che na m ahugh ya (Does he think, I don't see it?)
Fere ja, ja, fere nja... (refrain: Fly, fly)
- ix. *Onye nwa ya muru nwa* (The person whose daughter puts to bed)
Pa wa otilẹ enyi, enyi (Should raise her private part high, high)
A ha nwam, pa wa otilẹ enyi, enyi
- x. *Anuru m anu na nwata nwanyi muru nwa* (I heard that a young women put to bed)
Aiye, aiye (refrain)
Omumu ye, aiye, aiye (Offspring, aiye, aiye)
Anu kwara m anu (I only heard)
Aiye, aiye, aiye... (refrain)

Performance of song texts expresses individual/family values and their commitment to social beliefs/practice. Like Shi-xu noted in his work, discourse always portrays what we think and how we choose to say or represent certain ideas/concepts. And as we shall see in the performance, reflects individual and group cultural assumptions and what rural women perceive as their roles in society and their relationships with one another. Interestingly, this may not coincide with western ideas about gender equality and what the female social role should be. I'm aware of strong criticisms that trail patriarchal tradition but there are indeed places where women accept 'nominal' roles as natural, God-ordained and in fact 'divine'. While this study does not make a case for Igbo patriarchal societies, it does indeed reflect the conservative traditional sense of the Igbo woman and what she accepts as gender roles. They represent ethnic and cultural values and identities of the Igbos, especially the Ngwas of the south-east of Nigeria.

Analyses/discussion

Though the syntactic structures of Igbo and English vary significantly, I have endeavored to provide English equivalents of the Igbo words as much as possible in a table form. The aim is to show how all types of actions (or processes) and circumstances in the sentences of the songs are defined and how all interactions that are defined in linguistic terms capture the subject matter of the song texts. There are some levels of structural similarity which the Igbo grammar shares with English that makes it easy for me to translate the songs. But where this is almost impossible, I have provided a translation in English using the nearest possible linguistic options. Again analyses will concentrate on the written text of the lyrics.

Performace (i): announcing birth and defining gender differences

Unu tiwara m ońu, na nwam muru nwa

<i>Unu</i> (you)	<i>Tiwara m</i> (shout)	<i>ońu</i> (shout of joy)	<i>Na nwam muru nwa</i> (for my child has given birth to a child)
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'Unu' (you) in the above clause (actually an imperative simple sentence) is an obligatory element where the English language would have rendered it non-obligatory. Rather than simply render the statement as 'shout for joy' where 'you' is understandably elided, the Igbo syntax retains it as an obligatory item because it addresses the community and carries the general belief that a child belongs to the community rather than just the parents. In fact the text is meaningless without the 'Unu', where in this context it is equivalent to the French 'tu' (familiar), rather than the polite 'vous.' *Unu* performs the action 'tiwaram oñu' which literally means 'shout for me, the shout of joy' and not just the English 'shout for joy,' and the circumstance is 'my daughter has put to bed.' Notice the personalized items in 'tiwara m' (shout for me) and 'na nwa m (my daughter). Traditionally the *Oñunwa* is announced by the mother of the young woman that puts to bed. It is in fact culturally out of place if she simply says 'shout for joy' without the important communal pronoun 'unu' or 'tiwara m'. No one else does this form of awareness creation but the grandmother of the child. If she is not available at the time of the birth, the woman's mother-in-law does it. In their absence, any elderly woman in the husband's family plays the role. Again *me* and *my* in the processes are pragmatically encoded to announce the older woman's maternal roles. It is another way of telling the world 'I have played my part as a mother and as a support'. At the earlier times, most Igbo women put to bed at home, or at the local midwife's. Some of them in modern times still do. In a traditional setting it is taken for granted that all a woman needs during labor and child birth is her mother or her mother-in-law. So it's expected that one of them announce a successful birth. However, they do not take absolute responsibility in case of complications. The preliminary announcement is made as the woman runs from one homestead to another, and is received by other women with a thunderous response that culminates to a mini *Oñunwa*. The 'm' in 'tiwaram' is another way of telling the clan, 'I was there, I actually played my role'. If the baby is a male child, the father normally announces the birth to his in-laws with a gun shot. The gun shot is generally understood and is again greeted with applause and shout. It is at this point that a lyric that announces the sex of the child is raised. I will discuss this in detail in performance ii.

The *Oñunwa* at this stage is believed to prepare the new child for a communal life – a life of meaning, of culture and of a sense of heritage. The refrain of the above lyric says 'igbe-npaghari ego, igbe-npaghari ego, igbe,' though lacks some direct English translation, generally captures the idea that children are priceless. One can say that tradition here equates a child (particularly females) with material wealth. 'Igbe' literally means 'box,' 'ego' means 'money'; 'npaghari' means 'to roll'. One can then gather that the people often consider a child as being equivalent to rolling in bags of money/material wealth in a literal sense. This is particularly true of the Igbo bride wealth tradition; a female child in this traditional sense is rated alongside material asset. Unfortunately this delays marriages among the Igbos since a young man has to 'prepare properly' before thinking about marriage. In some parts of the Igbo society, this has resulted in serious social problems where mature women have had to wait for a long time for a 'suitable' suitor. Desperate mothers who do not support this practice have had to advise their daughters sometimes privately to run off with or get pregnant for a young man in order to avoid strict compliance to the bride wealth practice. Singing this song at this initial stage of a child's life is said to define the baby's destiny with a definite message of hope by the community itself. That is why *Oñunwa* is compulsory for the first child in a family. The song text represents

communal roles, such as ethnic cooperation and mutual inter dependability. It shows that both the child and mother are accepted by the community.

Performance (ii) & (iii): announcing sex: masculinity versus femininity

Preliminary ii and *iii* are treated together, because they belong to the same genre-in terms of their functions, i.e. they announce the sexes of children. *Preliminary ii* presents three clauses of time (subordinate to the main clauses) – ‘amuta nwoke’ (when a male child is born), ‘mu ebure egbe m ga ahia’ (I pick up my gun and go to the market). Notice that it didn’t say ‘A male child is born, so I pick up my gun . . .’ It says ‘when’ or ‘whenever’ a male child is born (*amuta nwoke*). ‘When’ therefore means that the practice is deliberate and perennial, handed down from generation to generation and it is done all the time. The ‘gun’ in question is a literal locally made gun for hunting and fighting wars. The ‘I’ i.e. the performer, represents the men folks. The significance of picking up a gun and going to the market is in recognition of the tradition roles of men in society. The discourse of oral poetry here constructs a man’s cultural roles and asserts his masculinity. Men do the hard jobs; they fight the wars and ensure the territorial integrity of their communities. Picking up the gun and going to the market is symbolic of responsibility and statesmanship. It is the initial ethnocentric consciousness that is expected of the newly born male. The marketplace is where men gather in times of war to discuss situations and develop stratagems. So when a male child is born, this role is reenacted in the lyrics of *Oñunwa*, which again reminds men folks especially the baby their traditional civic responsibilities. This role is not contested by the average rural women. They tell you that male and female roles are not contestable; women are not to be pitied or defended for what natural or cultural role they play such as keeping the home, raising the children, and owning the work. They tell you that the home front has suffered for years due to some western ‘feminist’ ideas that “lead our daughters astray” and tend to isolate a woman from the wife and mother that nature has ordained for her. Accordingly, a woman is the custodian of societal values that must be inculcated to the children. The men know their place in society and the women are not envious of them. This follows Leslie’s stiwanism, about women not challenging men’s role. The traditional idea establishes the divine gender roles and cites the Bible where God specifically told the woman that she would be under her husband and that he would rule over her (Genesis 3:16).

Performance ii song text similarly constructs the traditional roles of the women folk. The lyrics follow the same structural pattern. The clause shows the actor (the possessor, i.e. women), mental process (own), and the phenomenon (the market, the palm fruits, the work).

Umu nwanyi (women)	nwe (own)	ahia (the market)
Umu nwanyi (women)	nwe (own)	nkwu (palm fruits)
Umu nwanyi (women)	nwe (own)	oru (the work)

The sex of a child is announced by re-iterating the culturally/naturally determined role of the gender in question. ‘Own’ here assumes a different meaning from a cultural perspective, which implies that the profession belongs to them: they dominate it by tradition. ‘Market’ here means ‘trading’. Women are constructed

(in the lyric) as natural owners of the market. As owners of work and market, they are natural homemakers and home keepers. In the traditional context, trading is perceived as a non-complex profession and therefore good enough for the woman. Hence, most men who take to trading are sometimes viewed as performing the women's role. The same sense of 'own' run through the other works – 'palm fruits,' and 'the work' where 'palm fruits' (nkwu) represents palm produce. Men climb the palm trees to cut down the ripe palm fruits but the women do the actual production – this time it is hard work. The palm oil processing – the cooking, pounding, picking, and separating oil, are essentially female roles. 'The work' here represents 'farming' for subsistence. Again women do the traditional ploughing, planting, weeding, and tending of crops. Though the men clear the forests and make the land ready for cultivation, the women are considered as owning agricultural activities. Yet these aspects of women functions are cultural viewed as 'soft' – not soft in the sense that the work is easy but that the woman that performs it makes it soft. The weakness with which women are associated with here is in terms of jobs that demand physical/masculine strength, not mental or intellectual weakness; not weakness in terms of initiatives or as being appendages as western advocates of equality with men portray it. The woman's 'weakness' in the cultural context is essentially her strength. In her 'weakness' she rules the man and brings out the best in him; she comforts, feeds, and provides sex so that his masculine strength might come out in full. The song that reiterates this predominant social role is sung with pride by the women themselves. And it is said that a baby girl should know what she is born for right from her formative years. She is never to contest the role of the man, for example as the breadwinner. The tone of the voices of especially the lead signers is generally vivacious, elating, and full of life. The audience and the other dancers will form a circle around her and dance in rounds, throwing up their hands above their heads. The preliminary sung texts are fundamental precursors – so vital to the actual performance of the *Oñunwa* that they are never relegated. They are performed by the 'ndi ndom' (another term for 'married women' among the Ngwa of the Igbo) of the husband's side. The main *Oñunwa* is masterminded and performed by the in-laws (of the wife's side).

Performance (iv & v): the place of the wife

Ma obugh obi dim (without my husband's will); *Agagh m ama akwa* (I won't be clothed)

The *Oñunwa* is generally performed at night till the dawn of the next day. As the group of performers arrive at the 'ama' or 'ilo' (front of the compound) and are formally received with a traditional sum of N20 (20 naira is about five US cents) the performance begins. The favorite song at this time is usually 'Ma obugh obi dim...'. The text is rendered as a clause, which Igbo syntax separates as two independent clauses. 'Without my husband's will (or choice) I won't be clothed'. Ordinarily, this statement portrays the relationship between a man and his wife in terms of a host and a dependant, but this is not the case in the sense of the Igbo traditional context. It is a man's primary responsibility to clothe his wife and it is a man's pride to do so. As a matter of fact, a husband's integrity and respect among his peers is largely measured on how well his wife dresses. A woman that dresses poorly is inadequately clothed and the shame is the man's, not the woman's. So the song is saying: it is mandatory

for the man to clothe his wife. Thus, the song presents two presuppositions; first, a mature single woman living on her own is a social aberration in the traditional sense; secondly, a woman lives for her husband. While the man may marry as many wives as he wants (though this practice is gradually declining in modern times with the influence of Christianity); a woman is not permitted to keep more than one husband, because sex to a woman is perceived as more dignifying, precious, and significant than to a man. A man that keeps more than one woman is generally more prone to selfishness, self-pride, and physical aggression than the wife/girl-friend (Okeh 1999).

Again this lyric also reminds the husband of the traditional role of 'nmahari akwa' (change of clothes). When a woman puts to bed among the *Ngwas* (a tribe of Igbo), the husband buys changes of clothes as a form of rites for the woman. Here, the song text performs two functions – constructs the woman's identity and relationship with her husband as well as assert a cultural practice. It is taken for granted that the man understands the full implication of the song as he promptly receives a young plantain tree from the lead singer. The plant is called 'ichi' (the placenta), which is to be planted where the baby's 'alo' (umbilical cord) is buried. The child assumes ownership of the plantain tree henceforth. All these are implied in the song text with the 'nmahari akwa' (change of clothes) tradition. The performers would raise their hands and swing their hips in gusto, sometimes vigorously following the rhythm and music of the song. Their necks often painted in white with powder or 'nzu' (white clay), while their feet are usually sustained in quick movements with their heads and necks moving the same time in almost a hysterical manner, quite swift and artistic.

Performance (v)

Ano m na nke di m (I am in my husband's house); *Ano n'ezi di m* (I am in my husband's home stead)

A	no m	na nke di m
A	no m	N'ezi di m
I	Am	in my husband's house

The relational position of the agent to the location is significant. The agent is the woman and the location is her husband's house. This song text captures again the interpersonal functions of language to address the fundamental questions about social relationships and identities. The woman (agent) does not just announce her personal situation but enacts her identity and relationship with her husband's. With this song, she absolves herself of any form of matrimonial unfaithfulness. In the traditional setting, childbirth is sometimes viewed with suspicion of infidelity on the part of the women, so the song text is intended to assert the wife's innocence. By emphasizing 'n'ime ezi di m, kpom kwem' (inside my husband's homestead, directly) she makes a unilateral vow that the child legitimately belongs to her husband. In this context, she demands attention and respect from those that hear the song. Though she does not participate directly, it is generally understood that the participants represent her voice. When she says 'in my husband's house, in my husband's homestead, directly', she again calls on her husband to bear witness of her fidelity. This is one of the reasons why the *Oñunwa* is performed at night. Night is culturally

believed to be the only time babies are made. So the women's assertion of her identity at night is to call the god of fertility to bear witness. 'A no m na nke di m' (I am in my husband's house) significantly constructs the woman's identity. A woman is viewed lacking an independent social identity. Her identity is completely dependent on her husband's position and his socio-economic achievements. In extreme cases, she doesn't own property and is not allowed to inherit her husband's property when he dies. This tradition is however being depleted in many Igbo clans as the woman, especially the urban working women now own property and in some cases help to establish the husband. A woman setting up a man is however viewed as an unfortunate reversal of roles which a typical rural conservationist still views with scorn. Traditionally a woman takes decisions only in a restricted sense, and she doesn't leave her matrimonial home without her husband's approval. Festivals and discourse practices are deliberately patterned to re-enact this system and even with the cultural performances that announce their births, male children's cultural roles are enacted from the beginning. We see this more clearly in performance (vi).

Performance (vi): gender and identity

Nwa bu ugwu m (*A child is my honor*)

Nwa A child	bu Is	ugwu m my honor	
<i>Nwa nwoke</i> A male child	<i>bu</i> is	<i>Ugwu</i> An honor	<i>ji m dobere n'ezi di m</i> that keeps me in my husband's house
<i>Nwa nway</i> A female child	<i>bu</i> is	<i>uru m</i> my profit	<i>Ritara n'aka dim</i> from my husband (husband's hand)

A male child is an honor while a female child is a profit. In the traditional sense, the male child is perceived in terms of his strategic position to keep a family together. It is often said that seven male children equal to seven 'onu-ama' (compounds) because it is the man that brings in a woman and sows his seeds in the woman and they both multiply. In this sense, therefore a male child is honor and that why a marriage without a male child is often viewed as transient, and socially insignificant. The remaining clause in the text explains why this is so. A woman says: 'A male child keeps me in my husband's house'.

A male child	keeps	me	In my husband's house
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Here the child is portrayed as the subject of the marriage. The affected participant 'me' is a product of the action of the actor 'a male child'. This indigenous idea does not recognize the tension between the traditional role of the male and the female since it is taken for granted that social roles are naturally and culturally determined. The proposition that discourse is a way of thinking and speaking based on a people's culture is here again demonstrated, which shows that rather than impose a view or thought, we simply study what people's cultures permit them to believe. The other clause in the above text, says 'a female child is my profit in my husband's house'.

A female child	is	my profit	In my husband's house
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The identified female child is portrayed in terms of her relationship with her husband's house. The implication is that while the male keeps and sustains the marriage, the female is a profit to the marriage. Relationally, the female is constructed as a gain to her husband. However, the woman's position in the sense of this song is more than a mere 'profit'. The woman gives relevance and satisfaction to the man and the home. The power of this assumption is founded in its historical and cultural relevance and its total acceptance by the indigenous community. Since a female is a profit, the first female child (Ada) is not totally detached from her father's house after marriage and also belongs to the Umuada (a cult of first daughters) called 'umuamuamu' in the Ngwa dialect. Yet her influence remains limited, because it is not like the man that brings a woman home. There is a traditional sense of 'woman' which the natives take for granted, which goes beyond what a westerner sees in advocating (sometimes) male roles such as breadwinning for the female. The performers of *Oñunwa* are women themselves, who are born and raised within this belief system. And they are saying a woman doesn't want to be a man. A woman gives fulfillment to a family and to a man's life. That is the actual sense in which 'urum' (my profit) in the above song is used. Very few educated women among the Igbos have challenged this assumption, even with the significant levels of research and literature on gender equality. In my view, an average African woman is a womanist not a 'feminist' in the sense of equating male traditional roles with the female's. Rather than view gender as cultural imposition or process of constructing oneself (Butler 1986), or that the man is the absolute ruler who defines the woman, Ngwas view gender identity as obviously uncontestable, natural, and unchanging. The next sung text toes the same line of gender pride.

Performance (vii & viii): male and female gender pride

Unu si utum nwuo (should my penis die?)

Ya nwula (May it not die)

Unu si utum nwuo (should my penis die?)

Ya nwula (May it not die)

Utu m ji neri aku (The penis with which I enjoy)

Ya nwula (May it not die)

Obu utum nwuo (If my penis dies)

Gini ka m geji rie aku (What will I enjoy with?)

Ya nwula (May it not die)

The literal translation of 'unu si utum nwuo' is 'did you say my penis should die?' I have attempted to explain the contextual implication of 'unu' in the earlier analysis. Here, the 'unu' addresses the women folk only. This song is rendered in a question and answer (chorus/response) mode. The question represents the male voice, while the answer is that of the female. While the male voice goes on to explain why his manhood must not die, the female voice repeatedly responds 'ya nwula' (let it not

die). Here sex is seemingly constructed as the man's right – his natural exclusive comfort. A woman has no right to reject her husband's sex advances at any time and under any circumstance; it is however believed that discerning men must act reasonably. The next line of the text says: 'utu m ji neri aku (the penis with which I enjoy). Notice that throughout the text the personal pronoun 'I' runs through, i.e. 'm' or 'mu' (I, or me, my) rather than 'we' or 'us' ('anyi'). The male voice, the questioner asserts his right, and the woman, the responder is invariably at the receiving end, available to satisfy the man's sex drive. In the song text, no reference is made to the woman's own position, her enjoyment or satisfaction, though usually taken for granted. As a matter of fact, this particular song reflects an earlier patriarchal assumption prevalent in the ancient Igbo societies. Women then were simply their husband's 'property'. Yet, they never complained. Again note that the performers are women who inadvertently accept this position and in this oral performance deliberately propagates the male gender pride. In many parts of modern Ngwa communities, this tradition appears not to have died altogether, so that even during a child's sociocultural initiation, it is played out as a mock drama. Notice, the word 'nwuo' or 'die' used repeatedly in the text. Male impotence is considered as a serious natural calamity among the Igbos, so 'nwuo' is used for impotence; a milder word would have been 'odida' (limp) but 'die' is used to reflect a more serious condition. If a man's organ 'dies', the man is said to have died. As the song is a cultural voice, which pragmatically speaks the society's voice, it also speaks the women's own voice. The women's gender pride does not just reside in her husband's virility, but really on the superiority of her own sexuality. A woman's organ never dies. In that sense, she is superior and all she has to do is to wish that her husband's does not die. So when the song text initially announces the man's gender pride, the underlining pragmatics of the song is that, the man actually serves the woman's sexual comfort, because she is at the receiving end. When she sings 'ya nwula', she pities the man, because his sexuality is susceptible to dying, hers is not. The same conflict of sexual pride re-echoes again in performance (viii).

Performance (viii)

Nwa okoro n'elu nkwa (A young man on a palm tree)

Amu ya n'efe, efe (His male organ is flying)

O che na m ahugh ya (Does he think I don't see it?)

Fere ja, ja, fere nja... (Fly, fly, fly)

Palm tree climbing is a male activity, considered as a masculine pride. The song text exalts male sexuality and male virility is constructed as very expensive. In the text, the male organ is perceived as elusive and the woman can only spy at it. Women in the Igbo culture are not permitted to climb trees. The text is a female voice: *o che na m ahugh ya?* (does he think I don't see it?). The woman is portrayed as the aggressor, while the man is the elusive, flying object. The woman in a dilemma makes love overtures to the man but she does not get his attention. Unlike the generally assumed woman's sex weapon or 'bottom power' this song appears to transfer this pride to the man, making the woman totally at the mercy of the flying penis. So the man actually has some power in the sex politics. On the other hand, the

song continuously reinforces the woman's sexual power when it says 'fere ja, ja, fere nja . . .' (fly, fly, fly). It's another way of saying: 'agaracha (walker-about), you must come back.' (Fly and go, I am here waiting for you). Significantly however, the traditional woman in this song does not fragrantly lay claim to the superiority of her sexuality: she deliberately empowers the man and chooses to be a 'wife' in the traditional sense. They believe that the man should be empowered in every sense even in sex matters, and it is the woman that empowers him to realize his sex potentials to the full. It's like making a child to walk for the first time; the mother tries all gimmicks, introduces all simulating devices to empower the child to walk. The mother then enjoys to see the child take the first few steps of his/her life. In the traditional sense, the woman acts as the motivator of the man's sex pride because she is the one that enjoys the final result.

Performance (ix) & (x): festivity and relationships

Onye nwa ya muru nwa (The person whose daughter puts to bed)

Pa wa otile enyi, enyi (Should raise her organ high, high, high)

A ha nwam, pa wa otile enyi, enyi (Yes, my child, raise your organ high and high)

Anuru m anu na nwata nwanyi muru nwa (I heard that a young women put to bed)

Aiye, aiye

Omumu ye, aiye, aiye (Offspring, aiye, aiye)

Anu kwara m anu (I only heard)

Aiye, aiye, aiye . . .

Performance ix extols the maternal bond between a mother and daughter and child. Notice the repetition of 'nwa' in the text: Onye *nwa* ya muru *nwa* (she whose daughter puts to bed). Both 'nwa' literally means 'child,' but the former 'nwa' refers to the mother of the newly born baby. Here 'nwa' assumes dual connotation, but same interpersonal reference. Traditionally, the bond between mother and child is the same between mother and grand mother and grand child. They are constructed as primordial identities within the same chain of existence. It is in recognition of this that the second line of the text says: 'pa wa otile enyi enyi' (also meaning raise your womanhood high). The repetition of 'enyi enyi' simply represents the song property of the text. Among the Igbos a young mother remains a 'child' of her own mother, as long as she is in her pre-menopause years. Pa wa otile enyi enyi (raise your private part high) again re-iterates the grand mother's social responsibility towards her daughter and the new child. So the song text while urging the woman to raise her female organ high in pride is pragmatically informing her to rise to her roles in the circumstance, that of love and care for both 'children' (i.e. mother and child).

Performance (x) is a general formal greeting to the mother and child, and also a call to the other women to join in the *Oñunwa* dance. Functionally the text 'anuru m na nwata nwayi muru nwa' (I heard that a young woman put to bed) is a clarion call to join the dance as well as felicitate with the celebrating family. This particular song ought to have come first in the performance but it does not because *Oñunwa* is

performed at night and continues till dawn. At every stage of the performance new performers join as it is convenient for them. As the performers move from one compound to another the number of the performers increases. So the newcomers would raise the song even if it is at the end of the performance. Children are constructed as a blessing from God; they are more important than material wealth and remain a perennial source of joy and celebration.

Conclusion

We can conclude therefore that a people's belief system and values are encoded in their discourse practices and this significantly affects the way they live. The *Oñunwa* performance of the Igbo is an infant traditional rite of initiation, but all the more important because it reveals some cultural traditions about how gender roles are perceived by the Igbo rural woman and what being a woman means to her. Being a woman is divine and unchangeable with clear-cut natural and social roles that do not conflict with that of the man. *Oñunwa* practice constructs the woman as a unique person with gender pride that does not envy the man's position. 'Equality' in every sense with the man is therefore not the issue here, since in the culture of the Igbos, the man and the woman each recognizes his/her tradition position and roles. If a woman seeks to be a man and play a man's role, she is said to twist nature's hands and is definitely asking for trouble. If a woman fights with her husband, she is said to fight against her own parents, siblings, and in fact the entire culture. Men of course are viewed as naturally endowed with rights and privileges and through discursive means women accept this position and perpetuate it themselves. In the song texts, the female sexuality is constructed as being at the receiving end while the male assumes the power and the right to enjoy sex. Interestingly, however, despite the widespread western ideologies of gender campaigns in favor of equality of both sexes (especially in terms of rights to make decisions, own property, and achieve economic independence), most rural women, particularly those in the data samples, are not interested. Many still feel that there is something about traditional womanhood which western ideology attempts to explain away, something about the woman's right to be different – something to celebrate about her gender difference. When they say that they don't envy the men, they perhaps mean that women need not interfere with male's roles. This is probably why an elderly woman would normally have a week-long orientation for her daughter about to get married on her roles in the household. The study shows that *Oñunwa* performance functions as a celebration for a newly born child but much more as re-inaction of traditional beliefs and cultures of the Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria. Specifically it argues that gender differences are sacred. And while making a case for liberal patriarchy and stiwanism – building social harmony through recognition of men's and women's different sociocultural roles, it rejects western radical feminism, Walker's idea of womanism and lesbianist views.

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