

From Amina's Walls to Wazobia's Throne: Gender Protest, Female Dignity, and the Reclamation of Women's Full Humanity in the Works of Tess Onwueme and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

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ABSTRACT

Across the domains of domestic life, religious authority, professional practice, civic governance, and artistic creation, Nigerian women have been systematically confined to a geography of permitted existence whose outer boundaries are the kitchen, the bedroom, and the domestic compound. Yet the costs of this confinement have never been merely personal. Every woman whose talents are suppressed, whose ideas are bottled, and whose civic or spiritual authority is denied represents a measurable loss to the entire society that confines her. This article argues that Nigerian women writers, dramatists, historians, and civic actors have mounted a sustained, multi-genre protest against this confinement and that this protest draws its deepest moral force from an inconvenient historical truth: the confinement of women is not ancient, natural, or culturally inevitable. Queen Amina of Zaria, who commanded an army of twenty thousand soldiers, governed a city-state for thirty-four years, and expanded Zazzau's territory to its greatest borders in the sixteenth century, is the most powerful evidence that Nigerian history itself has always known what the full exercise of female talent can produce. Drawing on this historical foundation, and on the drama of Tess Onwueme, the fiction and feminist essays of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and the civic activism of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti supported by the poetry of Molara Ogundipe-Leslie and the prose of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo the study traces gender protest across five interconnected domains. The theoretical framework draws on Queen Amina's historical example as an African feminist archetype, Ogundipe's Stiwanism, and Ubuntu feminist philosophy. The central argument is that women's protest across all these domains is simultaneously a claim for individual dignity and a contribution to collective human flourishing: the untapped talents, bottled ideas, and suppressed virtues of Nigerian women are not a woman's problem. They are a human problem. In addition, the literature and history examined here makes this case with urgency, moral seriousness, and extraordinary creative force.

Keywords: Gender protest, Queen Amina of Zaria, Nigerian women's literature, female confinement, religious exclusion, professional restriction, civic marginalization, Tess Onwueme, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Stiwanism, Ubuntu feminism, female dignity, collective human flourishing

INTRODUCTION: WHAT HISTORY ALREADY KNEW

In the sixteenth century, a woman named Aminatu, Queen Amina of Zazzau, the Hausa city-state that now bears her sister's name as Zaria, commanded an army of twenty thousand foot soldiers and one thousand cavalry troops, waged continuous military campaigns for thirty-four years, expanded her kingdom's territory to its greatest extent in history, introduced military innovations including iron helmets and chain mail to the Zazzau army, built fortified walls around conquered cities that still stand in northern Nigeria today, and governed one of the most powerful states in West Africa until her death in battle in 1610. The historical record documents her achievements with a clarity that admits no ambiguity. Sultan Bello of Sokoto wrote of her in 1812: 'Strange things have happened in the history of the seven Hausa States, and most strange of these is the extent of the possessions which God gave to Aminatu, daughter of the ruler of Zazzau. She waged war in the Hausa lands and

took them all' (Ibrahim A., 2014; Weller, R., et al., 2026, p. 1440-1830; Modu I., et al., 2024, p. 17-21). For her exploits she earned the title: 'Amina, daughter of Nikatau, a woman as capable as a man' (Bangura S., 2025, 59-76).

This history matters enormously to the argument of this article not merely as an inspiring story but as an epistemological fact. If Queen Amina of Zaria could command armies, govern states, innovate military technology, and build infrastructure in the sixteenth century, then the proposition that women are naturally suited to the kitchen and the bedroom and the domestic compound is not a cultural truth. It is a cultural choice a specific historical construction, shaped and enforced by particular interests at particular moments, and therefore capable of being unmade. The confinement of Nigerian women is not ancient. It is not inevitable; It is, as Ifi Amadiume documented with scholarly precision, significantly a product of colonial governance and Christian missionary activity that imposed European bourgeois gender norms on social arrangements that had previously accommodated considerably greater female authority (Bhattacharji, 2018, pp. 27-41). Queen Amina is the proof, from within Nigerian history itself that those arrangements are not the only ones Nigerian culture has ever known.

This is the foundation on which the protest examined in this article stands. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Tess Onwueme, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo are not importing foreign feminist ideas into Nigerian culture. They are recovering what Nigerian history has always known and what the confinement of women requires us to forget: that women's full exercise of talent, authority, intelligence, and civic capacity is not transgression. It is tradition. It is, in the deepest sense, what Nigerian civilization has already demonstrated itself capable of producing and what it loses, every generation, when it allows the narrow geography of domestic confinement to substitute for the full range of human possibility.

Adichie states the logical conclusion of this argument with characteristic directness: 'Culture does not make people. People make culture. If it is true that the full humanity of women is not our culture, then we can and must make it our culture' (Anand S., 2025, p. 93-107). However, Queen Amina's example suggests something even stronger: the full humanity of women has always been part of Nigerian culture. The task is not to make something new but to remember, and to refuse to forget, what Nigeria has always already been capable of when it does not confine half its people to the domestic threshold.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarship on Nigerian women's literary and civic contributions has grown substantially over four decades, yet it has developed along disciplinary lines; literary criticism, feminist theory, history, political science, that have prevented scholars from reading the full scope of women's protest as a unified phenomenon. Studies of Nigerian feminist drama have focused primarily on Onwueme's theatrical representations of collective female resistance and leadership (Nati, I., 2025, p. 2134-2141; Batra, K., 2011). Studies of Adichie's work have engaged extensively with postcolonial theory, diaspora studies, and global feminism (Aissaoui, S., 2023; Alexander K. and Marianne N., 2013). Historical scholarship on Ransome-Kuti has been treated largely by historians rather than literary scholars (Byfield A., 2016, p. 107-127; Dada, O. 2025, p. 1930-1950). In addition, the historical scholarship on Queen Amina, drawing on the Kano Chronicles, Sultan Bello's Infaq al-Maysur, and more recent historical and archaeological work (Sa'id H., 1978, p. 1807-1919; Gokaru S., 2026, p. 65-116; Garba, A., 2022, p. 1583-2007) has rarely been brought into productive dialogue with literary and feminist cultural criticism.

By reading across these disciplinary boundaries, this article makes visible a coherence in Nigerian women's protest that disciplinary specialization has tended to obscure. The most important theoretical contribution of this cross-disciplinary reading is the reframing of Queen Amina not merely as a historical figure but as what this article terms an African feminist archetype: a historically verified demonstration, from within Nigerian civilization itself, that female authority, military expertise, civic leadership, professional mastery, and political intelligence are not foreign to Nigerian culture but constitutive of its deepest historical achievements.

Ifi Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (Amadiume I., 2015) established the theoretical foundation for this reframing by demonstrating that precolonial African gender arrangements were considerably more fluid

than colonial modernity allowed that the rigid domestic femininity which subsequent generations of Nigerian women protest was significantly a colonial imposition rather than an indigenous inheritance (Amadiume I., 2015). Queen Amina is the most powerful historical confirmation of Amadiume's argument: a sixteenth-century Nigerian woman who exercised military, civic, and economic authority of a kind that the domesticated gender norms of colonial and postcolonial Nigeria have tried to make unthinkable.

Molara Ogundipe's concept of Stiwanism Social Transformation Including Women in Africa situates women's protest within the broader project of postcolonial reconstruction, insisting that women's liberation is inseparable from the project of building just and functional societies (Akingbelue, M., 2025). Stiwanism provides the civic and political framework within which the literary and historical protest examined in this article operates: women are not merely claiming personal freedom but contributing, through their protest, to the reconstruction of a Nigerian public sphere capable of drawing on the full range of its human resources.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's postcolonial feminist critique provides the methodological caution against homogenizing Nigerian women's experience or measuring Nigerian feminist protest by Western feminist templates (Mohanty, 2020, p. 371-391). The protest examined in this article is deeply Nigerian in its forms, its references, and its cultural logic. It draws on Queen Amina's Hausa historical legacy, on the Yoruba civic traditions through which Ransome-Kuti organized, on the Igbo narrative traditions that shape Adichie's and Onwueme's fiction, and on the specifically Nigerian intersections of gender, class, colonialism, and religion that determine the specific forms women's confinement takes and the specific resources available for contesting it.

Ubuntu feminist philosophy, as articulated by scholars including (Keevy I., 2008; Chilisa B., 2024, p. 158-165), provides the ontological grounding: personhood is constituted through relationship, and a society that confines the humanity of any of its members diminishes the humanity of all of them. This principle: 'I am because we are' grounds the article's central claim: that the confinement of women is not a private arrangement but a public impoverishment, and that women's protest against it is, at its deepest level, an act of generosity to the society that has refused their gifts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: QUEEN AMINA AND THE HISTORICAL PROOF OF WOMEN'S FULL HUMANITY

The theoretical framework of this article is built on a foundation that is unusual in feminist literary criticism: not a Western philosophical theory but a Nigerian historical fact. Queen Amina of Zaria, who ruled from approximately 1576 to 1610, commanded twenty thousand soldiers, introduced military innovations to the Zazzau army, built fortified walls across her empire, governed trade routes connecting western Sudan with Egypt and Mali, and expanded her kingdom's territory to its historical maximum represents something that no theoretical argument can match in persuasive force: proof, from within Nigerian history itself, that the confinement of women to the domestic sphere is not natural, inevitable, or culturally necessary.

This article proposes to treat Queen Amina as an African feminist archetype in a specific and theoretically precise sense. An archetype, in this context, is not a myth or an ideal but a historically verified instance of what is possible, a demonstration, grounded in documentary and oral historical record, that certain capabilities, achievements, and forms of authority were exercised by a woman in Nigeria centuries before the colonial period introduced the gender norms that now try to make them seem transgressive. When Onwueme stages a woman ascending to political authority, she is not imagining something unprecedented; she is recovering something historical. When Adichie argues that women's professional ambitions are as legitimate as men's are, she is not adopting a foreign feminist position; she is asserting what Queen Amina's life already established. When Ransome-Kuti led ten thousand women to demand political representation, she was not making a new claim but recovering a principle that Nigerian civilization had already enacted and that colonial governance had suppressed.

Queen Amina's historical example thus functions in this framework as what might be called a counter-memory: a specific, verifiable instance of female authority and capability that the dominant narrative of women's domestic

confinement requires us to forget, and that feminist protest in literature and civic life works to remember and restore. The article draws on this counter-memory not as a romantic nostalgia for a golden past but as a rigorous historical argument: if Nigerian civilization produced Queen Amina once, then the capabilities she exemplified are not alien to Nigerian culture. They are native to it and a culture that suppresses what it has already demonstrated itself capable of producing is a culture that has chosen, for reasons that deserve scrutiny, to make itself smaller.

Two theoretical pillars supplement this historical framework. Ogundipe's Stiwanism situates individual women's protest within the collective and civic project of postcolonial social reconstruction the understanding that women's full participation in Nigerian public life is not merely a matter of individual fairness but a structural condition of the society's capacity to function at its full potential (Akingbelue, M., 2025). Ubuntu feminist philosophy provides the ontological principle that grounds the article's claim about the social cost of women's confinement: in a society where personhood is constituted through relationship and where the humanity of each person is bound up with the humanity of all, the diminishment of women is the diminishment of everyone (Keevy, I., 2008).

Together, these three elements Queen Amina as historical archetype, Stiwanism as civic feminist framework, Ubuntu philosophy as ontological grounding constitute a theoretical framework that is entirely African in its sources and entirely adequate to the complexity of the protest is used to analyze Nigerian women's protest against confinement does not need Western feminist theory to legitimate it. It has Queen Amina.

FIVE DOMAINS OF CONFINEMENT, FIVE MODES OF PROTEST

The Domestic Trap: Women beyond the Kitchen and the Bedroom

Queen Amina of Zaria did not spend her life in a kitchen. She spent it on horseback, at the head of an army, governing a state, building walls that still stand four centuries later. This is not a detail about one exceptional woman; it is a fact about what Nigerian civilization has already shown women to be capable of when it does not confine them to domestic service. The domestic trap the reduction of women's permitted existence to the bedroom, the kitchen, and the compound is not an ancient Nigerian truth. It is a specific historical construction. It is precisely, a construction that Tess Onwueme and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie spend their creative lives dismantling.

Adichie identifies the mechanism of domestic confinement at its most intimate and psychologically precise level. She describes a woman who genuinely hates domestic work but has so thoroughly internalized the social teaching that a good wife must be 'homely' that she spends years performing a love she does not feel. When she finally stops pretending after marriage, her husband's family complains that she has changed. 'Actually, she had not changed,' Adichie observes. 'She just got tired of pretending. The problem with gender is that it prescribes how we should be rather than recognizing how we are' (Aissaoui, S., 2023). The domestic trap, this example reveals, does not merely constrain what women can do. It attacks the authenticity of what women can be demanding a performance of domestic contentment so sustained that it eventually becomes indistinguishable from the self it is performing.

Onwueme's *the Broken Calabash* (Oturuhoyi, O., 2025; Worugji G.) stages this attacks on female selfhood in theatrical terms. The protagonist Ona's refusal of the arranged marriage her family demands is not romantic rebellion but an act of ontological self-preservation: to accept the marriage is to accept a definition of her personhood that reduces her permanently to her domestic and marital utility to others. The broken calabash the cultural vessel of inherited domestic femininity, cracked under the pressure of a woman who has grown beyond what it was designed to contain is Onwueme's central image for the violence that domestic confinement performs on female selfhood. It is not merely a restriction. It is an attempted reduction of personhood to function. In addition, it is, the play insists, a violence that Queen Amina who refused marriage for the fear of losing power (African Feminist Forum, 2016) understood and refused centuries before Ona was written.

Egbung I., (2025, p. 14-18) renders domestic confinement from the inside, in the consciousness of Beatrice Achike, a woman of evident intelligence, moral depth, and emotional richness, whose every capability has been redirected into the management of a household that does not permit her to exist as a full person. The novel refuses to let the reader forget what Beatrice might have been: the small, fierce eruptions of personality that push through even under her husband's weight are evidence of what she contains, and therefore of what the domestic trap has cost not only her but the world that might have benefited from the full expression of her gifts.

Out of the Sacred: Women and Religious Authority

The exclusion of women from religious leadership in contemporary Nigerian life delivers a message that is as theologically presumptuous as it is historically ignorant: that women's relationship to the sacred is inherently mediated, secondary, and insufficient to constitute spiritual authority. The altar is not for you. The pulpit is not for you. The message of the divine passes through men. Queen Amina of Zaria a Muslim ruler who exercised both temporal and sacred-civic authority, who led her people, administered justice, and presided over the governance of a Hausa Islamic state is the historical refutation of this presumption from within Nigerian and Islamic tradition itself.

Adichie addresses religious exclusion with characteristic directness, observing that religious institutions have served as sanctuaries not only for faith but for patriarchal privilege spaces in which the exclusion of women from leadership is dressed in the language of divine order and thereby placed beyond democratic challenge (Singh, R., 2024, p. 116-127). The genius of this theological manoeuvre, she argues, is its apparent humility: it is not that men want to exclude women; it is that God requires this arrangement. Any woman who questions it transgresses not merely institutional authority but divine will. Yet the historical record of Queen Amina presiding over a Muslim Hausa kingdom with authority that the Kano Chronicles document with respect and the Sultan Bello of Sokoto records with admiration suggests that the Islamic and African traditions have not always understood divine order to require women's exclusion from leadership. The exclusion is not theological. It is political.

Nati, I., (2025, p. 2134-2141) dramatizes this political dimension with theatrical force. Wazobia's authority is consistently framed in terms that invoke not merely civic but sacred legitimacy: she is not simply a political leader but a figure through whom the community's relationship to its deepest values justice, accountability, communal flourishing is re-examined and reconfigured. Her governance is ethical and spiritual in the fullest sense: it is leadership that understands itself as answerable to something larger than personal power. In this, she is recognizably in the tradition of Queen Amina, whose campaigns were understood by her people not merely as military expansion but as the exercise of a divinely authorized capacity for governance. By staging Wazobia, Onwueme recovers this tradition for the theatrical imagination of contemporary Nigeria.

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's poetry extends this protest into the domain of women's spiritual self-knowledge, insisting on the validity and depth of women's encounter with the sacred as an independent source of authority not a supplement to masculine religious tradition but a parallel and equally legitimate spiritual intelligence, shaped by the specific experiences of women's lives. This is the spiritual protest at its most intimate and it is most radical: a woman insisting that her encounter with what is holy is real, significant, and authoritative regardless of whether any institution has yet been generous enough to recognize it.

Hands that Cannot Build: Women and Professional Life

Queen Amina of Zaria introduced iron helmets and chain mail to the Zazzau army. She built fortified walls the ganuwar Amina around cities across her empire, many of which remain standing today. She was a military innovator, an architect, an engineer, and an economic strategist who organized trade routes connecting western Sudan with Egypt and Mali and made Zazzau the commercial centre of southern Hausaland (Mustapha, A., and Bello Y., 2025, p. 1-22; Iwueze, D. and Umasom, A., 2024. P. 14-31). By any reasonable standard, she was a professional skilled, innovative, and productive in domains that contemporary Nigerian social convention reserves exclusively for men.

The exclusion of women from skilled trades and learned professions in contemporary Nigeria, from carpentry, masonry, plumbing, electrical work, estate management, and engineering, as well as from law, medicine, and academia at the highest levels is enforced not by formal decree but by the accumulated weight of social expectation: the workshop that has never had a female apprentice, the professional culture that has never imagined training a girl, the family that steers its daughters toward 'appropriate' work without ever questioning the categorization. Adichie diagnoses the social mechanism that sustains this exclusion with precision: 'We have been so conditioned to think of power as male that a powerful woman is an aberration. And so she is policed. We ask of powerful women: Is she humble? Does she smile? Is she grateful enough? Does she have a domestic side?' (Walker, M., 2019). The professional woman is surveilled for signs of improper ambition in ways that her male colleagues simply are not. The surveillance is the system: it makes the cost of female professional ambition high enough that many women choose, rationally, to redirect their capabilities into domains where they will be less harshly judged.

Adimora-Ezeigbo's fiction stages these professional conditions from the inside, in the consciousness of women navigating careers in law, academia, and public administration in contemporary Nigeria. Her female characters are precise analysts of the structural conditions they inhabit: the double labour of performing competence in environments that doubt it, the social tax of maintaining domestic performance while pursuing professional achievement, the dependence on individual male sponsors in institutions that have built no formal pathways for women's advancement. Their protest is enacted not through dramatic confrontation but through the steady, patient, expensive work of continuing to show up to perform, to advance, to refuse to be redirected in the face of systems that have not been designed to accommodate them.

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti addressed the economic foundations of women's professional exclusion through her organizing work among the market women of Abeokuta. She identified with exceptional clarity the structural connection between women's economic exploitation and their professional limitation: a tax system that required girls as young as fifteen to pay income tax while exempting boys until eighteen; market controls that suppressed the incomes of women traders; and the systematic denial of access to capital and training that confined women to the most precarious forms of economic participation (Abdulkareem, K., 2025, p. 87-104). Her framing of these conditions under the universal civic principle of 'No taxation without representation' was itself a professional act of the highest order a feat of political and rhetorical strategy that transformed a complaint into a constitutional argument and an organized community of market women into one of the most effective civic advocacy organizations in colonial Nigerian history (Cruz, J., 2020, p.101-105).

Barred from the Bench: Women, Civic Authority, and Judicial Life

Queen Amina of Zaria presided over a kingdom. She adjudicated disputes, organized governance, commanded military forces, managed tribute systems, and exercised the full range of civic and judicial authority that was available to any ruler of her time and place. She did this not as an exception to the political order but as its embodiment the legitimate Sarauniya of Zazzau, recognized by her own people, documented in the Kano Chronicles, and praised by Sultan Bello of Sokoto as one of the most extraordinary rulers in Hausa history. The idea that women are naturally unsuited to civic and judicial authority is not a truth that Nigerian history supports. It is a claim that Nigerian history actively refutes and that the political exclusion of women has required sustained ideological effort to maintain against the evidence.

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti understood this historical evidence with exceptional clarity and deployed it as a political argument. When she led an estimated ten thousand women to the palace of the Alake of Abeokuta in November 1947, demanding both an end to discriminatory taxation and the inclusion of women in local governance, she was not making a new claim but recovering a civic principle that Nigerian tradition had itself established and colonial governance had suppressed (Onajin, A. and Obioma O., 2015). The Abeokuta Women's Union's chosen slogan 'No taxation without representation' was strategically brilliant precisely because it grounded the demand for women's civic inclusion in the universal language of democratic governance rather than in the language of gender grievance. The women were not asking for a favour. They were asserting a right

that the tradition of civic governance, including the tradition exemplified by Queen Amina, had already established as legitimate.

The results of the AWU's sustained campaign, which drew more than ten thousand women to a single demonstration in November 1949 and eventually forced the temporary abdication of the Alake in 1949 included four women gaining seats on the local council and the abolition of women's taxation (Amy, N., 2016). These were concrete civic achievements, won through organized collective action, that demonstrated precisely what Onwueme stages theatrically in *The Reign of Wazobia*: that women's civic intelligence, when it is organized and allowed to express itself, is not merely equal to men's but distinctively valuable bringing to governance a set of experiences, knowledge, and ethical commitments that the exclusively male political structures of colonial and postcolonial Nigeria had systematically excluded.

Adichie addresses the contemporary dimensions of women's civic exclusion with characteristic directness, connecting the persistent underrepresentation of women in Nigerian political institutions to the social conditioning that teaches girls from childhood that public life is not their domain. The circularity of this logic women, are underrepresented because they are told civic life is not for them, and they are told civic life is not for them because they are underrepresented is its most self-perpetuating feature. Breaking the circle requires, as both Ransome-Kuti and Adichie demonstrate in different registers, the willingness to name the circle as what it is: not nature but politics, not tradition but choice, and therefore capable of being unmade.

The Silenced Muse: Women's Artistic and Intellectual Life

The suppression of women's artistic and intellectual gifts is the domain of confinement whose costs are most difficult to calculate because what is lost is not a specific product but a way of seeing, a set of questions that only she would have thought to ask, a perspective on the world that only her specific experience of being in the world could have produced. Queen Amina's walls are still standing in northern Nigeria. The works that might have been produced by the women who were confined to domestic labour while Amina's walls were being built and in every generation since are lost without record. We do not even know what we are missing.

Flora Nwapa's existence as Nigeria's first published female novelist was itself a protest against this suppression not a declaration of protest but a demonstration of one. When *Efuru* appeared in 1966, it showed what the literary establishment had not yet acknowledged: that a Nigerian woman's way of seeing the world could sustain a novel; that the experiences of women's lives contained the complexity, moral seriousness, and narrative richness that literature requires; that the exclusion of women's perspectives from Nigerian literary culture had impoverished that culture in ways it could not even perceive, because it did not know what it was not seeing. Nwapa did not argue for women's intellectual authority. She enacted it.

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's career as both poet and feminist theorist embodies this protest in its most complete form. Her poetry grounded in Yoruba oral tradition, alive to the textures of Nigerian women's experience of colonialism and its aftermath, attentive to the specific intersections of gender, class, and cultural hybridity that shape Nigerian women's lives represents exactly the kind of creative and intellectual contribution that women's confinement tries to prevent. Her theoretical work in (Ojem, O. and Phemelo O., 2025, 24226-24244) demonstrates that Nigerian women's intellectual engagement with questions of gender, power, and social transformation constitutes an independent and original contribution to human thought not a local application of Western feminist theory but an African feminist epistemology grounded in African women's specific historical experience.

Adichie's entire body of work is, among other things, a sustained argument for the intellectual authority of Nigerian women's perspectives. When she teaches girls in *We Should All Be Feminists* to refuse shame, to claim ambition without apology, and to insist on their right to full humanity, she is doing what Queen Amina did with a sword and what Ransome-Kuti did with an organized women's union: asserting, through the specific medium available to her, that the confinement of women's minds and voices is not natural, not necessary, and not acceptable.

'We teach girls to shrink themselves,' Adichie writes. 'We say to girls, you can have ambition, but not too much' (Emezi, S., 2020). Against this teaching and in the tradition of a warrior queen who commanded twenty thousand soldiers and built walls that have outlasted four centuries Adichie's writing teaches something different: that there is no upper limit on what women can produce when the domestic trap does not hold them.

The Human Cost: Bottled Ideas, Wasted Talents, Untapped Virtues

Queen Amina's walls still stand. They stand because a woman with the authority, the resources, and the freedom to exercise her full professional and civic capabilities built them and built them so well that four centuries of weather, war, and the passage of empires have not brought them down. They are, in the most literal sense, the physical evidence of what women's unconstrained talent can produce. They are also, in an equally literal sense, an indictment of every generation since that has decided women's capabilities are better directed toward the kitchen and the bedroom than toward the construction of things that last.

The concept of bottled ideas central to this article's argument refers to precisely this: the capabilities, insights, innovations, and creative productions that remain trapped inside women who have not been permitted to exercise them. A woman who has spent decades managing the complex logistics of a large household the financial planning, the relationship negotiation, the anticipation of needs, and the coordination of multiple competing demands has developed organizational, strategic, and interpersonal capabilities that would be extraordinarily valuable in public management, legal practice, civic governance, or professional leadership. However, if the social script tells her that these capabilities are merely domestic, that they do not constitute professional expertise or civic intelligence, then they remain bottled: available to the family but unavailable to the wider society whose problems they could help solve.

The concept of untapped virtues is equally significant. The virtues cultivated by women in the performance of caregiving, community management, and domestic provision patience, attentiveness to need skill at negotiation, sensitivity to relational dynamics, the capacity to sustain commitment through difficulty are not inferior to the virtues cultivated in public life. They are different, and in many public contexts desperately needed. A judicial system that excludes women from its bench is a judicial system that lacks the perspective of people whose lives have given them specific insight into the kinds of vulnerability and exploitation that courts most often adjudicate. A religious institution that excludes women from its leadership is a religious community that preaches to its congregation without the theological insight of people whose spiritual lives have been shaped by experiences of caregiving, vulnerability, and moral labor. The exclusion of women's virtues from public life is not neutral. It is a structural deficiency a deliberate choice to function at reduced capacity.

Ransome-Kuti's life demonstrated, with the clarity of historical fact, what becomes possible when women's civic intelligence is organized and directed at specific institutional targets. Ten thousand women, organized around a clear civic argument and a disciplined strategy of nonviolent mass protest, forced the temporary abdication of a king, won seats on a local council, and abolished a discriminatory tax. The talent that produced this achievement was not imported; it was always there, in the market women of Abeokuta, in the educated women of the Abeokuta Ladies Club, in Ransome-Kuti herself. What changed was not the talent but the conditions under which it could be exercised. This is what the protest examined throughout this article insists: it is not that women lack the capabilities that civic, professional, religious, and artistic life require. It is that those capabilities have been systematically prevented from contributing to the society that needs them.

Onwueme's Wazobia shows us this prevention at its most theatrical and its most ironic. A woman who governs with evident competence, ethical seriousness, and genuine attention to the needs of her community is removed from power not because she has failed but because she has succeeded and her success has made visible the fact that the structures designed to exclude her from governance were never about competence. They were about gender. Her removal is not a political judgment but a political reflex: the system reasserting its exclusions precisely because they have been revealed, by her governance, to be indefensible on any grounds other than the circular logic of tradition. Wazobia's brief reign is, in miniature, the argument of this entire article: when women are permitted to exercise their full capabilities, they do so with a distinction that makes the confinement of those capabilities look not merely unjust but absurd.

CONCLUSION: REMEMBERING WHAT NIGERIA ALREADY KNOWS

The women whose work and lives this article has examined Tess Onwueme, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, and the historical figure of Queen Amina of Zaria whose example grounds the entire argument are not importing foreign ideas into Nigerian culture. They are performing an act of cultural recovery: insisting that Nigeria remember what it has always already known about women's capabilities, and demanding that what is remembered be allowed to shape what becomes possible.

Queen Amina's walls are the most concrete expression of this argument. They stand in northern Nigeria not as a monument to an exceptional woman but as physical evidence of what Nigerian civilization has already produced when it did not confine half its people to the domestic threshold. They are not a foreign achievement. They are not a Western feminist fantasy. They are Nigerian built by a Nigerian woman, from within Nigerian civilization, using capabilities that were recognized and supported by her society rather than suppressed and redirected into domestic service. They are the answer, in stone and earth, to every argument that women's full exercise of talent, authority, and civic capability is alien to Nigerian culture.

The protest examined across this article in drama, prose, poetry, and civic action; across the five domains of domestic life, religious authority, professional practice, civic governance, and artistic creation is ultimately a protest in the name of this evidence. It is a demand that Nigerian society stop choosing to forget what it has already demonstrated, and start building institutions, cultural norms, and social conditions adequate to what its own history proves it capable of producing.

The costs of not doing so are specific, cumulative, and devastating. Every woman whose professional capabilities are redirected into domestic service represents a structure that was not built, a case that was not argued, a diagnosis that was not made, a poem that was not written, a civic judgment that was not rendered. Every woman whose spiritual authority is denied by a church that reserves its altar for men represents a congregation that hears only half of what God might have said through the full range of human spiritual experience. Every woman who is taught to shrink herself, to want less, to be ambition-lite represents a diminishment not only of herself but also of the society that has taught her this diminishment as a virtue.

The discovery and harnessing of women's full capabilities their intellectual gifts, their professional expertise, their civic intelligence, their spiritual authority, their artistic vision is not, in the end, a feminist project in any narrow sense. It is a human project: the project of a society choosing to be as large, as capable, and as just as it already knows how to be. Queen Amina's walls have been standing for four centuries. It is time the society that built them remembered what it is capable of and built accordingly.

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