

Ugwu's Biafra:  
Individual and National Modes of Sovereignty and Resistance in  
Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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The historical trajectory of the concept of “sovereignty” has its foundations in the societal workings of pre-historical eras, prior to the documentation of history as an academic resource in the growth and development of populations. As global cultures have grown from their formulaic primitive states and have developed into more a complex series of relationships between political, economic, and social ideas, the idea of sovereignty has been recontextualized to adapt to the ever-changing political landscape. Though existing almost solely in our contemporary vernacular as a method of discussing the theoretical frameworks of political states, the primitive foundational idea of sovereignty allows for a similarly archaic definition: absolute power, control, or authority within a defined area. The way that sovereignty has been historically defined leaves ample room for the reinterpretation and reapplication of the term. Thus, if political sovereignty is indicative of the ability of a nation to self-govern (possessing the dominance in its established government to rule without the intrusion of external political rule), then personal sovereignty is indicative of the ability of an individual, and further, the establishment of this ability, to remain the sole authoritative figure presiding over their personal being, both internally and externally.

Sovereignty becomes a key point of contention in the consideration of Chimamanda Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which has a narrative split between the early sixties and the late sixties--the years just prior to the secession of Biafra and the duration of the Nigerian-Biafran War beginning in 1967, respectively. The landscape of Adichie’s text is heavily influenced by the historical and political trajectories of Nigeria in its colonial inauguration, making the movements of the Nigerian people toward sovereignty in all stages of its history a critical foreground for the analysis of the text. Nigeria has historically sought the absolute framework of

sovereignty, and the movement of the Igbo people toward sovereign rule in their secession from Nigeria is heavily weighted in the consideration of the nation's unstable relationship to the idea of self-government.

Nigeria was a colony of Britain until the Western empire ended its colonization in 1960. When Britain established Nigeria as a colony, it was through the arbitrary jointure of two unlike territories, which thus became the Northern and Southern Nigerian protectorates. This allowed Britain to financially kickstart the struggling Northern economy with the more lucrative economy of the Southern protectorate, whose financial gain was far outweighing the expenses of administration. When Britain decolonized in 1960, Nigeria sought to establish rigid territorial, economic, and political boundaries with the Nigerian Independence Act, the presumed first step in the nation's own establishment of its sovereignty and its self-determination in the wake of absolute British rule (Falola 14). The Nigerian Independence Act establishes the following: "Her Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom shall have no responsibility for the government of Nigeria or any part thereof; and the provisions of the First Schedule to this Act shall have effect with respect to legislative powers in Nigeria" (1.2). Despite this newfound establishment of Nigerian independence and the earnestness of the nation to move forward as unified whole, the inherent division of Nigeria, Africa's most diverse and populous nation at the time, is ultimately what prevented the nation from becoming a unified, self-determining territory. Essentially, Britain's methods of colonizing in the amalgamation of two differing territories in the emergence of a modern Nigeria in 1914 can be readily perceived as the foundational root of the ethnic and cultural tensions that sparked the Nigerian-Biafran War just a few short years following the nation's independence from Britain (Falola 78). Besides convenience and presumed capitalist

gain for Britain, the joining of a largely Muslim Northern Nigeria and a predominantly Christian Southern Nigeria made little sense culturally, leaving the amalgamation under British rule understandably lacking the innate ability to establish for itself a nationalist sense following its gain of independence in 1960. Awolowo, an important nationalist figure of the Southern Nigerian protectorate, declared Nigeria more of a “geographical expression” than a nation (Sklar 233). The decolonizing of an already-divided Nigeria seems a formulaic contestation of the essentiality of third-party ruling by Britain, and the conflict was exacerbated by the removal of Britain from the nation’s government.

Biafra, too, sought the absolute authority to self-govern in its secession from Nigeria, a political establishment of forthright independence fueled by Christian anxieties about the political domination of the Muslim Northern protectorate. Biafra was largely constructed by the Igbo people, a Southern-Nigerian ethnic group classified by the Igboid linguistic frame, geographical orientation, and a syncretism between Christianity and the indigenous Igbo systems of belief, or rather, a Christian worldview rooted in tribalism. In his text *Africa in Modern History: The Search of a New Society*, theorist Basil Davidson suggests that the construction of Biafra was the secondary period of Nigeria’s resistance to Britain’s colonization (with the first being the establishment of Nigeria as wholly independent from Britain), and that the “ideological resistance” associated with Biafra’s formulation was an effort to “reconstitute a shattered community, to save and restore the sense and fact of community against all the pressures of the colonial system” (155). Thus, in the furrow of colonialist retraction, the Igbo people established Biafra as a self-governing territory seeking political recognition in May of 1967, seeking absolute sovereignty almost immediately upon secession with their territorial geographical

division from Nigeria, the first step in defining the area in which governing will occur. Biafra also sought immediate sovereignty in their institutional creation of The Bank of Biafra, leaving the nation with its own tender and circulation to create an economy beyond the already-existing Nigerian economy. Additionally, Biafra had a self-supported military, manufacturing their own artillery forces within the confines of the Biafran territory. It is projected that the Biafran army grew from approximately 3,000 soldiers at the start of the Nigerian-Biafran War to approximately 30,000 when Biafra fell (Uzokwe 117). However, this is not solely through the willingness of Biafran men to join the ranks fighting for sovereignty, but rather through a forced conscription of young men into the army in the attempted formulation of a populous nationalist identity for Biafra.

Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* holds a primary focus on a group of fictional Igbo people who become part of the Biafran secession, identifying strongly with the nationalist movements of Biafra, but whose lives are entirely deconstructed and foundationally uprooted by the afflictions of the Nigerian-Biafran War. The text utilizes a fissured narrative, holding varying focus and shifting in each chapter between Olanna, the wife of revolutionary academic Odenigbo; Richard, a white Nigerian transplant identifying strongly with the nationalist movement of Biafra; and Ugwu, a village boy who moves to a more urban area of Nigeria to serve as houseboy to Odenigbo, and later, Odenigbo's growing family. Ugwu, the youngest of Adichie's primary characters, serves as a tremendous symbolic representation of Nigeria's historical orbit around absolute sovereignty. Adichie accomplishes this feat in the splintered relationship of Ugwu to his own inherent masculinity, an important and recurring theme in *Half of a Yellow Sun* which textually instigates an exploration of the disparities between the relationship of gender to power

in indigenous and nonindigenous cultural structures. Throughout the text, Ugwu's establishment of his own personal sovereignty is directly affected by this relationship of Ugwu to the gendered constructs of his culture, and ultimately by the ways in which he chooses to either identify or to disidentify with the rural tribalist beliefs about gender or the more Westernized beliefs about gender which infringe upon Nigerian culture in the urban interchanging and melding of ideals as a direct result of colonization. The personal sovereignty which Ugwu gains from resisting conceptualized ideals of masculinity serves as a textual representation of the resistance of the Biafran people to the colonizer's forced amalgamation of Nigeria, and ultimately to the tensions caused by the imposed cultural synthesis of variant systems of belief.

Ugwu moves from Obukpa, a scarcely-populated village of Nigeria, to the much more greatly-populated Nsukka, a central urban hub of Nigeria's Westernization under British rule, with both areas existing as primarily Igbo territories. This geographical movement of Ugwu from a rural, indigenous area of Southeastern Nigeria to a more urban area displaced from indigeneity is indicative of an immediate migration of cultural understanding -- it can be assumed that a thirteen-year-old Ugwu would carry with him, as anyone would, the landscape of an indigenous understanding of the world. Throughout the text, readers experience his gradual Westernization as a result of his transplantation into an urban zone most specifically through his linguistic acquisition of standard English, a language which he had little exposure to and understood very little of before moving to Nsukka. However, there is little textual indication that Ugwu's system of spiritual belief (and further, how indigenous spirituality affects the interpretation and regard of objective human relationships) is altered in his geographical movement of location. Thus, the

practices of indigenous Igbo spirituality begin to hold weight in the exploration of Ugwu as a symbol of resistance.

Igbo religious practice, which has historically manifested itself as a hybridization of Christian theology and indigenous Igbo spirituality, has an inarguable influence on the cultural actualization of the Igbo people. Thus, a need to assess the varying ways in which gender is regarded across these models of spirituality arises. The very model of indigenous Igbo spirituality has its roots in the feminine mode of existence -- their most highly-regarded deity is Ani, “the goddess of the Earth” (310), as outlined in David O. Ogunbile’s text *African Indigenous Religious Traditions in Local and Global Contexts: Perspectives on Nigeria*. Because of Ani, Igbo people practicing traditional indigenous spirituality have a higher regard for womanhood than those in Western cultures and systems of belief. Ani is traditionally depicted “a mother with a child ... on her knees with a sword in hand” (Ogunbile 310). This symbolic merging of the nature of maternity and the power status which accompanies the handling of weaponry is an early indication of the methods by which the Igbo people characterize femininity in their culture.

According to Chinyere Ukpokolo, in her 2010 article entitled “Gender, Space and Power in the Indigenous Igbo Socio-Political Organization,” the idea of power as it relates to gender holds a vastly different meaning in indigenous Igbo culture than it does in Western cultures, where we perceive the binaric gender relationship as a universal standard. Ukpokolo asserts the following: “The juxtaposition of women’s groups and men’s groups is not in binary opposition but within the context that reflects inter-group complementality, which recognizes sameness in difference. The inter-relatedness of groups inherent and instituted in the body polity ensures that

power is not concentrated on a single individual or group of individuals” (184). A Western understanding of gender relation almost directly opposes this idea in the historical imposition of the male figure as the primary authoritative possessor of cultural and social significance and power. In Igbo culture, male heads of household are expected to provide for their families financially, but their power is mutually balanced with the traditional responsibilities of womanhood, making men and women mutually dependent and in a perpetually symmetrical state of unity.

Also critically regarded in indigenous Igbo spiritual practices are “zones of power” (184), spatial areas which attribute social and political weight to those who occupy them. Ukpokolo uses the domestic sphere and the standard spaces within this sphere as a foundational spatial reality indicative of more significant relations of gender among the Igbo. She suggests that the domestic spaces of Igbo households are generally regarded as zones of feminine power, and that decisions made by the male head of household in his own domestic sphere (a smaller space regarded as the “obi” [178]) must not encroach on the declarations of the female head of household, making the female powerful not only in her own feminine power zone but within the male’s zone of power as well. Accompanied by the high regard for femininity within indigenous Igbo culture, the idea of powerful feminine spaces is crucial in the consideration of Ugwu’s acquired identification with domesticity in *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

In the first chapter of Ugwu’s narrative, which chronicles the very start of his transition to Odenigbo’s home in Nsukka, his youthful engrossment with domestic work emerges. Though the indigenous gender roles of Igbo people are not outlined in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, it is assumed through the following passage of Ugwu’s narrative that domestic spaces are women’s spaces in



his indigenous culture: “Often, when his mother was sick with the coughing, he wished that he, and not Anulika, would cook. He had never told anyone this, not even Anulika; she had already told him he spent too much time around women cooking, and he might never grow a beard if he kept doing that” (15). This passage about Ugwu’s private enthrallment with cooking informs from our introduction to Ugwu that he is personally gratified by domestic work. Further, his sister Anulika’s reaction to Ugwu’s enduring presence in the Igbo’s feminine zones of power is indicative of the rarity of male identification with domestic work in indigenous Igbo culture, an area of labor culturally reserved for the allotment of power to women occupying domestic space. However, it is a fixation that Ugwu does not see as inherently subversive or in innate defiance of his indigenous culture; thus, he carries it with him to Nsukka and to his new post of employment.

When Ugwu first arrives at Odenigbo’s home, the dialogue between the two suggests that Ugwu’s responsibilities as houseboy would not even involve cooking for Odenigbo. Ugwu’s master states the following: “I eat mostly at the staff club. I suppose I shall have to bring more food home now that you are here,” to which Ugwu responds “I can cook, sah” (14). Odenigbo’s positive reaction and response to Ugwu’s proclamation of ability is the first textual presentation of a sense of personal sovereignty to Ugwu. Since Odenigbo does not occupy the kitchen in his home, eating mostly beyond the confines of his residence, the kitchen from this point forward becomes Ugwu’s space, his own zone of power, and it remains as such until Odenigbo and his growing family are forced out of Nsukka at the start of the Nigerian-Biafran War. In their displacement, Ugwu continues to acknowledge the significant responsibility that he has chosen to espouse, ensuring that Odenigbo and Olanna’s baby is properly nourished, and

eventually embracing a role as one of Baby's primary caregivers, adopting a role similar to a Nanny.

While this identification with feminine power zones as they apply to indigenous Igbo culture could be interpreted as a resistance to indigenous masculinity, Ugwu is occupying a fragmented nation which is newly-independent from Britain's empire. Thus, in the trajectory of Ugwu's textual relationship to masculinity, it is evident that while he is fulfilling the roles associated with indigenous women, he is similarly resisting the Western modes of masculinity which begin to infiltrate the text's consciousness. This infiltration is primarily evident in the presence of the professors of the University of Nsukka, a Nigerian educational institution established by the European union in the pursuit of bringing Western modes of education to indigenous Nigerian cultures. Odenigbo, in his employment, comes to embody a changing sense of masculinity in his active engagement with political and intellectual ideas and the passive observance of and separation from indigeneity. This sense of Westernized masculinity, creating a sharp contrast to the textual understanding of indigenous masculinity which is gleaned from Ugwu's narrative, is an inevitable repercussion of two primary circumstances which must be acknowledged to make the implicit parallels between Ugwu and Biafra. The first, reflecting a more individualized reading of Ugwu as a symbol of resistance to colonialism and Western ideology, is the geographical movement of Ugwu to an urban zone of contact, wherein indigeneity and its ideals would encounter and directly conflict with Western ideology. The second is the ascendance of Biafra in the wake of colonialism and the methods by which the budding nation resists the acts of their colonizers while attempting to maintain a sense of resistance and momentum independent of Western ideology. The presence of Western dogma

paired with the national consciousness of the colonized people to resist the elemental principles of Westernization is inarguably the primary cause of both Ugwu's personal resistance and Biafra's national resistance to the indigenous understanding of Westernism in their analogous seeking of sovereignty.

The resistance of what is forcefully imposed is a natural human response to such an imposition. Elleke Boehmer, in his article "Networks of Resistance," discusses the methods by which resistance movements are formed on a nationalist level, which can then be narrowed to examine Ugwu's resistance on a more individualized level. This article specifically discusses the cross-cultural interchanging of ideas that occurs as a result of colonialism, and how the language, belief systems, and methods of the colonizers are recontextualized and reactualized in the pursuit of the colonized people to develop movements of anti-colonial resistance. There is an interesting image that recurs in Boehmer's text of cross-border contact, and the idea inherent in colonialist action of "reach[ing] beyond cultural and geopolitical boundaries" (114). Boehmer asserts that both the colonizer in their methods of colonization and the colonized in their methods of colonial resistance must perform this action, a mirror-like effect that can have some troubling ironies in the assessment and analysis of said resistance movements. This is inherently transgressive, as the embodiment of the very modes of existence which such resistant movements attempt to counter presents a comparative hypocrisy in the analysis of the dichotomy. Boehmer imagines that anti-colonialists, "...poised between the cultural traditions of home on the one hand and their education on the other, [occupy] a site of potentially productive inbetweenness where they might observe other resistance histories and political approaches in order to work out how themselves to proceed" (115). Essentially, the colonial action or ideology is eventually mimicked in any

incarnation of anti-colonial resistance which pursues a departure from such ideology. The reasons why this must occur vary, and several are represented textually in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* in the seeming consolidation and dissolution of Ugwu and Biafra's collective methods of resistance to colonialism.

Considered one of the darkest points of Biafra's existence is the period of self-preserving war-time conscription, during which any boy aged 15 or older was forcibly recruited into the Biafran army. This period is historically regarded as Biafra's final act of desperation before their dissolution back into Nigeria. *Half of a Yellow Sun* chronicles Ugwu's own conscription into the Biafran army, and the subsequent dissolution of his resistance and his personal sovereignty. Ugwu, first occupying the feminine power zone in Odenigbo's Nsukka home, becomes farther and farther removed from the physical confines of a domestic space with as much specificity as a kitchen, a den, or another living space in which he would gain power from domestic labor. He becomes displaced in the detachment from the Nsukka home, but not disconnected entirely from these zones of power, as he then lives in a series of places which do not have physical domestic spaces like the ones he occupied in Nsukka, but instead in places which still allow the performance of the role which accompanies the occupying of such spaces. When Ugwu is conscripted, his self-determination is almost entirely stripped from him in his removal by force from his home with Odenigbo's family, but also from the role of domesticity which he had occupied and gained his sense of self-government from, the singular method of action which had up until his conscription offered him his truest understanding of self and personal sovereignty. Ugwu's narrative changes, and we begin to lose sight of the emotive and

anxious boy who had, up until this point, served as a third-party propeller of the tale of Biafra's resistance.

Comparatively, though, Biafra's methods of conscripting its citizens unwillingly into the war which was devastating all facets of life in both Biafra and Nigeria also seems a dissolution of Biafra's sense of its own ability to self-govern. The nature of Biafra's resistance was its inherent opposition to the colonial action of the aggregational imposition of colonial power on Nigeria -- first, the culturally ungrounded division of Nigeria without regard to the people's own nationalist sense of community and societal engagement; and second, the continual imposition, even following the nation's gaining of independence, of Western ideology on the cultural indigeneity of Nigeria's people. Frantz Fanon, a post-colonial theorist, asserts in his article "National Culture" that "to fight for a national culture means in the first place to fight for the liberation of the nation, that material keystone which makes the building of a culture possible" (120). Fanon's assertion is particularly relevant in the consideration of Nigeria's amalgamation and the notion of Nigeria's citizens that what they inherently lacked was a nationalist sense with a collective national culture and further, the ability to be banded by this culture. A young Biafra and the luminaries of this nation, in the pursuit of remedying the cultural divide between the Nigerian people, believed that war was a necessary step in establishing Biafra's national culture, and thus, the conscription is justified in this pursuit. Collectively, the people of Biafra were seeking sovereignty, the ability of their nation to self-govern without imposition of external political influence. However, by forcing its citizens to conscript and join the ranks of soldiers fighting for the collective sovereignty of Biafra, it is correspondingly infringing on its citizens' abilities to practice their own personal sovereignty, a political and cultural paradox which leaves

Biafra in a position similar to Britain's prior to Nigeria's independence. This method of erasure in the removal of the ability of Biafra's citizens to resist is echoing the earlier colonial influence over what would become Biafra, verifying the theoretical work of Elleke Boehmer. Biafra's method of resistance and acquisition of sovereignty becomes rooted in the colonial framework of securing power over a people and using that power as a method of controlling them and restricting their own free will.

In his criticism of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, John C. Hawley states that the Nigerian-Biafran War, while stemming from a promising movement of a nation toward its sovereignty, becomes "a vortex that threatens to pull [Adichie's] characters apart" (18) and this assertion is actualized as Ugwu becomes an obvious victim of this embodiment and mimicking of colonial action by a young Biafra, his character beginning to reflect the severance of the boy from his own ability to self-govern. Ugwu becomes known as "Target Destroyer" post-conscription, indicating a textual linguistic departure from an Ugwu who possesses a strong sense of his own personal sovereignty to an Ugwu who has been stripped of this sense. He joins the collective consciousness of Biafra's war effort in his engagement in war-time violence, and perhaps most troublingly, he uncharacteristically engages in a gang rape, which shows an acute disconnect from Ugwu's previous valuing of the feminine above all else. Romantic love which he had felt for women prior to his conscription had been disrupted by the men of Biafra's army, an embodiment of a colonial masculinity, with this foreign form of aggressive and violent masculinity directly conflicting with what Ugwu's comparatively believes about the Igbo zones of gender and power. Following Eberechi's abandonment of her presumed romantic relationship with Ugwu for a forced sexual engagement with a soldier, Ugwu narrates the following passage: "He felt angry

that she had gone through what she had, and he felt angry with himself because the story had involved imagining her naked and had aroused him. He thought, in the following days, about him and Eberечи in bed, how different it would be from her experience with the colonel. He would treat her with the respect she deserved and do only what she liked only what she wanted him to do” (Adichie 294). The last line in particular, and the anger that is embodied by Ugwu in this structurally emotive analysis of Eberечи’s lack of consent, effectively demonstrates how Ugwu interprets these sexual behaviors of men, which makes his engagement in the gang rape all the more troubling. It is not until Ugwu is forced into his new form of colonial masculinity, paired with his departure from Igbo femininity which has granted him his sovereignty, that he feels the pressure to engage in sexual violence as he does.

In her article “Rape, Race, and Colonial Culture,” Pamela Scully explores the history of rape as a colonial weapon of war. Though there is no historical context suggesting that rape was used as a method of submission by British colonizers in Nigeria specifically, the rape of indigenous African women by European settlers has gained historical prevalence in the analysis of Britain’s empire and the methods by which the empire attained its territories (355). An analysis of rape in a colonial setting surfaces an inevitable focus on the ways in which rape is used to attain power, but not merely physical or sexual power. Monique Y. Tschofen suggests that through rape “power over the body, power over social subjects, economic power, and political power” is gained (503). Thus, this method of attaining power, which has been historically utilized by colonizers in their pursuit of control and the methodical acquisition of territory, becomes disconnected from the innate sexuality of human beings and is actualized as a social or political act instead of an intimate one. If it is, historically, a method of acquisition,

particularly of power, then this intercultural violence associated colonialism seeks to mark the victims of these actions, creating a clear psychological trajectory associated with the struggle for power. In her criticism of Adichie's text, Zoe Norridge observes the most obvious difference between Ugwu and his colonizer in that "the soldiers are located in Biafra, raping one of their own, with none of the strategic purpose of abjection, marking, and pollution attributed to many sexual war crimes" (26). Instead, Ugwu's engagement in the rape is conceptually comparable to Biafra's methods of conscripting its own citizens -- there is a necessity ingrained in the history of the Nigerian people to use political power and control as a primary method of actualizing sovereignty, for the self or otherwise. Ugwu, like Biafra itself, is engaging in an act which reflects and parallels the actions and purposes of Nigeria's colonizers, which marries Ugwu to his country textually as both of their methods of resistance and sovereignty dissolve into the inescapable foreground of politically- and culturally-imposed Westernism.

The framing of this historical text, with the recent decolonization of the nation by Britain on the text's horizon, leaves the young nation situated for a hopeful future free of Britain's imposition in their carrying-on as a geographical entity. However, the methods by which Britain unified African territories and divided them by cultural presence left an inescapable colonial influence on the nation as it moved forward. Plagued by the influence of its colonizers, Biafra attempts to move forward and attain the sovereignty that colonialism restricts. Adichie's Ugwu comes to represent Biafra, and further, he represents the journey of the indigenous that Biafra itself historically embodies. These entities, engaging with a framework of theory which Adichie actualizes on both an individual level and on a national level in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, seek above all else a realization of their profound indigeneity in their establishment of self-determination or



sovereignty, free from their oppressors and the imposition of Western ideology in their geographical region of culture and expression. Both the individualized and nationalized movements toward absolute sovereignty fail, and according to the theory surfacing in post-colonial global landscape, the transgressive nature of engaging with the ideas and methods of a third world colonizer is at the root of the implosion of forward-moving resistance toward sovereignty independent of Western imposition. Together, Ugwu and Biafra fall, their sovereignty dissolves, and the indigenous modes of resistance which they had come to embody and tentatively actualize collapse into a modern hierarchy of colonial empire.

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