

***The Missing Face: A Discovery of Identity through Colonialism, Masculinity and
Femininity, and the Production of Social and Global Justice***

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History 489

October 2015

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Abstract:

The Missing Face, a musical drama written for the voices of color, explores a series of issues that are often presented to Africans, and descendants of Africans. The play acknowledges such topics as identity, displacement, masculinity, and femininity. In order to better understand the intersectionality of these facets, I have thoroughly researched such topics, conducted interviews, and visited the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire's Archives and Special Collections to gain a broader perspective. Throughout this research paper, I will discuss the effects of British colonization on identity crisis within Nigeria and its people, the perceptions of female and male circumcision and the practice, and the ways in which history and production of *The Missing Face* has come to shed light on Western interpretation of said topics.

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Introduction:

“We read culture with western eyes, with a western mindset.” These words resonated with me after I left Dr. Tess Onwueme’s office. I could not help but think about my purpose for writing this research paper, which centers on interpretations that are held about Nigeria and its peoples’ experience with the process of colonization, certain practices that are performed within the country, and the way that these concepts and experiences get produced through works of literature. Throughout my college career, I have taken different classes that hone in how the use of colonialism works to maintain a presence within a certain space and the effects that such a dominating force can have on the growth and development of certain countries. This became increasingly clear to me when I took a course on Modern Africa, in which we studied many topics, both past and present. Two themes of the course that stood out to me revolved around colonization and social movements, or more specifically, feminist movements. As I began the process of writing my final capstone, I knew that I wanted these two themes to play important roles throughout my paper. By analyzing Dr. Onwueme’s work, I have been able to better incorporate these themes, or at least build upon her insight into these two topics.

When the writing and research process began, I asked myself a few questions. Would my paper be received through a Western lens? Would I be able to write an objective, rather than subjective piece of scholarship? Through others’ works, interviews and primary sources, as well as my interpretations of Dr. Onwueme’s text, I have been able to better develop a thesis, focusing on the expression of colonization, and even the argument that colonization persists, as well as feminine and masculine identity through

literature. Utilizing Onwueme's script to better contextualize the struggles of countries who have been victim to colonialism, as well as how cultures use rituals to maintain traditions and roots, has allowed for a deeper analysis of how such things can be produced through literature, as well as the theatre.

Background of *The Missing Face*:

The Missing Face, written in 1996 (for American audiences) had originally been published in Nigeria in 1989, under the title, *Legacies*. However, for American audiences, the play become adapted and titled, *The Missing Face*. The author's name is stated as Osonye Tess Onwueme. Some of the editions, have an additional "a musical drama written for the voices of color" following the title, but it seems the original text was simply, *The Missing Face*. The inside cover of her script appears like any other novel might; there is a list of Onwueme's works, as well as an abundance of praise from other authors. One aspect of the opening pages of the script that stood out was the dedication to her children. She addresses them with a five-stanza poem, thanking them "for unlocking the unwritten text of my Womanhood."¹ On the original draft of the text, the computer papered copy had but one name on the dedication page. It was addressed to Ehi Oviasu, "my new daughter."² There is a note indicating that more will be added to the dedication page, which is obviously seen in her more recent editions of the text. Within the preface of the text, there is a lengthy description of the premise of the play, noting some of the major themes. Dr. Tess Onwueme has written a

¹ Onwueme, Osonye Tess, *The Missing Face*, preface.

²Tess Osonye Onwueme papers, 1975-2014, Archives Series 598.

myriad of plays, most of which follow a central theme of African connectedness and identity. These plays speak not only of social injustices and inequalities, but also of the diaspora and identity crisis that face many Africans.

Onwueme's text, *The Missing Face*, tells the story of a middle-aged African woman, Ida Bee, and her son, Amaechi. The two travel from their home in Milwaukee, WI, to Ida Bee's ancestral homeland of Nigeria.³ Throughout the course of the play, there are references to many ethnic groups and their respective kingdoms or ancestral lineage, including the Idu Kingdom, which is a mythological kingdom within Nigerian folklore.⁴



Map 1. Nigeria and its States⁵

Additionally, she sheds light on the different ancestral lines that exist in this mythological kingdom, noting the Igalaland, Yorubaland, Hausaland, Fulaniland, and the

³ Onwueme, Osonye Tess, *The Missing Face*, movement 1

⁴ Tess Onwueme, interview by author, Eau Claire, October 22nd, 2015.

⁵ Dailymail.com/ng. Arrows indicate areas of Southern Nigeria that are relevant to characters in the text.

Efikland, all of which appear to be lineages across Nigeria.⁶ Ida Bee and Amaechi meet members of the Idu Kingdom, but are not welcomed in the way that they'd hoped to be.

Movements two and three of the play go into great detail about the idea of identity and how the effects of Afro-Centric vs. Euro-Centric perceptions play a role in each of the characters' lives. In Movement Two, the reader is introduced to the members of the Idu Kingdom, Momah (Amaechi's father), and Momah's parents, Nebe and Odozi. There is great conflict between Ida Bee and Momah's family, as Ida Bee claims to share their African heritage, an explanation that does not seem to sit well with the others. In Movement Three, a flashback between Ida Bee and Momah occurs, in which the audience and reader find out how the two met and how they came to have a baby together. The two meet in Milwaukee, where Ida Bee heavily identifies with her African ancestry, whereas Momah, a college student at the time, speaks highly of how he "strives to turn Africa into Modern Europe."⁷ This interaction demonstrates the search for identity, as well as, perhaps, a clouded vision of the role that Africa is to play in the world. At the end of Movement Three, Amaechi undergoes the ritual of circumcision, a procedure that is performed by his father and grandfather. As the story progresses, especially in Movement Four, it becomes clear that Ida Bee is bonding with her one-time in-laws. She holds the passion for her African heritage that Momah lacks, which causes Momah to be angry and violent, banishing Ida Bee to the forest of demons, causing her to lose touch with her confidence and sense of identity.⁸

⁶ Tess Onwueme, interview by author, Eau Claire, October 22nd, 2015.

⁷ Tess Onwueme, *The Missing Face*, movement three.

⁸ Tess Onwueme, *The Missing Face*, movement four.

Movement Five deconstructs Momah's actions, acknowledging his lack of Afro-centric identity and how that has come to detach him from those in his life, especially his family. Movement Six continues to analyze Momah's lack of identity, which transcends into his lack of masculinity. A new character, the "voice," is introduced, as a means of mocking Momah for chasing away the spirit of a mother, in which he is instructed to retrieve.⁹ Once Momah does that in Movement Seven, it is clear to the audience that Ida Bee has descending to a place in which she is out of touch with herself. She ends up being the one who has lost her sense of identity, her sense of femininity, and her sense of self.

Interview with Dr. Tess Onwueme:

After meeting with Dr. Tess Onwueme for an interview, it became apparent that there was a complex and important history behind the writing, production, and intent of *The Missing Face*. Dr. Onwueme informed me that the play had originally been written in the late 1980s, around the time that she had moved to the states. The play had originally been produced in Nigeria, but was adapted for production purposes in the United States, since it contained content that would not make sense to people outside of Nigeria. In the interview, Dr. Onwueme stated that "in the course of the evolution [of the play], different reinterpretations, adaptations are done to locate different audiences—to bring the context closer to them."¹⁰ This was reiterated as she spoke about the differences in screenings of the play in America and for those produced in Nigeria. She notes that certain aspects of the play, like the folklore of Idu, are going to

⁹ Tess Onwueme, *The Missing Face*, movement six.

¹⁰ Tess Onwueme, interview by author, Eau Claire, October 22nd, 2015.

make more sense in places in Nigeria, as it is a story that many are familiar with.¹¹ Dr. Onwueme spoke about the importance of this play in relation to Milwaukee, noting that she wanted to begin the story in this place because it was a Northern city and the class and race conflicts continue to be prevalent in the city. The most important part of the conversation, in my opinion, revolved around the rituals of female and male circumcision. Dr. Onwueme shed light on the purpose behind the rituals, noting that the physical portion of the ritual is not as significant as the symbolism behind the act.¹² Onwueme's script works to better clarify how practices like female and male circumcision play a larger role in culture. Her text also speaks from a place of complex and deeply rooted histories, which helps the reader to make connections between present-day Nigeria and times of colonialism (arguably still occurring today). These insights contribute to the power behind her plays, especially *The Missing Face*.

Historiography:

There are many ways that one could deconstruct the histories of "The Missing Face" and what it stands for, but it seems as though there are a couple stark aspects of the text that stand out. To begin, it is important to address the references to "whiteness" and colonization. At a few different points in the text, Onwueme uses the ideas of Afro-Centrism versus Euro-Centrism. There is reference to the discrepancies between Ida Bee and Amaechi and their African counterparts. Onwueme uses one of the characters to shed light on the role that white people have played, stating, "I cannot blame you yet

¹¹ Tess Onwueme, interview by author, Eau Claire, October 22nd, 2015.

¹² Ibid.

for not being able to understand us. (*Pause*). And I can also see that they whiteman has thought you well.”¹³ This quote contributes to the theme of identity, as it is addressed to two individuals who have spent their lives living in a country that is completely separate from their ancestors. But their ancestors are familiar with the foundations of this foreign place, for they have experienced their own forms of colonialism and control by the whiteman. Part of the historiography of this paper will focus on how the decolonization of Nigeria has continued to contribute to the identity crisis for Nigerians, following the decolonization in 1960.

A second history that will be analyzed focuses on the ritual and implantation of both female and male circumcision, especially in regards to Nigeria. In the play, Amaechi undergoes his own circumcision, something that happens quickly and without much dialogue. This procedure occurs in the final scenes of Movement 3, and contains a significant amount of symbolism, which is seemingly meant to be interpreted by the audience, as only actions are exchanged.¹⁴ It is extremely important to understand the purpose behind such rituals as female and male circumcision in Nigerian culture, but it often gets interpreted through a westernized lens. Through other scholarship, as well as interviews with Dr. Onwueme, I hope to expand on this idea, while exploring the implications of cultural acts. Third, the exploration of the play, its production, and the outcomes that were wrought from it merit strong recognition. There have articles, reviews, and literature produced following the showing of the play, all acknowledging

¹³ Onwueme, Osonye Tess, *The Missing Face*, movement two.

¹⁴ Onwueme, Osonye Tess, *The Missing Face*, movement three.

the importance of the work, as well as what we can stand to gain from the representation of identities, cultural rituals, and world inequities. I hope to demonstrate how important works, such as *The Missing Face*, can be used to call upon social, political, and economic change.

Colonization and the Effects on Nigeria:

Throughout *The Missing Face*, colonialism is, perhaps inadvertently so, mentioned in ways that would encourage the reader to interpret that there is an identity crisis, potentially caused by both colonization and decolonization. Onwueme acknowledges the ways that the “whiteman” has affected Ida Bee and Amaechi’s connection with their African ancestors, noting that they speak a language different than those from the Idu Kingdom.¹⁵ This sense of disdain for the “whiteman” is most certainly driven by the act of colonialism in Nigeria during the 19th and 20th centuries. British colonization in Nigeria caused massive separation between ethnic groups within Nigeria. Colonialism wrought this separation because of the structure of the government, which ensured that ethnic peoples would not be associated with one another. Davis and Kalu-Nwivu state, “The colonial structure maintained ethnic isolation and reinforced it with regionalism—a situation inherited by the independent nation.”¹⁶ By keeping Nigerian peoples separated with regional administration, rather than having a form of central government, British colonizers were able to maintain controlled areas of the country. Once Nigeria received independence in October of 1960, it represented

¹⁵ Onwueme, Osonye Tess, *The Missing Face*, movement two.

¹⁶ Thomas J. Davis and Azubike Kalu-Nwivu, “Education, Ethnicity, and National Integration in the History of Nigeria: Continuing Problems of Africa’s Colonial Legacy,” *The Journal of Negro History*, 86, no. 1 (2001): 1-11.

itself as a name, but not yet a nation. There was the presence of an actual state, but ethnic groups did not embrace any form of identity. Their identities revolved around their own connections with those that they knew under British rule.¹⁷ Davis and Kalu-Nwivu state, “At independence, Nigeria’s peoples for the most part had not yet come to think of themselves as Nigerians. Ethnic loyalty took precedence over national identity.”¹⁸ This reiterates the idea that “identity” did not seem to have much of a place in Nigeria, both before and after decolonization. Individuals were able to form a sense of identity, but the lack of direct rule contributed explicitly to the separation of peoples within Nigeria.¹⁹ Perhaps the audience of *The Missing Face* could interpret from the text that the instilled and drawn-out use of colonialism continues to perpetuate the idea of a “lost” identity, one that has been difficult to maintain when there has not ever been a true sense of unity.

Colonization is obviously driven by some sort of capital, something that would create wealth. Reports have been produced, discussing the prosperity of Nigeria, a prosperity that was wrought by the discovery of oil. Fran Hosken, who will later be discussed for her research on and disdain for female circumcision, studied extensively countries in Africa, noting their population demographics, political systems, and economic situation. Hosken writes, “Due to large oil discoveries, Nigeria, the most populous country of Africa, has also become the most prosperous one.”²⁰ Companies

¹⁷ Thomas J. Davis and Azubike Kalu-Nwivu, 1

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Fran P. Hosken. *The Hosken Report: Genital and Sexual Mutilation of Females*, 3rd revised ed., (Lexington: Women’s International Network News, 1982).

such as the Shell Companies in Nigeria, which originated in Britain, claim that they “have played a pioneering role in Nigeria’s oil and gas industry throughout its history.”²¹ Worded in such a way, one could assume this is a positive thing, when in reality, it could be argued that this is still a form of colonization. The company website notes that the first commercial exports came from the Oloibiri field, which was run by the Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria. These first exports were discovered in 1958, two years before Nigeria achieved independence. The company clearly did not become dismantled after the “end” of colonialism, but continues to thrive within the country. Although Nigeria maintained independence in October 1960, the country is continuing to struggle today. Studies done have shown that, “Several decades after the end of colonialism, the country is still fraught with the crisis of high poverty rate, basic infrastructural facilities, unemployment, high mortality rate, political instability and insecurity of lives and property.”²² The author notes that decolonization (if Nigeria truly is considered decolonized), contributed to long lasting effects of instability. The studies go on to show that, “The crisis of development is the most serious problem facing Nigeria today. This is because the country has remained largely underdeveloped despite the presence of huge mineral and human resources.”²³ Colonization, and the

²¹ “Shell Global,” Privacy Policy, Shell International B.V., accessed October 28th, 2015, <http://www.shell.com/global/aboutshell/website-social-mobile/about-our-website/privacy.html>

²² Attah, Noah Echa. “The historical conjuncture of neo-colonialism and underdevelopment in Nigeria. *Journal of African Studies and Development*, vol. 5, no. 5, (2013): 70-79. DOI: 10.5897/JASD2013.0223 pg. 71

²³ Austin, G. “Resources, Techniques and Strategies South of the Sahara: Revising the Factor Endowments Perspectives on African Economic Development, 1500-2000.” *Econ, History Rev.* 61, no.3 (2008):587-624 quoted in Noah Echa Attah, “The historical conjuncture of neo-colonialism and underdevelopment in Nigeria.” *Journal of African Studies and Development*, 5, no. 5 (2013): 70-79.

prospect of decolonization, wreaked havoc on Nigerians, as plans were made to redesign the state of Nigeria's economy. This has been an on-going process, since before colonization, but seems to be a continuous one. Scholarship on the developmental plans for Nigeria, during colonization, works to demonstrate how British interference in the social and economic advancement of Nigeria's state led to the 1940 Colonial Development and Welfare Act, an act that was designed to create a 10 year plan for the country and its citizens.²⁴ Theoretically a helpful plan, one that could potentially have the country and her citizens' best interests in mind, this ended up not being the case. Anah Ikehchukwu writes, "The colonial era development plans have been criticised as not involving the people whose interests and welfare the plans were supposed to enhance...planning could not be continued when Nigeria became a federation."²⁵ In this way, one can interpret that the intentions of the colonizers were not aligned with the Nigerian citizens, even though the plan seemed to be designed to better their lives.

The author goes on to note that "the colonial development plans were aimed at enhancing the objective of the colonial enterprise in Nigeria to wit: the maximisation of profits through effective and efficient exploitation of human and natural resources in Nigeria."²⁶ This quote sums up the fact that colonialization worked to oppress those in Nigeria, by controlling their resources and maintaining the exploitation of goods. Not

²⁴ Ikehchukwu Anah, Cletus. "Who Benefits? The Political Economy of National Development Plans in Nigeria." *Journal Of Alternative Perspectives In The Social Sciences* 6, no. 1 (August 2014): 100-115.

²⁵ Ibid, 101-102.

²⁶ Ibid, 102.

only does this contribute to the lack of independence for Nigerians, but also contributes to the sense of displacement and lack of attachment to a place and land that is their own, especially if they are not able to control their own resources. We have a better understanding of this, as noted in *The Missing Face*, when Momah wants to create a booming industry in Africa, similar to Europe. Ida Bee is taken aback by that notion, as she views the world through an Afro-centric lens, one that has driven her to have a strong sense of identity and confidence.

Circumcision (and its implications in Nigeria and around the World):

Before I deconstruct the use of circumcision within the text, it is important to explain what both male and female circumcision entail. According to mayoclinic.org, male circumcision is “the surgical removal of the skin covering the tip of the penis.”²⁷ This definition is relatively straightforward and explainable, especially for Westerners who may be familiar with the practice. Female circumcision, on the other hand, was a bit more difficult to both find a definition for, as well as actually define. The first definition that I saw when researching came from the World Health Organization and referred to female circumcision as “female genital mutilation.” There was no concrete, general definition of the practice, which probably speaks to the complexities revolving around this topic. The main overview of the expression, “female genital mutilation,” described the practice as having “no health benefits for girls and women,” and that it is a “violation of human rights.”²⁸ As this paper continues, I discuss how the perceptions of

²⁷ “Circumcision (male).” Mayo Clinic. Accessed December 18th, 2015. www.mayoclinic.org

²⁸ Classification of female genital mutilation.” World Health Organization. Accessed December 18th, 2015. <http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/fgm/overview/en/>

female circumcision often varies in how male circumcision is received, and why it is often seen as a violation of someone's rights. In still trying to define the procedure, I discovered that it was not until the end of the page that one could really understand what the process of female circumcision entails, and why it is so complex, as there are four different types of female circumcision.

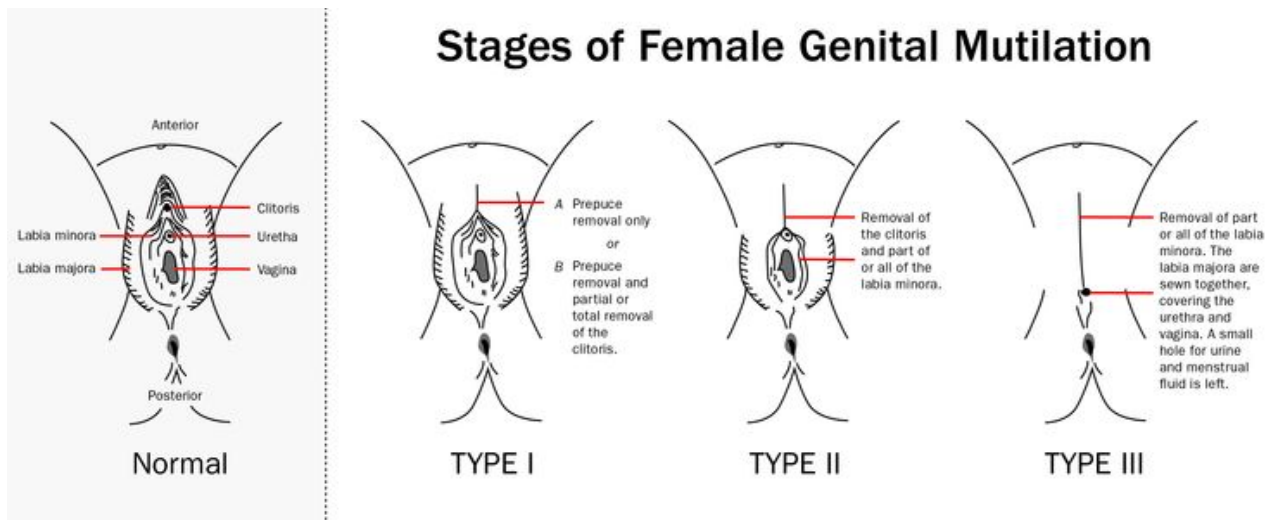


Image 2. Diagram of female circumcision²⁹

The first type of female circumcision is referred to as a clitoridectomy, which is partial or total removal of the clitoris. The second type of circumcision is known as excision, which is defined as the partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without the excision of the labia majora. The labia surround the vagina. The third form of circumcision is referred to as infibulation, which is the narrowing of the vaginal opening through the creation of a covering seal, which is done by cutting and repositioning the labia. Finally, the fourth procedure encompasses practices such as

²⁹ Diagram of female genitalia and the process of female circumcision. <http://iburqa.com/post/53864006566/stages-of-female-genital-mutilation>.

piercing, incising, scraping, etc. of the clitoris and surrounding anatomy.³⁰ This break down of a woman's genitalia and the areas of her body that are most likely to cut in the process of circumcision work to better explain why such a procedure is as complex, and sometimes difficult to understand. Much scholarship has been done to both combat and defend the process of female circumcision. I began my research by asking the woman whose play helped to inspire this project.

Dr. Tess Onwueme shared insights into the perceptions of circumcision, explaining thoroughly the misconceptions that a Western lens can often produce. In our interview, she stated that the view of both male and female circumcision becomes "politicized and militarized" through Western eyes.³¹ She acknowledged that circumcision, at least in many cultures in Nigeria, is seen as a symbolic ritual. There is significance in the act of cutting and the release of blood, quite literally, back to the earth. Female and male circumcision are symbolic in this way because they connect those who are living with those who have come before them, as well as those who are to come after them, as their blood has been returned to the mother, or the ground.³² According to Tess, male circumcision is a process that is necessary for a boy to become a man. If a grown man is not circumcised, he is considered beneath even a young boy.³³ Dr. Onwueme informed me that men who are circumcised are thus

³⁰ "Classification of female genital mutilation." World Health Organization. Accessed December 18th, 2015. <http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/fgm/overview/en/>

³¹ Tess Onwueme, interview by author, Eau Claire, October 22nd, 2015.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

suitable for marriage and family life. It is intriguing that the prospect of being seen as a masculine, stable, and mature individual is so sought after for men, while it seems to have a different intent for women, which includes “curbing promiscuity.”³⁴ There is much discourse on the discrepancies that seem to exist between men and women, in regards to the practice of female circumcision.

One prominent source, which thoroughly discusses female circumcision, is the Hosken Report, written by Fran Hosken in 1982. In her text, Hosken refers to the practice as “the genital and sexual mutilation of females.”³⁵ This terminology alone is incredibly westernized, as it implies a negative connotation. It is as though all of the females in the world who undergo female circumcision are forced into it against their will and there are women who are not actively choosing to have the ritual performed. Hosken takes thorough records of the demographics of time of publication (1982), noting that, “Most of the subgroups of the three main ethnic groups in Nigeria—the Moslem Hausa of the north, the Yoruba in the southwest including the area of Lagos, and the Ibo in the southeast, subject their female children to genital operations, mostly excision and clitoridectomy.”³⁶ These subgroups of certain ethnic groups stood out to me, as some are mentioned in *The Missing Face* as significant lines of ancestry. These are amongst some of the larger ethnic groups that practice circumcision with both their children. Hosken approaches this topic from a place of disdain, which can be

³⁴Lukman Olajide Abdur-Rahman, Omotoso I Musa, and Gordon K Oshagbemi. “Community-based study of circumcision practices in Nigeria.” *Annals of Tropical Medicine and Public Health*, 5, no. 3, (2012):231-235.

³⁵ Fran P. Hosken. *The Hosken Report: Genital and Sexual Mutilation of Females*, 3rd revised ed., (Lexington: Women’s International Network News, 1982).

³⁶ Fran P. Hosken. *The Hosken Report: Genital and Sexual Mutilation of Females*, 187.

problematic. She acknowledges the cultural aspect of the practice, but does not refrain from noting the fact that it is often performed on young girls and that, in her eyes, it is seen as a dangerous and unhealthy practice.

Other scholarship that has been done notes the controversy of female circumcision and its history of the ritual. “The origin of FGM is fraught with controversy either as an initiation ceremony of young girls into womanhood or to ensure virginity and curb promiscuity, or to protect female modesty and chastity.”³⁷ This quote works to reiterate the fact that female circumcision can often be interpreted as a practice much different than male circumcision. It may appear as though it is performed to ensure a woman’s conservation, whereas it encourages a man to be brought into manhood. A study conducted demonstrated why women might undergo the process of female circumcision. “They regarded FGM as a tribal traditional practice (our custom is a good tradition and has to be protected), as a superstitious belief practiced for the preservation of chastity and purification, family honor, hygiene, esthetic reasons, protection of virginity and prevention of promiscuity, modification of sociosexual attitudes (countering failure of a woman to attain orgasm), increasing sexual pleasure of husband, enhancing fertility, and increasing matrimonial opportunities.”³⁸ This quote lends reason to believe that female circumcision is a ritual that is completed for several reasons, ranging from the importance of religious beliefs to an emphasis on sexuality.

³⁷ TC Okeke, USB Anyaehie, and CCK Ezenyeaku. “An Overview of Female Genital Mutilation in Nigeria.” *Annals of Medical and Health Science Research*, vol. 2, no.1. 70-73. Doi: 10.403/2141-9248.96942

³⁸ *Ibid*, 71.

Countries around the world have worked to exterminate the practice, but have been relatively unsuccessful. “Laws passed in 1959 and 1978 prohibiting female circumcision without a clear medical indication went largely unenforced, and concerted efforts to discourage FGC reemerged in the mid-1990s.”³⁹ Although the article is focusing on the practice being done in Egypt, it raises the same concerns that certain scholars are talking about in places like Nigeria. The article goes on to describe that the conversation about female circumcision was addressed within important agencies, such as the UN, stating, “FGC was a key topic at the 1994 United Nations International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, sparking national debate and action from civil groups to “eradicate” female circumcision through education, research, and advocacy.”⁴⁰ It would be interesting to further investigate when the issue of female circumcision was first brought to the attention of agencies such as the UN or even the Women’s Health Organization.

Other reports and histories of both female and male circumcision in Nigeria approach the conversation from a more objective view, noting when the ritual is performed and why they may be done in this way. One report shows that circumcision is seen as “Congregational” and “prevails in some communities as a means of upholding traditions and commemoration of festive period.”⁴¹ This provides a more objective view of the practice, noting that the ritual is often done with a communal intent.

³⁹ Sepideh Modrek and Jenny X Liu. Exploration of pathways related to the decline in female circumcision in Egypt, *BMC Public Health*, 13:921, (2013): Doi. 10.1186/1471-2458-13-921.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Lukman Olajide Abdur-Rahman, Omotoso I Musa, and Gordon K Oshagbemi, “Community-based study of circumcision practices in Nigeria.” *Annals of Tropical Medicine and Public Health*, 5 no. 3, (2012): 231-235.

The authors continue, noting, “Culture dominated reasons for circumcision among respondents in spite of the fact that majority of respondents were Muslims, and male circumcision is prescribed by religion.”⁴² The focus on male circumcision reiterates the fact that the ritual is often practiced from a religious standpoint. In *The Missing Face*, these exact reasons for circumcision are demonstrated. Amaechi undergoes the ritual, surrounded by members of his family, so that he may enter into manhood. It becomes a revered experience, one that makes his mother state, “My son, is at last part of the fold.”⁴³ In this way, the audience understands that it was a necessary action in order to have Amaechi be a part of his ancestry. Perhaps this outlook is one that would be better applied to, if not at least considered, when discussing the rituals and implications of both female and male circumcision.

Production of *The Missing Face* and Projection of Social and Global Justice:

The Missing Face, which had originally been produced in Nigeria, was adapted for American playwrights and their theatre productions. Produced off-Broadway, *The Missing Face* was part of a two-play series known as the “African Project.”⁴⁴ The production of this play was directed by Patricia White, a woman who would receive recognition for her “straightforward direction,” which made the “former lovers confrontation one of the most enlightening aspects of the play.”⁴⁵ The play received

⁴² Lukman Olajide Abdur-Rahman, Omotoso I Musa, and Gordon K Oshagbemi, 321-325.

⁴³ Osonye Tess Onwueme, *The Missing Face*, movement four.

⁴⁴ Brooke Pierce, Review of *The Missing Face*, directed by Patricia White, New York City, May 21, 2001

⁴⁵ Jeanette Toomer, review of *The Missing Face*, directed by Patricia White, June 6th, 2001.

positive feedback on behalf of both the actors, and the director, because the production worked to demonstrate the sense of African displacement and the need to develop an identity. Other reviews of the play thoroughly explored the sense of diaspora and what that says about African identity, noting the power behind Onwueme's projection and intent with the storyline.

One review of the play focused specifically on the fact that "The Missing Face is not primarily about the internal workings of an imagined or actual part of Igboland, but it is an exploration of the "return to roots" motif that is central to the reclamation of ancestral connections of the diaspora."⁴⁶ The central theme of identity, which is ever present in the script, clearly gets projected throughout the performance of the play, as the characters deal with the sense of displacement and their inability to connect with one another.



Image 3. Kim Sullivan, Stephanie Berry, and Tobias Truvillion appear in *The Missing Face*.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Joseph McLaren, *Osonye Tess Onwueme and Diaspora Representations in The Missing Face*. Performative Inter-Actions in African Theatre 1: Diaspora Representations and the Interweaving of Cultures. Edited by Kene Igweonu and Osita Okagbue. 32-33.

⁴⁷ Photo: Jacqui Casto, production of *The Missing Face*, 2001.

The reviewer goes on to note, “In order to explore both indigenous and diasporic issues in *The Missing Face*, Onwueme creates African-American characters who, as products of the West, fit within the model of her critique of Western values.”⁴⁸ Again, one could read this review and understand that Onwueme was intentional in her projection of African-American identity, the sense of displacement, and the effects of how masculinity vs. femininity either contribute to or take away from the sense of identity. McLaren quotes Mabel Ewrierhoma, stating, “Although Onwueme adopts feminist and womanist ideologies to suit her creative goals, much more of her ideas, as reflected in the plays, are based on tradition-and highlight the customs of the Aniocha-Igbo. In all her plays, the worldview of the Aniocha-Igbo is ever present, be it by the way of festivals, sacrifices, marriage, birth, and funeral rights of inheritance, or politics, and the folklore of the people.”⁴⁹ Dr. Onwueme uses her texts to emphasize the importance of histories, ethnic groups, and the symbols that are used to represent all of these things. Perhaps it becomes easier for those viewing her plays, especially in America, to be able to see and connect these expressions of culture. The reviews seem to convey that, through her writing, she has been able to do this.

Works by Dr. Onwueme have always been appreciated for her perspectives on inequalities, as well as her positive outlook for the future. Nwachukwu-Agbaba writes, “Each of Tess Onwueme’s published plays so far, it would seem, is a clarion call for

⁴⁸ McLaren, 34.

⁴⁹Ewrierhoma, Mable. “Female Empowerment and Dramatic Creativity in Nigeria” quoted in Joseph McLaren, *Osonye Tess Onwueme and Diaspora Representations in The Missing Face. Performative Inter-Actions in African Theatre 1: Diaspora Representations and the Interweaving of Cultures*. Edited by Kene Igweonu and Osita Okagbue. 32-33.

social change, the cultivation of new attitudes, and new hopes. The society she targets in her works for the stage is both national and international, and at each level her position seems to be that the old order of traditional, social, and economic oppression must give way to a new and more healthful one."⁵⁰ This quote gives reason to believe that Onwueme writes about very specific events and groups of people, perhaps with the hope that, through her literature, she will be able to spark awareness and conversation about these issues noted above. The review goes on to say, "Her quest for social change goes beyond the raising of feminist consciousness in society to include a swipe at the diminishing status of supposedly independent African countries as a result of the powerful gains of neocolonialism."⁵¹ Again, it becomes clear that Dr. Onwueme writes from a place of familiarity, but also writes to convey a message. Many writers have noted her success, as well as her use of culture and African heritage to shed light on global issues and themes.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, a fellow playwright rights, "In her work, Onwueme has shown daring in her exploration of ideas even if they lead to subjects and themes which may seem taboo. Onwueme is eminently a political dramatist, for power affects every aspect of society. She explores these themes with a dazzling array of images and proverbs. Her drama and theater are a feast of music, mime, proverbs and story-telling...[Thus] Onwueme consolidates her position among the leading dramatists from Africa."⁵² This

⁵⁰ J.O.J Nwachukwu-Agbaba, "Tess Onwueme: Dramatist in Quest of Change." *World Literature Today*, vol. 66, no. 3 (1992): 464-467. Published by: Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma. 467

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 467.

⁵² Thiong'o, Ngugi wa. AyacLab Web Development.
http://www.writertess.com/africanwriter/Writers--Scholars-Comment_42

is just one of many reviews of Dr. Onwueme's work, which notes her ability to capture social and political issues through a lens of literature, which not only works to have the reader take on a different perspective, but also presents information in a way that is easier to understand. She has a powerful way of illuminating the need for not only social and political change, but economic as well, something that was demonstrated within *The Missing Face* and the implications of colonialism. Through her writing, which spans many decades, she has create works of art that continue to seek bigger and better things for humanity.

Conclusion:

This research paper has contributed to my broader understanding of a myriad of histories. When beginning the process of writing my capstone, I knew that I wanted to focus on subjects in history for which I am passionate. My exposure to courses revolving around social, political, and economic issues inspired me to further exam the role that colonialism plays in exploiting and maintaining control in said issues. I wanted to expand upon the social issues that are debated within over-exploited regions and find out if there is a correlation between the use of power and force to the current social issues that are being debated today. By learning more about Dr. Onwueme's play, I believe I was able to do this.

By investigating British colonialism in Nigeria, I have been able to better understand how colonialization and the scars that are instilled from the imperialistic and capitalist agenda brought upon by countries with more power and force leave lasting and detrimental effects. Nigeria and its people are still faced with ramifications of colonialism, which arguably, are seen in not only economic ways, but social ones as

well. Although I had studied this concept prior to writing this paper, the dangers of viewing the world through a Western lens became clearer, as I considered how maintaining control over someone's body, like telling an individual that something like female circumcision is wrong, can be seen as its own form of colonialism, as it represents the idea of taking control over something that is not your own. I have learned much from considering different points of view, especially after having extensive conversations with Dr. Tess Onwueme. It was through her work of *The Missing Face* that I was able to better understand how art and literature work to shed light on issues of social, economic, and political matters.

After further researching these topics and attempting to get even the smallest grasp of understanding with such complex and important conversations, I have discovered a few different realities. To begin, there will always be a variety of perspectives, interpretations, cultural practices, and histories that dominate the way in which we see the world. I think it is imperative that we seek to learn more about such things, if we have the opportunities and means to do so. Dr. Tess Onwueme is an individual who seems to understand that, and channels her knowledge through art, a unique way to better understand the history around us. Even more so, it allows others, who may not otherwise have opportunities to learn about these histories and cultures to do so. Although there are parts of *The Missing Face* that are fabricated, there is much truth to what is projected through the text. The audience comes to see the long-lasting effects that are wrought from colonialism, effects that are still seen today. We also come to have a better understanding of cultural practices, especially those practices that are considered to be highly controversial. Finally, to be able to see a production of

art that demonstrates these truths, deserves the upmost recognition and analysis, as it is through a production of art that there lies the potential to change the world.

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