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Preserving the memories of precolonial Nigeria

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When it comes to Africa’s precolonial history, debates persist on whether women played an active role beyond the domestic sphere. Western and African men who told of Africa’s past largely “celebrated male sectors of society to the neglect of female contributions. Most chroniclers ignored women’s economic, religious, or social activities.” But recent studies, driven by the popularity of feminism, have pushed for a retelling of African women’s histories. According to Ogbomo and Ogbomo, we need to continue challenging “the myth that African women have been among the most oppressed in the world.” In African countries where patriarchy and long-held gender stereotypes have further oppressed women, challenging this myth is even more urgent.

So far, historians have found and used folklores/tales, oral accounts, written records, proverbs, and myths to reveal women’s invaluable contributions. Another way is to engage the past through popular mass media/communication forms like film, novels, theatre, and television. According to Mike Kirkup, historical media are popular ways of engaging audiences with the past because they bring history “to life, inspire lively debates, arguments and discussions around a range of topics.” Historical media can also help audiences “renegotiate cultural memory and their understanding of how the past shapes the present.” Yet, communication aspects in the areas of empowerment and gender equality “remain largely unrecognized and understudied, even by scholars in feminist communication, development communication, persuasion and other forms of social change.” Scholars must acknowledge that “writing women out of history has not only discouraged or punished women who challenged the status quo, it has also ignored and reduced their accomplishments.” Moreover, historical films “offer a privileged site for scholars of cinema, media, history, and many other disciplines to interrogate a nation’s relationship with the past.”

The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to describe and discuss how Nigerians are using mass media and theatre to preserve and share the memories and contributions of precolonial Nigerian women to nation-building, thus contributing to a new image of Nigerian women. Specifically, it examines those works that celebrate and portray the heroism of three women – Queen Moremi Ajasaro of Ife Kingdom, Queen Amina of Zaria, and Princess Inikpi of Igala Kingdom. Nigeria is home to the world’s second largest movie industry, Nollywood, and has
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used media and theatre for national development and social orientation since the 1940s, which makes it a good site for this study.

This discussion is also important because since 2009, Nollywood and theatrical works on historical events and figures have increasingly focused on notable women. The current global push for women’s empowerment and gender equality in all spheres of life may be responsible for this focus. However, this push will be incomplete if past efforts of women are not considered. Moreover, scholars have contended for decades that the messages people receive about gender roles play a critical role in how women see themselves and how society views women. Nigerian state and local governments are also investing in these projects. One example is the Kogi State Diaries, “which seeks to harness the media as a tool for telling the story of the people of the state and showcasing their cultural diversity to a global audience.” For Nigerian women especially, stories about historical women are relevant today because they “suggest that we should give womenfolk their pride of place.”

This chapter provides a background on each woman named and discusses some works available about them. As Nigeria is home to more than 250 ethnic groups, these women are symbolically more popular within their ethnic groups than the nation in general. Therefore, apart from Queen Amina, people of the same ethnicity as these women have sponsored or spearheaded the projects. The discussion begins with Moremi of Ile-Ife (Ife town) in present-day Osun state.

**Queen Moremi Ajasaro of Ife**

Queen Moremi Ajasaro of Ife is probably the most celebrated woman in Yorubaland. Ife, the recognized founding place of Yoruba kingdom, is in western Nigeria. Presumably, Moremi lived in the twelfth century and was born in Offa in present-day Kwara state. She later married Ooni Oranmiyan of Ife and had a son, Olurogbo. She was and is still renowned for her beauty.

As the story goes, another tribe, called Ugbo/Igbo, raided Ife for several years. According to Ibrahim Anoba, the people of Ife were afraid of the Ugbo because they appeared “completely covered in raffia leaves,” which were used to separate people from oracles and the sacred forest. Moremi consulted the Esimiri goddess, who advised her to surrender next time the Ugbo raided. She acquiesced and also married the king of Ugbo, Orumakin. With time, she gained his confidence and learned the secret of the Ugbo raiders – they were men, not spirits, who could be defeated with fire. Moremi later returned to Ife, divulged the secret, and devised a plan. The next time the raiders came, an ambush awaited and defeated them.

According to the current Ooni of Ile-Ife, Oba Adeyeye Enitan Ogunwusi, Moremi was the “real mother of liberty,” whose actions and sacrifice saved Ile-Ife. She is immortalized in music and art. In 2016, Oba Ogunwusi erected a statue in her honor, which is the third tallest statue in Africa and the tallest in Nigeria. For her contributions to Yoruba history, there are also plays, about six Yoruba language films, and one English film titled *Moremi*. The movies are mostly about powerful, mythical, or modern women leaders, the exploits of beautiful women, or women creating wealth with a Moremi-like theme. Only one of them is about her.

In 2009, 1st Eye Productions released a historical epic called *Moremi Ajasaro*. The movie recounts Moremi’s story, based on Chief Duro Ladipo’s stage play *Moremi Ajasaro*. The storyline matches much of what is known about Moremi and how she saved Ife. The movie’s morals are built on three principles – love, patriotism, and courage. In *Moremi Ajasaro*, viewers get a strong appreciation for Moremi’s courage, her love for her husband and child, and her love for her people in Ife. The portrayal implicitly asks whether present Nigerian leaders will make heavy sacrifices for their people. However, “even as a film and its characters reflect the time when it was made, we are reinterpreting the film from our own perspective.”
One difference seen in the movie’s interpretation of history is how it portrayed the Ugbo as savages who lived in the forest. This portrayal contradicts historical accounts that identify the Ugbo as the original inhabitants of Ife. They lost Ife when they could not produce a king and moved to Ilaje, also in present-day Ondo state. They also speak Yoruba. Another choice the filmmaker made was to show Moremi living into old age and still contributing to the community. However, the movie suggested she felt unappreciated following her husband’s death.

Another way Moremi has been immortalized is through *Queen Moremi: The Musical*. It premiered on December 21, 2018 in Lagos, Nigeria and has sold out each time. This is the first play on Moremi with a musical component. Directed by Bolanle Austen-Peters, the story in many ways matches what is known of Moremi’s legend with an injection of folklore, solos, and modern musical beats. However, unlike 1st Eye Productions’ epic, the musical has a strong feminist theme that puts women at the center and as part of Ife’s victory over Ugbo. According to Austen-Peters, the feminist perspective was selected because she believes in equal rights. The musical emphasizes that women prevailed where men had failed. Kings had sacrificed virgins and animals for years against the Ugbo raids to no avail, but a woman succeeded. When Ife attacked Ugbo, its army included women. In their costume choices, the women are also shown wearing the clothes of warriors, which include shorts. Audiences see a community that succeeded because it included women in every aspect.

Moremi’s husband is also portrayed as controlling and patriarchal, one who sees little value in women. When Moremi tells him of her mission, he calls her a “mere woman.” He reminds her that as her husband, he owns her and forbids her, as her lord and master, from going on the mission. When she insists, he accuses her of infidelity and promises to marry another wife if she goes. These sentiments resonate with the patriarchal structure in Nigeria today, where husbands contend that they own their wives and can divorce and replace them at will. The musical speaks specifically to the contemporary women’s movement in Nigeria, which is mostly fought at home, where the supremacy of men is maintained culturally, traditionally, and religiously.

However, the musical shared some untold aspects of Moremi’s history. For one thing, it portrayed the Ugbos as aborigines of Ife and the original inhabitants. This account matches recent historical discoveries contradicting long-held beliefs that Ife was the founding place of the Yoruba. New information suggests that the Yoruba immigrated to Ife. The musical also differs in its portrayal of Moremi as a hunter and the daughter of a hunter; a warrior, and not a princess of Offa. This account suggests she married into royalty. That Austen-Peters chose hunting rather than another profession should not be disregarded. This is because hunting is a male profession. In Yoruba culture, hunters are also perceived as brave businessmen, capable of fighting spirits, and often serve as security and soldiers. Therefore, portraying Moremi as a hunter suggested she was brave, economically independent (hunters sold meat to the community), and strong. If Moremi was a hunter, she was also a soldier. Perhaps Austen-Peters reframed Moremi as one who married into wealth rather than one who was born into it to explain why the raids disturbed her so greatly. If she had been royalty from the beginning, she would have been shielded from what regular people suffered. But as a woman who lived and worked among the people, she would know first-hand how the raids impacted non-royals and, as a hunter, would defend her people.

Another element the musical emphasized was Moremi’s struggle to become a mother and her closeness to Olurogbo (called Ela here). He was the only child she conceived after years of childlessness. To eventually lose the child she had waited long to have in a culture where children solidify marriages highlights the immense sacrifice Moremi made for Ife. There is yet another controversial message in the musical – Moremi committed polyandry for Ife. She married the Olu of Ugbo without divorcing her first husband. This unexplored part of the story is critical,
considering that many Nigerian cultures frown on the idea that a woman can marry more than one man, an idea that is unthinkable to some. But this heroine did, and then returned to her husband. It is telling that historical accounts emphasize that Oranmiyan accepted her and reinstated her as a queen, though he had married other women while she was gone.

Apart from the play and musical, in 2019, Akin Alabi released a short animated video on Moremi. Titled *Moremi: The Legend*, the six-minute video tells the story of Moremi as others have, portraying her as courageous, wise, and beautiful (see Figure 8.1). Alabi said he chose animation so “our technology-driven generation can relate.” Unlike other popular narratives of Moremi, the animation depicted the king, not Moremi, consulting the oracle on the Ugbo problem and being told that a woman would solve it. Like the musical, the animation showed Moremi leading the battle against the Ugbo in the end.

Overall, these projects have renewed conversation and interest in Moremi’s legend. A deeper examination of these works, especially 1st Eye Productions and Austen-Peters’ musical, suggests that recent global movements on gender, especially from 2009 onward, may have affected the artistic differences and interpretations. In 2009, Nigeria was working toward achieving the UN Millennium Development goals (MDGs), which include gender equality and women’s empowerment. Therefore, 1st Eye Productions’ film, which came out in 2009, was in line with Nigeria’s efforts to meet this MDG, because it suggested that women had played important roles in nation-building in the past and could do so in the present. By 2014, Nigeria was witnessing more discussions on gender issues, thanks to feminist literature (with authors like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Ayobami Adedayo, and Lola Shoneyin), Boko Haram’s kidnapping of 276 high school girls, online discussions and debates (such as #FemaleInNigeria), and women’s empowerment movements such as #MeToo and #NoMore.

These events may have influenced Austen-Peters’ decision to portray Moremi using a feminist lens. Austen-Peters’ Moremi is one current Nigerian that women can relate to, because she wove in issues that Nigerian women face today. This Moremi worked and was financially independent, as are contemporary Nigerian women, even when married. Moremi’s efforts to convince her husband to let her be captured suggest she was politically and socially active in her community, and also portray the patriarchal beliefs and systems that prevent women from participating in politics and social issues even today. The conversation she had with her husband about

Figure 8.1 Animated short *Moremi: The Legend*. 
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letting her join the fight redefined Moremi as an agent of history, a woman who wanted to act and not remain a victim. She also understood that her biggest obstacle lay in her home, in her husband’s hands. Rather than go against him, she convinced him to work with and support her.

Fertility is also a serious issue in Nigerian marriages, and women are blamed when a couple cannot or does not conceive on schedule. Divorce, adultery, and polygyny are common for this reason, with the woman who has no children bearing the shame. To sacrifice a child without hope for another is indeed a powerful message in Moremi’s story. Still, the musical’s conclusion brought women back to a traditional perspective – a woman is nothing without children.

Queen Amina of Zazzau

Among Nigeria’s many heroines, Queen Amina of Zazzau might be the most popular and most studied. This may be because written records of her feats exist. Hers is probably a unique tale of a Hausa woman, because scholars have stressed the “subordination of women to men arising from an intersection of a patriarchal Islam and Hausa cultural values, which were in place before colonization,” for years. In his work, Balbasatu Ibrahim also contends that Hausa women had no rights before Usman Dan Fodio’s jihad from 1804 to 1814 and were treated as slaves. But other scholars dispute this, arguing that the jihad actually challenged and ended the liberalism women had enjoyed as active members of all spheres of life. These different perspectives make Amina’s legend even more intriguing.

Amina was born in 1533, the oldest child and daughter of the ruler of Zazzau, Bakwa of Turunku. Her family was a wealthy one, as its members traded in various goods, including metal, cloth, and horses. Legend has it that Amina spent her days honing her fighting and military skills from a very young age. She led the Zazzau Cavalry and was admired for her swordsmanship. She also became a member of the royal cabinet at sixteen, when her mother named her Magajiya (female heir) of Zazzau. Upon her father’s death, her younger brother Karama inherited the throne and reigned for 10 years. After Karama’s death, Amina took over, and within three months, naturally, led the Zazzau army on a path of domination. During her 34-year reign, Amina expanded the kingdom and made it the center of trade in Hausaland. She boosted her kingdom’s wealth and power with gold, slaves, and agriculture (with new crops such as kolanuts). Because her people were talented metal workers, Amina introduced metal armor, including iron helmets and chain mail, to her army. She also conquered and controlled large cities like Borno, Kano, and Katsina in the north and Idah and Nupe in the south.

Amina also introduced architecture to Hausaland, the most famous example being the “ganu-war Amina” (Amina’s walls). Amina made Zazzau the largest far-reaching kingdom in Nigeria due to her military assaults and prowess. In her personal life, it is said that she never married (she rejected all suitors from a young age) and had no children. Rather, she took a man from a land they invaded, had sex with him, and killed him the next morning so that “he could tell no stories.” Amina’s history is memorialized in countless ways. There are stamps, books, and various sculptures commemorating her contributions to Hausaland. There are also plays and TV shows about her. One popular show that may be based on Amina is the American series Xena: The Warrior Princess. Her story also featured in an episode of a popular 1980s Nigerian television series, Magana Jari che.

In 2008, Nollywood released a movie titled Amina, starring Genevieve Nnaji, about an Igbo princess adopted by a Hausa royal family. She was not a warrior, but she was strong and honest. The first Nigerian movie to explore Queen Amina’s legend is director Izu Ojukwu’s epic, Amina: The Movie, which was expected to debut in 2018 but was not released, despite intense global promotion. According to the executive producer, Okechukwu Ogunjiofor:
The movie chronicles the many lives of this exceptional woman; the pain and the agony caused by the betrayal of cherished lovers; the ferocious savagery in the face of all battles and enemies; the cunning manipulation at will of the nobles and sovereigns of kingdoms; and the tender concern over the down-trodden Talakawasor common people.30

In an age of women’s empowerment, the “film raises an important question on why there are not many female leaders in the world today when history is full of women who have excelled as leaders.”31 Cinematically, the trailers paint a powerful and beautiful image of Amina as a warrior and strategist and invoke different angles to explore her identity. However, it appears that the writers either chose a feminist perspective or worked from the stereotype that Hausa women were relegated to domestic duties during Amina’s childhood and before, making Amina an exception. The movie’s synopsis suggests the latter, stating that Amina’s story is of a princess who “battles forces which have long relegated the female child to the background, to be seen and not heard; subjugated to remain under a man.”32 But this perspective may be far from the truth.

In 2019, YouNeek Studios released a different take on Amina using animation and comics.33 Through a historical fantasy series called Malika: The Warrior Princess, YouNeek tells Amina’s story.34 Like Amina, Malika rules over the kingdom of Azzaz, and expands it, starting in the fifteenth century. She is from the Bakwa family and an undefeated warrior. The first page of the comic frames Malika as a girl who could wield a dagger at a young age. But unlike Amina, Malika has superpowers and also battles the Ming Dynasty to stop it from destroying her people and the world (see Figure 8.2). She also worked for 10 years to unite Azzaz following a civil war. There are other differences too.

Malika, unlike Amina, is the youngest sibling and has a sister called Nadia, who will take over when their father dies. The comic also suggests that both girls are formidable, contradicting the stereotype of Hausa women. The comic also portrays Malika as fiercely protective. For instance, on her way to battle, she rescues a boy from a leopard by killing the animal. In another instance, she engages in combat with General Ras of Bornu, nicknamed “The Savior.” Ras is loyal to Malika’s uncle, who he thinks deserved the throne instead. Following a battle between their
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armies, which she wins, Malika challenges him to single combat. He accepts, assuming he will win. Malika uses moves reminiscent of Neo’s in The Matrix and triumphs. The trailer for the animated series was released on July 24, 2019. This is the first superhero animated series from Nigeria.

Overall, these stories of Amina have maintained her legacy as a strong, powerful, and capable woman. Amina’s portrayals in recent times seem almost superhuman. Unlike Moremi, whose legacy is situated in her femininity and her ability to use it to her advantage, Amina is situated in her rejection of her femininity and her emphasis on her ability to not only challenge paternalistic notions of what women can do, but also take on masculine roles from a young age. Even her sexual history appears masculine, because it is rare to hear of Nigerian women using men only for sex as she did. The idea of whether a Nigerian woman can enjoy sex for the sake of pleasure and not to produce children is often debated on Nigerian Twitter. While Amina appears to have had no interest in anything feminine, none of the works portray her as wanting to become a man (she does not dress like one or speak like one), and they also emphasize her beauty. Perhaps this is to frame her as the total package. At the same time, this frame borders on fantasy and idealism.

Princess Inikpi of Igala Kingdom

The final woman I will discuss is Princess Inikpi of Igala Kingdom. Hers is a story known mostly to the Igala people, who are found in present-day Kogi state in south-eastern Nigeria. Princess Inikpi “was a beautiful and intelligent young woman, whose selfless sacrifice saved her people from doom.”35 Though it is not known when she was born, she existed between the late fifteenth and the sixteenth century. During this era, either the Igalas were at war with the people of Benin, or their kings had a disagreement that could have caused a war. Whatever the version, the gods requested that the Igalas sacrifice Inikpi to ensure victory. Inikpi willingly agreed to sacrifice herself for the kingdom. She, along with nine virgin maids, was buried alive by the bank of the River Niger in Idah. It is said that as the Bini people approached, they saw the entire town engulfed in fire, assumed there was no need to attack, and left.

According to Ahmed Yerima, “Her bravery of self-sacrifice, loyalty, dedication and love become the embodiment of Inikpi as a person, who has since been deified as a goddess.”36 To recognize her contribution, she is memorialized in a statue in Idah, the state capital. There are also two plays and three movies about her. The plays include The Legendary Inikpi by Emmy Idegu and Inipki: The Warrior Princess by Nath McAbraham-Inajoh. According to Yerima, the plays “deify the young innocent girl” and “can be used to affect, effect and appeal to the consciousness of the Igala people of now and of future generations.”37

In terms of movies, the three that exist comprise director Dave Ibrahim’s Inikpi: Sacrifice of Redemption (2013), director Chico Ejiro’s Inikpi: The Legendary Princess (2017), and director Frank Rajah Arase’s The Legend of Inipki (2020). The first two are publicly available, while the third premiered on January 24, 2020. Ibrahim’s version framed Igalaland as a tributary of Bini, who raided them at will. The Igala were especially afraid of the Bini because among them was a young woman with supernatural powers who ensured Benin’s victory in any war. Fearing their doom, the Attah and his chiefs consulted the gods, who asked for Inikpi if they wanted victory. Inikpi is portrayed as one of two children, both female, but she is her father’s favorite. She is also very popular in the community and is framed as kind and fair. However, the 2017 version portrays the Attah and Oba as best friends who fight because the Attah mistakenly assumed that the Oba had seized and killed his servants. It also frames Inikpi as fearless, willing to go hunting with her four brothers and even challenging a man who beats his wife.
The movies also vary in how Inikpi was buried. The 2013 version shows her being buried while standing in the grave with nine virgin maids. The 2017 version depicts her buried with three teenage boys and nine virgin girls, lying down. Inikpi lies on top of the boys, who carry her as if on a lifter (see Figure 8.3).

Though the movies focused more on the relationships between the kings, both emphasized her sacrifice. A viewer will appreciate her humility and selflessness. Interestingly, Ibrahim compares her to Jesus, using John 3:16 at the end of the movie to signify how in laying her life down for her people, like Jesus, she saved them. But as the Bible verse refers to God's act of giving his only son, perhaps the director was also referring to Ayegba, who sacrificed either his only or his favorite daughter to save the people he loved. Her story is similar to biblical accounts of Jephthah, a judge who promised to sacrifice to God whatever came out to greet him first if he returned safely and defeated the Ammonites. He is victorious, and his daughter and only child is the first person to welcome him. He regrets his vow, but his daughter tells him he must keep it and, like Inikpi, willingly offers herself. Like Inikpi, she died a virgin and is celebrated within certain Jewish sects today. One also sees the significance of Inikpi, as she is not forgotten in Igala's history. Though not a political leader, Inikpi represents a popular saying that women are called on when men fail.

But Inikpi's legend is probably more dramatic and emotional because she was a princess and her father's favorite child. What if she had been a commoner? Would she have had a choice? Would she have tried to convince her father to let her be sacrificed? Would we know her story? After all, she was buried alive with nine virgins, who also sacrificed their lives and futures for Igalaland. Why are they not celebrated?

**Conclusion**

I looked at these works from a Nigerian woman’s perspective, in that “arts and culture play a significant role in shaping the contemporary feminist agenda” because they “are sites where women can challenge male-dominance as a form of political and intellectual intervention.”
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Women directed and/or produced only three of the works discussed here (Moremi Ajasaro, Moremi: The Musical, and The Legend of Inikpi).

In this regard, the works examined in this chapter raised issues on patriarchy and tradition. The works on Amina largely represented rather than challenged the status quo, because they focused on her extraordinariness, presented an example of a woman who did what men could do, and celebrated her legacy. Her legend is definitely inspiring. However, there are issues in contemporary Nigeria that the works could have used her legacy to explore, such as marriage/love and sexuality. Of the three women, Inikpi’s history is the most incomplete and as such, open to interpretation.

Ultimately, only Austen-Peters’ Moremi: The Musical portrayed a heroine of the past with strong feminist undertones that challenged long-held beliefs on gender, gender roles, and issues like fertility and politics in contemporary Nigeria. The musical reframed Moremi as a woman who possessed bravery and strength long before she became a queen. Austen-Peters’ decision to make her an active agent of change and to dramatize how she convinced her husband to let her act makes the home the deciding location where a woman can consciously construct who she is and how successful she can be outside it. This resonates with works by Nigerian female authors like Flora Nwapa, Zulu Sofola, and Buchi Emecheta that also identified and placed the struggle for women’s rights within the home. Overall, these works are useful for preserving the memories of women who made great strides or sacrifices for their communities, thus serving as precolonial proto-feminist models.

Notes

3 Ibid.
19 http://africa.uga.edu/Yoruba/unit_15/cultureunit.html
20 A trailer is available on YouTube and can be downloaded for $3 from www.moremithelegend.com
24 Coles and Mack, “Women.” The Kano Chronicle also states that women were involved in politics and leadership. Also see Mahdi Adamu, The Hausa Factor in West African History (1978), Ahmadu Bello University Press.
26 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 https://thenerdsofcolor.org/2016/02/10/xena-was-black/
31 http://aminaqueenofzazzau.com/about.php
32 Ibid.
33 See trailer at www.youtube.com/watch?v=ppGA3iMhdGs
34 Watch the creator’s description on www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=153&v=SUDsta2GktE
37 Yerima, “Princess Inikpi,” 3.
40 www.msfaprominent.com/2018/10/nigerian-feminism-past

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