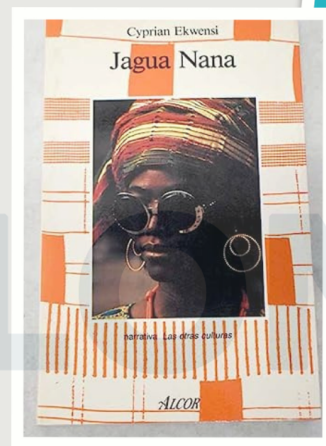


# Jagua Nana as a Feminist Icon

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Cyprian  
Ekwensi

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unapologetically chic and  
controversial.



On the first anniversary of Orlando Julius Ekemode's death, I found myself reflecting on his contributions to Nigerian culture and society. A pioneer of Nigerian popular music, Orlando Julius is known for his expert fusion of Highlife, jazz, and funk. Born in Ikole Ekiti in 1943, his musical influences included his mother Tinuola, Ghanaian Highlife singers, and the American musician James Brown. His first song, *Jagua Nana*, was released in 1965, four years after Cyprian Ekwensi's novel of the same name was published. The name *Jagua Nana* is given to a woman who bears characteristics similar to the British manufactured luxury vehicle, Jaguar—glossy and stylish but expensive and in need of high maintenance. Accordingly, the title, *Sisí Alájese*, is used by Orlando Julius as a synonym of *Jagua Nana*; it describes a lady who demands money, food and other resources capable of making a thick and abundant life possible.

Ekwensi's *Jagua* is a middle-aged woman. In the early pages of the novel, the years of her life are counted as forty-five but she is later described as being in her early fifties—an inconsistency interpreted by literary critics as a 'structural weakness' of the 1961 novel. Titillated by torched cigarettes and rich men, *Jagua* enjoys Highlife and jazz music and, on occasion, gyrates her waist on the dancefloor of *Tropicana*, a nightclub which features prominently in the novel. As in Ekwensi's novel, the *Jagua* of Orlando Julius's song lives a life of luxury and unlimited enjoyment. Singing the words, 'Èní ijó, olá party o. Èní otí, olá sigá o', Julius makes clear that the subject of his song is a woman who enjoys the freedom to dance, drink, and smoke cigarettes.

To be *Jaguaful*, as Ekwensi puts it, is to be unapologetically chic and controversial. *Jagua* is audacious and unrestrained, rousing excitement yet sparking concern in a society that expects women to be modest and contained. Given the cultural climate in which Orlando Julius released *Jagua Nana*, it is no surprise that it was a hit song. Underpinned by the empowering context of national liberation movements across Africa, the 1960s were a time when many African men, unfettered by patriarchal privileges bestowed by the cultural industry, built successful careers in

creative arts. Through art, they documented their social experiences and, as the critic and historian Stephanie Newell reveals, their cultural products had an overwhelming focus on 'deviant femininities'. Besides being an upbeat, feel-good song that instantly electrifies dancefloors, Orlando Julius's *Jagua Nana* joined Cyprian Ekwensi's novel in forming popular understandings of liberated women in 1960s Nigeria. Both works offer a glimpse into how African men tell the story of the unrestricted African woman who is bold enough to prioritise her pleasure and cultivate a whimsical sense of adventure. Ekwensi describes Jagua as 'wayward', a word used stoutly in Nigerian society to label people—often women—who dare to forge their own paths or deviate completely from life scripts written by others.

In an adapted version of *Jagua Nana*, Orlando Julius pleads with a woman to forgive him and return home. 'Sisi jowo, jowo forijimi o', he says. 'Ololufe mi, wale'. In a similar vein, Ekwensi portrays Jagua as a woman who was once married and birthed a son who later died. Jagua undergoes marital separation and becomes a sex worker. She lives freely in the raucous city of Lagos with Freddie, a younger lover whom she supports financially but considers a necessary part of her retirement plan. Paired together, the song and novel convey the story of a woman who has abandoned, whether temporarily or permanently, the institution of marriage. This echoes Stephanie Newell's claim that 1960s feminism was widely viewed as an 'association of the husbandless', a widespread understanding cemented by Ekpo MacJonah's 1965 novel, *Association of the Husbandless versus the Nigerian Bachelor, Opiachara*. In place of marriage, Jaguaful marriage-averse women search for comforts likely to emerge from a life of negotiated independence, a life without total independence since a man may remain in the picture as a provider.

Both Ekwensi's and Julius's portrayals of Jagua Nana spotlight traits that seem frivolous. Ekwensi writes of Jagua's 'high heels and tight skirts' while Julius, in a lively performance, refers to Jagua as 'apuskeleke' (a colloquial term used in Ghana to describe women who wear short skirts or revealing clothing.) Ekwensi's characterisation of Jagua is, however, more focused on Jagua's courage and earnest nature. In the novel, Jagua travels to Freddie's hometown of Bagana and departs only after facilitating a ceasefire between Bagana and Krinameh, kingdoms headed by warring factions within Freddie's family. In an attempt to rescue Freddie's younger girlfriend Nancy from an abduction orchestrated by the people of Krinameh, Jagua advises the leader of Bagana against sending armed men to release Nancy. Instead she volunteers to save Nancy's life by replacing Nancy as Krinameh's captive. Enamoured of Jagua, Chief Ofubara of Krinameh endeavours to engage in sexual acts with her. She nurtures his seductive advances but firmly reminds him of her intention to rescue Nancy and eventually convinces him to secure a truce with the leaders of Bagana. Affected by what Ekwensi calls 'the Jagua dazzle', Chief Ofubara proposes marriage to Jagua but she responds with an affirmation of her independence. 'Am a business woman', she says, 'I can't marry no one'. Indeed, Jagua is a proud member of the association of the husbandless. She enjoys her ability to move freely and do with her body what she wills. An awareness of non-conformist, formidable women of the 1960s seems rooted in Ekwensi's depiction of Jagua as a highly skilled sex worker and peace broker capable of ending a thirty-year war men had hitherto failed to settle.

Jagua Nana is a feminist icon midwifed into our cultural imagination by artists like Ekwensi and Julius. Neither Ekwensi nor Julius identified as feminists—in fact, Ekwensi's novel has been criticised by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi as sexist and in a 1980 interview Ekwensi described himself as 'neither anti-feminist nor fanatically pro-feminist'. Yet, their creative output unwittingly popularised a seemingly feminist character, albeit an arguably imperfect one. Jagua Nana embodies, rather paradoxically, the dissident and empowered woman who flirts with patriarchy, hoping quietly for the longevity of its structures and values because she may derive benefits from them. Such feminist desire could be explained by Obioma Nnaemeka's theory of 'nego-feminism' (the feminism of negotiation) which accounts for diversity in African feminism and emphasises the fact that many

African women participate in feminism through negotiation and compromise. Nnaemeka claims women in African societies may 'negotiate with/around patriarchy' to achieve their own goals.

Given the useful applicability of Nnaemeka's theory of nego-feminism to our understanding of Jagua Nana, it is difficult to overlook the marginalisation of Jagua Nana in Nigerian feminist discourse. Within the context of Nigerian literature, critics tend to theorise feminism with a greater focus on such characters as Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, Zaynab Alkali's *Li*, and Buchi Emecheta's *Adah*. We dare not deny the feminist energy that exudes from the pages of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* through the calculated characterisation of Aunty Ifeoma as a strong-willed, vociferous academic working at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka while also running a single-parent household. Yet, it seems easy to turn a blind eye to Jagua Nana, the ageing sex worker who seems drained of feminist politics and subversive action. But why has it been so easy to ignore this character whose life is pregnant with disobedience?

Jagua Nana as a cultural symbol was likely modelled after real women—not all—observed in 1960s Nigeria. Some will have disrupted the status quo by expressing their individualism in creative ways and labouring for a sheltered existence without necessarily removing men and their patronage from their lives. Modern day variants might include women who enjoy their freedom to work and build their own wealth but wish to also spend their partners' earnings. As Orlando Julius sings of Jagua Nana: 'Gbogbo òwó mi ló wá gbà tán o'. Or to borrow the words of the English rapper Dave, these Jaguaful women aim not to 'save [men's] soul[s]', but 'spend [their] savings'. Ekwensi claims such women thrust 'claw-like fingers into men's pockets'. For them, it is empowering to be financially independent—as Ekwensi's Jagua comes to be through sex work—but they ultimately enjoy the remnants of chivalry in society and hanker for a selective legitimization of patriarchal culture. Such behaviours represent a feminism of contested resistance that underlies Jagua Nana's character. Jaguaful women resist the hegemony of patriarchy but also resist forces seeking to obliterate patriarchy.

The subjects of Simidele Dosekun's 2020 book, *Fashioning Postfeminism*, may relate to Jaguaful women. In her book, Dosekun reveals the strong commitment of modern Nigerian women to (hyper)feminine beautification practices. Just as Ekwensi's Jagua regularly paints her face with 'arty makeup', women in Dosekun's book empower themselves by installing false lashes to appear prettier, correcting God's mistake of failing to create them with longer eyelashes. Regardless of how controversial these feminist values and practices may seem to radical feminists seeking to completely deconstruct the status quo, Jaguaful women deserve recognition because they contribute to our understanding of the complex nature of feminist practice and enable us to grapple with tensions that remain trapped in the feminist movement.

While male-authored narratives of women can be problematic in their scope or delivery, Cyprian Ekwensi and Orlando Julius have played an instrumental role in constructing, through vivid characterisations of Jagua Nana, an avatar of feminism that loiters in our cultural landscape due to unwarranted disregard. But Jagua Nana is not one to loiter aimlessly. She is a character who always finds purpose, and her purpose in enriching feminist theory cannot be denied.

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