

GENDER ROLES IN IGBO CULTURE: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

This paper made a synoptic essay on the pride of place of the female in African culture, using the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria as a case study. The paper used the evolutionary theory, and social role theory to show that gender roles among Igbos from pre historic times were not arbitrarily assigned but evolved, and that up to the moment, survival of any species in an ecosystem depends on proper adjustment to demands of the environment, including delineation of roles. It also explained that Igbos did not engage in retrograde widowhood practices nor defined discriminatory inheritance of parent's properties, and that the female gender participated actively in the policy/politics and adjudication processes at the highest level in the 'original' cultural setting. It concludes that Igbos could have been the oldest democracy in the world.

Keywords: *Igbo Culture, Igbos, Gender Roles, Customs, Female Child.*

Introduction

For several decades, most of African cultures and customs have been demeaned and described as uncivilized, and in some quarters as discriminatory against girls and women. While one may not authoritatively defend every aspect of 'black man's customs (though it may not be necessary to do so), it has become important to take a synoptic look at the severally touted issue of gender suppression and discrimination among Igbos of Eastern Nigeria with a view of encouraging proper evaluation of indigenous customs before throwing them overboard; perhaps consequent on sheer slave mentality. The paper will therefore define the constructs of interest, offer theoretical explanation for gender roles and in that context explain the 'original' customary practices that have been misperceived as discriminatory, then conclude.

Culture

Culture has been defined as a people's way of life, which embodies their belief systems, arts, music, values, institutions and religion. It as an umbrella term which encompasses

social behaviour and norms found in human societies, as well as the knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, customs, capabilities, and habits of the individuals in these groups. According to Merriam-Webster (2020), Culture is the customary belief, social norms and material traits of a racial, religious or social group, it is also seen as set of values, conventions or social practices associated with a particular societal characteristic (sub-culture) (<http://www.merriam-webster.com>) retrieved 18th April 2020. In these definitions two words are particularly germane to our current discussion: custom, and law; Although none of the featured words in the definitions are any less important.

Custom describes something that is done by people in a particular society because it is traditional; (www.ldoceonline.com) (and tradition simply suggests the transmission of customs from generation to generation). So practices that are transmitted from generation to generation are customs, and aggregates of customs make up the culture.

Theoretical Overview on Gender (Roles)

Having defined and explained culture and custom, it is reasonable to underlie the development of customs/culture using existing psychological theories. Psychological theories are necessary since culture and custom are all about human health and social behaviour, and relationship with the environment. Two theories: **The Evolutionary and the Social-role theories** here under evoked to showcase the origin and sustaining force of many cultural practices, especially Gender roles.

Evolutionary Psychologists view human cognition and behavior from a broad Darwinian persuasion of adaptation to evolving physical and social environments, and new intercultural challenges. These theorists hold that species that survive in an ecosystem are those that develop characteristics that enhance adaptability to the environment while those that lack survival characteristics get extinct: the grand concepts of natural selection and survival of the fittest have thus been used to explain the core philosophy of the Evolutionary theory. Simply put, as environments increase in sophistication and existential challenges, members and occupants of that ecosystem that are able to develop adaptive characteristics (strategies and features inclusive) conquer the existential threats, procreate and retain their kinds while the rest get eliminated.

Evolutionary theory therefore explains gender roles in terms of evolutionary demands that ensure survival and retention of the human species in the ecosystem (the geographical area under consideration). Accordingly, before the advent of education; ‘gold and white collar’ jobs, males were expected to be able to protect their families (wife/wives and children), while females who have a greater stake in not squandering their fewer reproductive

chances place a greater priority in selecting mates (husbands) with the ability to commit resources to protecting and nurturing their young. It follows that the roles ascribed to females by common traditions' evolved as human species worked hard to retain the Homo sapiens on Earth. These roles would keep adjusting itself as the environmental forces shape them. Perhaps, it will get to a time when there would be no need to care for children, yet they will survive, or when males will develop characteristics (biological/physiological, as well as psychological to nurture children as well as when the best method to rear children shall be through machines, or even the Homo Sapiens shall increase through binary fission... . This theory must be concluding thus: For humans to remain human beings, children must be reared as human beings, and someone most equipped with cogent characteristics have to do that. In the culture/custom of the Igbos, the female is that! She is thus seen as holding the ace for continued existence of the 'race' and must be protected and cherished.

The Social role theory, a more recent theory and perhaps a fall out of the evolutionary theory holds that various influences including childhood experiences and factors bend males and females towards differing roles that eventually affect our perceptions and behaviour as men and women. Eagly and Wood (1999) posit that biological (anatomical and physiological) make up and childhood experiences are major factors that predispose to a sexual division of labour. Hence in adult life, the immediate causes of gender differences in social behavior are the roles that reflect the 'sexual' division of labour. In effect, men endowed with apparatuses that engender strength and greed tend to be found in roles demanding physical power, while women's capacity for child bearing and nursing inclines them to more nurturing roles. Each sex then tends to exhibit those behaviors expected of those who fill such roles and have their skills and beliefs shaped accordingly. In this connection, Myers (2007) observed that cultural norms subtly but powerfully affect human attitudes and behavior, but they do not do so independently of biology: everything psychological and social is ultimately biological, and that what human biological heritage initiates, culture accentuates. In other words, if genes and hormones predispose males to be more muscular and more physically aggressive than females, culture may amplify this difference through norms that expect males to be tough and females to be kinder and gentler.

These theories help to give bearing to gender roles and differential role performances even in contemporary society. They as well must make sense to people who believe in creationism: fundamental gender roles were set out by the Creator so as to fulfill the purpose(s) of creation. Reversal of these roles must thus have far reaching negative consequences to species continued habitation in the current habitat. However, as the

environment evolves, and more roles emerge, further differentiation may lead to necessary role adjustments to ensure the survival of human beings in the various local ecosystems, as on the planet: the common habitat.

The questions then are: How is the mode of family property inheritance in **South-East Nigeria** related to this scheme of ‘survival’? Is this method/custom against the welfare of the Female child, even at the current (2020) level of western education and globalization? (how is this connected to father’s, and to late husband’s property).

First, let us take an overview of the pride of place of the female child in Igbo clime: as a child/daughter, then as a wife and mother. It seems a universal observation that female children are loved and cherished by their fathers, while the males are cherished by their mothers. This perhaps is not a function of the Oedipus complex as many may wish to suggest. It is however due to the understanding that in-laws are very important members of the Igbo extended family system, and because men think more of their old age and death /burial ceremonies, they always pray to have their female children protected and married out to competent males for the roles traditionally set for them at the ending of life (Anatogu 2000). On the other hand, males bring in the woman’s helping hand after she has ‘lost’ the first one; her girl- child! The daughter(s) in law become(s) a companion/companions: It is therefore not correct/or empirically evidenced that men love the boys more than the girls. Nonetheless, almost every Igbo man would want to have at least a son, more so in these days of Christian-Igbo culture. The boys are mainly sought to assist the man in his trade and family upkeep as well as territorial security. The foregoing is further buttressed by the common names: males are called Ikem, Ezeaputa, Orji, Onyeogu, etc, while sample female names among Igbos include Ngozi, Amaka, Obianuju, Nwakaego, Nwando, Akwaugo, and Apunanwu (market day names excluded), while wives were/are addressed as Oriaku (meant to consume wealth). Note also that unmarried men were regarded as irresponsible and not admitted to policy making meetings.

Indeed, it is the misguided or misunderstood Christian or emerging Igbo culture: the one that is a mixture of cultures, or adulterated foreign and Igbo custom(s) that ‘hyperbole’ the place of the male child against the female child. Originally, capable Igbo men were traditionally polygamous hence, many a time, there were no issues about male or female children. However, in the rather few instances where a man died without a son, no property of his was taken over by anybody because:

- a) The wife could accept to become ‘married’ to her late husband’s brother.
- b) A female child of the man could be retained to bear children in her father’s name or
- c) The woman/wife marries another wife on her husband’s behalf.

Indeed, many a second or third wife in those days were married by the first wife after years of infertility (primary or secondary, or for gender mix) hence most polygamous families lived in peace. These were methods of adoption of children among Igbos. Unfortunately, many of these customs have been ‘criminalized’ by the foreign culture mix that confused the place of pride of the girl child among Igbos for discrimination.

Marriage of a Deceased Brother’s Wife to his Brother.

This practice of those days: where a man died and leaving a young wife and children, then the young woman gets re-married to a man in the family has been described as ugly and unacceptable by the ‘modern woman’, and taken into the mainstream untoward cultural practices by rather uninformed persons and unschooled activists. The description above may seem harsh but is objective, considering that those who fight against the practice as evil never cared to accept that it was at a point in human societal development very ingenious and desirable. The traditional Igbos cherished integrity at individual and family levels, and any new wife was called ‘nwunyedi’, literally meaning my husband’s wife. Hence every wife was as well the other brother’s wife except for sexual gratification at the time they both lived.

However, if one lost the husband, formalization rites must be performed before the ‘other husband’ could have conjugal rights: it used to be a mutual thing supported by the evolutionary theory. This author witnessed a case where none of the brothers of the deceased was willing/capable to carry on with the responsibility, and the woman was handed over every parcel of land (even those she didn’t know about) and the late husband’s house, and every bit of thing the man had, and this was sealed by a ritual that made it an abomination for any person to trespass. In effect, it is not correct to say that the custom of the Igbos do not allow wives to take over their husband’s property if they had no male children. This woman was then at liberty to either marry on behalf of her husband to keep the family lineage going, or have any of her daughters bear children for the same purpose, and they could enjoy the full inheritance and respect in the kindred and village. Two questions that readily yearn for answers are: if this practice were morally unbecoming, why did St. Paul according to the Bible (1st Cor. 7:8 – 9; 1st. Tim. 5: 7) prescribe that young widows should preferably remarry? Again, how many young widows remain without active sexuality after the first year of their late husband’s demise? Observation and evidence show that overwhelming majority remarry legally or illegally soon after the mandatory mourning period. Nonetheless, and importantly too, by the Christian marital oath, the marital contract automatically dissolves at the death of a spouse (...until death do us part): so what makes remarriage to a family member a dastardly

sin.....it is not oyibo? Yet some Oyibo marry third cousins! May it be recalled at this point that among Igbos, a child born by an unmarried girl belongs to her father completely. In fact, in some parts of Igboland, once a man learns that her child is pregnant out of marriage, he would not accept any bride price; he has to take his new child before marrying out her daughter.

It seems unequivocal that this practice/custom/tradition of the Igbos is ingenious, and has Devine approval. Even though the practice may not scale through extant marital arrangements because of conventional/contemporary individualistic relationships, work and labour laws, urbanization, and the like, it must not be viewed as disrespectful or derogatory to womanhood; except if promiscuity were a more desirable behavior than prudence and proper nurturing of children which were envisaged by the original practice.

Married Female Child's Inheritance of Her Father's Property.

Another issue that has raised unnecessary dust is family assets. Some careless women rights' activists over orchestrate the issue of sharing deceased fathers landed properties. In this case also, one must state without any fear of contradiction that female Igbos are entitled to their fathers wealth as much as the males. An unmarried daughter as shown in the paragraphs above could have children for the family and the male child is considered and treated like the deceased fathers child/children. In cases where the female child is yet to get married, she is entitled to 'farmland' for her upkeep along with her mother. The issue of perpetual ownership of land comes in issue where the man of the house **did not make a Will**. But if a man shared her landed property and gave any parcel of land to his daughter(s) that would remain. Igbos hold that 'Onye nwenu n'eke' (one is entitled to share or give out what belongs to him as he wishes). This practice is valid even up to this moment.

One practice (marital custom) that has persisted till date which most people do not understand is the **Idu-Uno ceremony**: where a family gives gifts to their daughter after wedlock to enhance her settlement in the new family. This is the point at which the female child is given her own portion of her father's or family wealth to go and start her own family, much the same way the man shares/gives out portions of his wealth to his sons at various times to settle them into their respective families. In Igbo culture, wealthy men own vast expanses of land and during Idu-Uno they may give (and are used to giving) landed property to their daughters. Daughters therefore not only inherit land, but may also inherit houses. It is thus ignorance or malice that makes people misrepresent Igbo culture/custom as one that does not permit female ownership/inheritance of landed property. As a matter of fact, people (in those days) go for "ugly" girls with wealthy parents

who most likely would be given parcel of land for Idu-Uno, and many wealthy men in those days used to keep aside parcels of land for the purpose of beloved daughter's Idu-Uno whether they are alive or dead by the time of the girl child's marriage. It is therefore settled that girls, as well as boys in Igboland receive various Idu-Uno gifts from their parents at different times, and the items could include landed property if the man were wealthy enough.

A proposal to give part of a building of five rooms to a married daughter just to show her belongingness to the father's household still looks as stupid as it was in the olden days. However, if a woman returned from the marital home and had no children, the father's household still had to give her proportionate inheritance. Unfortunately, most women that had marital misfortune and returned, never returned with the Idu-Uno materials, so they should not in good conscience expect their siblings to 'settle them' with her own inheritance. They could only benefit from the remaining common pool (if any). Is this illogical, segregational, or against human rights? You may read about the return of a son after Idu-Uno in the Bible: Luke 15, emphasis on verse 31.

I guess it is bare and clear from the foregoing that both the male and female children are helped to start their own families at appropriate times (as Idu-Uno or Ipu-Obi) with as much wealth as the parents could afford. There is no igbo traditional law or rule that sets limits to what a father may give to his daughter or son. Wisdom and necessity demands that the male who would remain in situ should live in his father's house if the father has one since the female child would inherit another house alongside the husband. What could be fairer than this? Igbos were indeed very wise and civilized!

It must be put on record that until the advent 'modern Igbos', the body of a deceased daughter used to be brought back to the father's house for burial. This author had the privilege of witnessing this, and another, where the 'ibunaga ngiga' ceremony had to be performed before the body could be buried in the husband's place. This practice further demonstrated the high regards accorded the female child in the original Igbo culture. Indeed, even up to this moment, Igbos are more troubled physically and spiritually if they fail to see to it that a late daughter got befitting burial: *Ozu nwada na anyi ajo alo* (dead body of a daughter is very heavy) is a usual saying among Igbos because; should a female be denied her rights even at death, her spirit will weigh the family down: prosperity would cease, untimely deaths will abound and even mental ill-health will be the lot of the family until all issues regarding the missing daughter were resolved, and her spirit appeased. Again, this author was privileged to witness the Nwada issue emanating post slave trade and the eventual resolution of the matter as summarized above. The point is that even at

death it may seem that the female child is more revered than the male, but no: the actuality is that each child used to get what he/she needed to survive, procreate, and maintain the species in the ecosystem.

Concerning the Traditional Legal System.

The wisdom and democratic nature of Igbos seems to be the best in history. While it is not true that Igbos did not have kings, it is true that Igbo kings did not usually exercise autocratic powers. They were leaders whose biggest authority was at the worst authoritative style. The kings (Eze or Obi or Igwe) most of the time acted like the senate president of today. He took every issue to his council of elders, evoked the existing regulations already established by accepted norms, and in contentious issues ‘had the casting vote’. Again, the kings were under dangerous oaths not to malign the integrity of the stool and the ‘eye of the gods’ were around to remind them from time to time. A near case scenario is found in the current traditional arrangement of Nri in Njikoka L.G.A of Anambra state, where up to this time (2020) good part the tradition regarding the throne has been sustained: The traditional ruler is powerful to the extent he is righteous and integrous.

However, disputes did not go straight to the king’s palace/court. Disputes were first treated at the extended family level (umunna), with the eldest member presiding while other male members make up the jury. Hence, Igbos operated the Jury system not the imported bench system in the practice in Nigeria. Where a case could not be resolved at the family level, or if it were inter family dispute, the village head would convene the elders in another Jury at that level, pleas and witnesses were taken before majority verdicts would be upheld. No village head or Isi-Nze had the authority of a judge as it is known today. It was when a dispute could not be resolved at the level of the village, or where two villages were involved, the central administration in the Igwe/Obi/Eze and his ‘court’ or council of elders handled the case. Only criminal cases could jump this protocol.

Women at these levels also treated minor issues that concerned only women but reported more serious violations to the relevant male ‘courts’, including non compliance with verdicts. Perhaps the one outstanding Jury that seems to have been forgotten in many parts of Igbo land is the herein described as the ‘Superior Court’. Cases were rarely referred to this ‘court’, and it does not convene as regularly as all others. The court is the Umu-Okpu: (Daughters of the land who though married even to other towns get initiated into this group at appropriate time). They deal with serious matters that defy the other levels, or interlocutory appeals from those levels. That is, should someone or group lose confidence in the appeal Jury (Igwe/Elders court) the last resort was the Umu-Okpu. This court was

reputed to be zero tolerant to corruption and acutely dispassionate. It was a feared Jury such that uncharitable people would rather settle out of court than present themselves to this 'court' since non compliance with their verdict could eventuate to death when/if they commit same to the gods through a ritual they alone could perform.

In contemporary society, the Umu-Ada 'stand in' for this group- yes they are the Daughters, but foreign culture did corrupt the original Umu-okpu society and it lost a host of its powers as it's initiation rituals were forbidden by the Christians as Idol worship. However, it must be put on record that many communities still repose a level of confidence on the Umu-ada. In a rather recent case, this group used the 'traditional method' to settle a case of recalcitrant spouse violence in Dunukofia, and the male culprit learnt the lesson of his life, while the village stood still as no one dared go to the police.

The emphasis here is that irrespective of minor differences in the cultural adjudication/conflict resolution mechanism among communities in Igbo land, the women were not marginalized, and in many communities (if not most), the Umu-Okpu /Umu-Ada were invited to settle the most difficult of cases and to restore peace. Importantly too, Obi-Nwosu (2011) asserted that in many parts of Igbo land, eligible women were admitted into the Masquerade cult (the traditional administrators and secret preservers of such communities), and up to now, in some communities Nne-Nmonwu (Female patron of masquerades) still exist. Indeed, Igbo culture did not exclude women from decision making processes or policy making. It is the contaminated and imported culture that distanced women from the policy table.

Concerning Early Marriage and Mourning of Late Husband/Dehumanizing Widowhood Practices.

In an earlier paragraph, the custom regarding the issue of inheritance of a husband's wealth was explained so it could be taken for granted that the reader has understood that the Igbo culture and custom has no place of untoward widowhood practices. Wickedness, hatred and abuse are everyday words in every part of the world and this part is not exempt from these. In the original culture, the deity is feared and there are extents that people must not go, else the woman's family may get involved and deities may also get involved. If shaving of scalp hair is the issue, this author would ask the reader to refer to the Bible (1st Cor.11:5-6) to assist to explain that the ritual was meant to not only show last respect to the man but as a parting symbol signifying that the woman has no husband again. Paraphrased, it is one of the liberation rituals in Igbo land: End of a contract!

As for forced early/premature marriage, this is not a part of the Igbo culture at all. Very poor families may support early marriage of their children as is obtainable all over the world, hence early marriage was usually a function of poverty, not culture, and these were few. However, there was a culture of arranged marital promises: two friends may agree that their children would get married even when their children were minors. This practice had stopped several decades ago but it must be noted that at that time most marriages had no courtship history and were successful.

Religion

Perhaps, one of the strongest points of culture is religion. All peoples of the world at one point in time in history had some form of religious practice that shaped their relationship with one another, and the unknown. In Igbo land, besides the unseen Chi-Ukwu (The Almighty), other chis (deities), responsible for everyday problem solving had shrines in every community. Several of these shrines still exist till date, and some (a good number) are female in connotation. Most communities had both shrines for gods and goddesses of which Anatogu (2004) suggested that the Roman Catholic mission spread first in Igbo land because they had two god images: male and female, so the people were able to replace some of their attachments as opposed to the CMS that was older, but had more abstract teachings. This narrative showcases the relevance of females in Igbo culture and cosmogram. At no level of the cosmogram had women/female representation been maligned. Obi-Nwosu (2011) suggests strongly that the integration of women in all facets of the life of Igbos contributed to the greatness of the people in community administration (politics) and in commerce. Indeed, the Igbos could be regarded as the oldest democracy on earth: Perhaps, what Europe and the United States of America have done is to sharpen and put down on paper the democratic principles already in practice by pre-historic Igbos.

Conclusion

This paper set out to debunk the widely held but erroneous belief that Africans, but especially the Igbo cultural/customary heritage is antagonistic to gender equity with bias against the female. By the evocation of the Evolutionary and Gender-role theories, it was shown that Igbos had no customary based gender discrimination, rather, that Igbos had been a democratic people with well set out policy making and 'legal' institutions of which women were very active at all levels. Gender roles should therefore not be a matter of legislation. It should evolve; new roles should evolve as families, communities and human kind continue to do the needful to ensure survival of Homo sapiens on the planet earth. If legislation could change such things without damage, why has America not produced a first female president? Indeed, it is foreign adulteration of Igbo culture that engendered

reduction of the roles of women in the affairs of 'Igbo nation' if at all, but most importantly it is political business to use gender discrimination to attract pecuniary interests since practically Igbos advances more than most parts of the developed world in this arena.

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