

## **IGBO WOMAN IN TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS SETTING**

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### **Abstract**

*In this paper, the researchers attempted to delve into an analysis of the place of women in Igbo traditional setting especially as it concerns Igbo religion and its beliefs. The researchers tried to examine seeming maltreatment meted out to women and womanhood in a society where all should have been given an equal opportunity to express their aptitudes in diverse areas of life especially in the family and in religious life. The researchers were able to discover that the Igbo men traditionally had no cogent reasons for treating women as second rate citizens except for the notion that they are the weaker sex, having paid dowries on them. They regarded them (the women) as mere pieces of property which should be used and dumped at will. The researchers also found out that the trend is changing with the advent of Christianity and education. This research being a survey research*

*was conducted using oral interview and some books were also consulted and referred to.*

## **Introduction**

*Ndi Igbo* is the group of people that inhabit the South Eastern part of Nigeria. They are industrious and hardworking. Their major occupation is farming. They produce such crops as yam, cocoyam, maize, palm fruit etc. Their language is Igbo language which is one of the major African Languages. Although it is spoken predominantly in Eastern Nigeria, it is widely spoken in almost all the countries of world by the Igbo in Diaspora. The importance of speaking one's language can never be over-emphasized. Language is the most important heritage on which the survival of culture and their continued existence on earth as a people largely depend. Knowledge of the Igbo language will, amongst other things, give one the key to the heart of the Igbo people (Nd[ Igbo). In fact, it will enable you to understand why Igbo people are unique in Africa, why they are hated and admired by their erstwhile colonial masters and detractors, and above all, why they are wanted and unwanted in their country Nigeria. This situation is not only applicable with Igbo language alone but with the other languages whether minor or major.

As in every other society, Igbo people have customs and traditions that guide the way of their people. These customs are handed down from one generation to the other. However, this is done orally because they are not written down especially in the olden days. It is true that Christianity brought with it Western Education into the Igbo Community, yet the oral method of transmission of information has not faded.

Researches have been carried out into the life of the Igbo people. One of the earliest investigations is that carried out by G.T. Basden in 1921. And since then, a lot of other researchers have followed his foot path. However, evidence has proved

that some of the pre-colonial investigations were not carried out properly. This was because the researchers in their zeal to study the African societies, failed to understand their culture before the publication of their findings. Ezeigbo (1990) states that:

There are scholars, mostly Europeans and Americans who, in their zeal to study African societies, neglected the application of painstaking and in-depth research before embarking on the publication of their findings in books, journals and magazines. This no doubt, led to the publication of half-truths about the customs and values of the African people. Even when the truth was reported, it was often given a paternalistic interpretation by these scholars. Often what one saw were statements of generalization which misinformed the public about the true state of affairs in the African society or culture which was the subject of their study.

From the foregoing, one can deduce that, these early investigations were carried out by Europeans who had very limited knowledge of the complexities of Igbo culture including the Igbo language. Their works were also limited in scope, depth and coverage. However, they initiated the foundation for the study of Igbo culture.

Having mentioned all these, it is worthy to note that this paper is set to examine the place of women in Igbo Tradition especially in their religious beliefs and customs. Women have been exempted from doing certain things with regards to the tradition of the land. Some of these things include eating some kinds of food like egg, gizzard and the tail of a fowl. They are also forbidden from performing certain roles that might be regarded as exclusive for the men folk. They are also subjected to some traditional rites that are virtually not good for their well being both physically and spiritually.

It is on this note that the researchers have deemed it necessary to look into the different aspects of the culture of the Igbo people with a view to fathoming reasons behind the seeming maltreatment meted out to women and womanhood. Before going further to discuss this, it is necessary to understand what culture really is.

Culture is simply defined as the way of life of a particular group of people. Hornby (2006:357) defines it as “the customs and beliefs, arts, way of life and social organization of a particular country or group”.

From the definition, one can deduce that the customs, traditions, behavior and every other aspect of life of a group of people is their culture. This includes their beliefs, understanding, wisdom, food, marriage system etc. In all these culture-frame, there are some characteristics. They are:

- Culture can be learnt.
- It is transmitted from one generation to the other.
- Culture can only be associated with human beings.
- Culture differs according to tribes or ethnic groups or society.
- There can be elements of similarity between one culture and the other.
- Culture cannot die.
- However, it can change from time to time due to some factors influencing it (Anizoba n:d)

From these attributes, we have been able to understand what culture is and its characteristics. Some researches have been carried out on aspects of the lives such as Igbo Women gender sensitivity and women rights. As regards women rights, some of these studies tend to portray Igbo culture as savage, primitive and inferior. In addition Igbo religion was regarded as idolatrous, satanic and backward. The social system and institutions were also non productive, non-

sustainable and basic. Among these institutions, the marriage institution is contaminated in the discourse determined by the Western value system, long used to an atomistic model, as oppressive to women. (Nwakamma, 2008)

Here, the researchers believe strongly that these views are not true because they were based on assumptions, not facts. They believe that the Igbo system understood that women were a very important group in the scheme of things and so owned their own property/wealth. It was at the onset of the colonial process that women began to suffer oppression. So, the question of oppression among the Igbo women is notional. However, one can see that the researchers carrying out the aforementioned investigation do not believe that Igbo women are being oppressed. Rather they have a special place in the society.

Having discussed this far, efforts will be made to delve into the major topic of discussion.

### **Place of Women in the Traditional Igbo Society**

In a typical Igbo family, if a child is born, the sex is ascertained and if the baby is a male, that means great joy for the parents. The man is quite happy because he has a man who will take his place after his death and continue the lineage. The mother of the child expresses even more joy because she has just entrenched herself in her husband's heart. In other words, it will be very hard for her to be uprooted from the family. The birth of a son further means having a voice in the decision making of the family. It is for this reason that Igbo people give such names as Ikemefuna, Ahamefula, Obiechina etc.

On the other hand, if the child is a baby girl, the husband and wife receive it with mixed feelings. However, sorrow and unhappiness will envelop the family if subsequent pregnancies result to more female children. For the man, it brings

sorrow because his hope of having a male child to continue his lineage is becoming slimmer as the females will soon be married off. Therefore, having female children is like keeping other peoples' vineyard while your own is left unkept.

As the children begin to grow, the males and the females are socialized differently; the boys look upon themselves as superior, stronger, more important and indispensable. The females are trained to see themselves as appendages of the men. In *Things Fall Apart*, Nwoye and Ikemefuna were told stories of violence and bloodshed to toughen them and prepare them for their future role of guardian, protector and head of their families while mothers told their daughters feminine stories about how to behave themselves so as to attract worthy husbands. Achebe (1958) says:

Nwoye somehow still preferred the stories that his mother used to tell.... Stories of tortoise and his wily ways.... But he knew that they were for foolish women and children and he knew that his father wanted him to be a man. And so he feigned that he no longer cared for women's stories. And when he did this he saw that his father was pleased, and no longer rebuked him or beat him (38).

The status of women amongst the Igbo is such that it is an abomination to get into the area meant for the men or their husbands. Perhaps that was why Basden (1921:88) stated that "women have few rights in any circumstance, and can only hold such property as their lords permit... they accept the situation as their grandmothers did before them.

The statement above seems to be an over statement because the men too have their own burden and roles to play in the society. However the role of women is always more emphasized. According to him, women from the infant stage enter upon a life of service and are allowed such share in feminine affairs as their size

and strength could carry them. They are responsible for the supply of water, firewood, and some kinds of food like cocoyams, cassava, vegetables and seasoners to their families. Achebe (1958:16) states that “His mother and sisters worked hard enough, but they grew women’s crops, like cocoyam, beans and cassava. Yam, the king of crops, was a man’s crop”. The above author further states that women weeded the farm three times at definite periods in the life of the yams, neither too early nor too late. Furthermore, women go to market on market days to sell their farm products. In the olden days, this is done on foot unlike in the recent times when they will always load the farm products in a vehicle and take them to distant markets to sell.... Basden (1921:90) states that “the whole of the trade in the ibo country is in the hands of women and they are extremely capable”.

When other issues like a case of divorce arises due to other cases like infidelity, the woman suffers most because she would be deprived of all her property and also her children. Basden (1921) states that:

This procedure constitutes permanent divorce and the action of the husband will be upheld by the native law. The wife, so treated is deprived of all her property and also her children; indeed neither ever was hers. Her only possessions are her cooking pots, market basket, and a few other small articles pertaining to domestic side of the house.

However, this is hardly the case in real life because effort is always made to resolve the issues at stake by the Umunna of both sides especially where the woman has gotten some children, males inclusive.

## **The Place of Women in Religious Ceremonies of the Igbo People**

Religious ceremonies amongst Ndi Igbo range from burial ceremonies, yam festivals, masquerading, sacrifices to other forms of worship. In all these, one important ceremony is hardly omitted – the breaking of kola nut.

Kola nut and the breaking of it, is a very significant ceremony amongst Ndi Igbo and as a result, they give it prominence. Women are not allowed to pray over the kola nut except if a man is not around or in a gathering where only women are present. There is no reason behind this custom. The men especially the eldest man in a gathering performs this task whenever the need arises. Achebe (1958:14) in elucidating, asserts: “He presented a kola nut and an alligator pepper which was passed round for all to see and then returned to him. He broke it saying; we shall all live. We pray for life, good children, a good harvest and happiness...”. So women never break kola nut wherever a man is in traditional Igbo setting.

In Igbo marriage institution, women feel that they are not well treated because the custom allows them very minimal contribution in the affairs of the family. Basden (1921:77) states that “The feelings of the woman are not consulted; she has no rights to be respected, and if she acts contrary to the law of the land, she must bear the consequences”. He further states that “A woman cannot divorce her husband. She is his property duly paid for and she cannot take action against her lord and master ...”. These are some of the anachronisms and rustic prescription which are contrary to the fundamental human rights of women in traditional society. For instance, the woman is incapable of reasoning for herself. Achufusi (1994) as quoted by Ozumba (2005:4) captures this problem in the following words:

The most pathetic thing about these women is their ineffectiveness as human beings, incapability to correct or admonish their husbands despite their knowledge of inadequacies in the men’s lives they are all aware of the

superficiality, vanity, avarice, emptiness and extreme flamboyance of the kind of lives their husbands lead and into which they (the wives) have been pulled. They all appear helpless, unable to break away and start a more purposeful life for themselves or make effort to bring sanity and reality into the lives of their husbands.

The wives of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* for instance, knew after he killed Ikemefuna that the man had gone mental but they could not stop those his tantrums because of the untouchable image” of the husband in the traditional Igbo society. Today things have changed.

The aforementioned quotes relate to the issue of divorce in the marital life of an Igbo woman. However, the issue of divorce in Igbo marriage institution hardly arises except in the cases of inability of the woman to give birth. Even at that, the polygamous system usually solves the problem of a woman not being able to bear children. Other women who will be married into the family might fulfill the duty of child bearing. But at times, where the fault is from the man, the woman might be falsely and driven away from the family to save the husband’s face.

In traditional setting, Igbo women accept polygamy in their family. In some cases, they advise their husband to marry more wives and at times they might go to the extent of contributing to the bride price. This may be possible according to Onuma Mercy (2008) who posits that most women who advised their husbands to marry more wives did it for the following reasons: one, when their mates are barren; two, if they do not have many children especially male children; etc. Olisa (1980) as quoted by Nwaozuzu (2007:32) says “for the woman, polygamy was of much value: more wives reduced the individual woman’s burdens of contributing to the provision of family food, ... and attending to all her husband’s amoral and sexual needs”. In contrast, Nwaozuzu refutes this view by saying that “this is far

from the truth. The fact is that the submissive nature of the traditional Igbo woman explains her half-hearted tolerance of the system. She is seen as a villain if she dares put up some resistance”. The traditional woman reluctantly and grudgingly shares her marital rights with an intruder simply to avoid being branded a villain.

Burial rites or [kwa ozu is regarded highly amongst ndi Igbo. Amadi in his book *The Concubine* (1966:12,14) gives an account of the second burial of Emenike. During some of these burial ceremonies, the wife of the deceased seems to be subjected to some severe traditions. She might be confined to a room for a long period of time. Her hair would be shaved totally and she would put on sackcloth for a period of time, usually one year. In some parts of Igbo land, the wife of the deceased is forced to drink the water used to wash the corpse of her husband to prove that she is not responsible for his death. He narrates:

Her hair was closely shaven according to tradition. She looks emaciated, her cheek-bones showed and her voice was husky and uncertain; her dress was untidy .... The ceremony ended after eight days. Ihuoma was now expected to cast off her sackcloth and dress properly for the first time since her husband died a year ago. (pp. 13-14)

This extract gives a picture of what is expected of a widow in Igbo tradition. Women feel cheated because the widowers are not subjected to the same treatment. Recently, the researchers gathered from a town in Ideato north Local Government Area of Imo State that a woman who loses her husband is expected to stay at home without going out or doing any work for three months. She is confined to a mourning chair for these number of periods. She shall not be seen in the market or do any work. What a dehumanization in this contemporary time when most women are civil servants and bread winners?

Furthermore, masquerading and other forms of secret cult amongst Igbo people are strictly reserved for the men. Women do not belong to masquerade cults. Masquerading involves some religious rites and other rituals which are usually performed in the clandestine form at the shrine or some other hidden places before the outing ceremony. It is usually reserved strictly for the immediate members of the cult. In some cases, women are not allowed to see a masquerade. Achebe (1958:63) narrates:

These women never saw the inside of the hut. No woman ever did. They scrubbed and painted the outside walls under the supervision of men. If they imagined what was inside, they kept their imagination to themselves. No woman ever asked questions about the most powerful and most secret cult in the clan.

Some masquerades come out only at night to avoid being seen by women. It is believed that any woman who sees such masquerades dies. The outing of such masquerade is usually announced so that women remain indoors. In other cases, they stay at a reasonable distance to watch the masquerade. Sometimes, masquerading involves charms or “*ogwo*” or “*juju*” as the case may be. It may be one of the reasons women are not permitted to be involved. These charms are empowered from time to time with sacrifices. Basden (1921:224) states that “women are not only prohibited from making *juju* but are debarred from being in the presence of man on pain of severe punishment. Any man at any time may arrange for a visitation of his wife”.

From the foregoing, one can see that women are portrayed as a weaker sex in the tradition and as such they are prohibited from performing some tasks.

Women are involved in the leadership of the community, although the men especially the elders are the major decision makers of the community. The women

can lead other women in the gathering of their fellow women. They keep all public utilities clean, for example on every market day, the women sweep the market square early in the morning. Also, they keep the vicinity of the streams clean especially where the people use as bath places. In homesteads, it is the women that keep the compounds clean.

Women are forbidden to do certain things in the traditional Igbo society which may have religious implications like title taking. This is because they believe that it is a sin against the gods of the land. In other words doing such things is an abomination or sacrilege. Failure to adhere to these laws attracts punishment such as banishment from the land or death penalties. In some cases, the offenders make a sacrifice to the gods of the land for cleansing and forgiveness of sins. Such things may include climbing of palm tree or kola nut tree.

Women are not allowed to climb palms trees. They are not allowed to eat the gizzard of a fowl. Amadi (1966:84) narrates: “Women are unlucky. They are denied many things, list them. They are uncountable. Look, we are not allowed to climb palm trees, we may not eat the meat of a kite.”

In Igbo families, there is usually a deity which the family worships. This is usually done by the head of the family, i.e. the man. He makes sacrifices and offers prayers to the family god on behalf of the entire family. A woman, according to Basden (1921:93) fears her husband’s gods but may not touch or worship them. Her own objects of worship are of the most primitive character, consisting of little more than lumps of shapeless clay. Women offer sacrifice to the gods at footpaths and stream sides. They hardly go to the shrine for such sacrifices because they are forbidden to do so. However, they can be a priestess to small gods, an example, is the priestess of Agbala ‘Chielo’ in *Things Fall Apart*. If it is necessary that a

woman would visit a shrine, she has to perform an ablution especially if she is in her menstrual period.

From the foregoing, one can imagine the place of women in Igbo traditional society. One can see that women as well as men have their roles to play in the society. None of them is dissatisfied with his/her own role. Women accept the traditional functions placed on them without question. Some of these roles seem to be assigned to them by nature. Though women seem to be overburdened, tradition still protects them. Tradition does not permit a man to divorce his wife at will or beat her. The 'xmxada' were very powerful in protecting the women from the excesses of their husbands. The 'Egwugwu' in *Things Fall Apart* performed this task in the settlement of dispute between Uzowulu and Mgbafo (pp 64-66).

Furthermore, there seems to be no rationale behind some of the things women were forbidden to do. Ozumba (2005) states that there are some anachronisms and rustic prescriptions which are contrary to the fundamental human rights of women in traditional society. According to him, the most pathetic thing about these women is their ineffectiveness as human beings, incapability to correct their husbands despite their knowledge of the inadequacies in the men's lives.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it was discovered that the Igbo woman is purposeful diligent and hardworking, but constrained by the menfolk especially their husbands from performing maximally. Almost every important role is reserved exclusively for the men. The women are also subjected to inhuman and in some cases severe religious rites especially during burial ceremonies of their husbands. They are not allowed to take part in certain decision making in the community and even in their families.

They are forbidden to eat some parts of meat or partake in some religious rites without any cogent reasons. This is their position in the traditional Igbo society. However, the presence of Christianity and influence of other cultures have changed the situation of women in the contemporary Igbo society. Today, women are given equal opportunities in education and government to a certain extent. Presently the woman has to contend with herself, and her colleagues, as the women folk constitute impediments to their fellow women in their bid to outwit each other. The innate prejudices against women in their career pursuit notwithstanding, today's women are beginning to rise and shine beyond the imagination of the men folk.

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