

THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN A MALE DOMINATED CULTURE: THE NSUKKA (IGBO) EXPERIENCE.

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Abstract

This paper discusses the gender discrimination, bias, inequality, and the preferential treatment given to the men at the detriment of women in Nsukka (Igbo) Society. It investigates the cultural and the religious fables that battle and confound the attention of many protagonists and proponents of women cause and rebuilds it in the light of compendious egalitarian ethos. The finding of this paper reveals that women are often inflicted with physical and psychological abuse, debasement and injustice and most often unable to seek help and redress. Women often are alienated from some important activities in the community that are integral to proper human formation. This influences their attitude sometimes of not having 'self definition', this lack of self definition is remotely influenced by some basic human denials like the right to bequeath inheritance and the right to legal ownership of certain property. This research recommends therefore that there should be justice, equity, and balance on how women are treated and abrogation of all the archaic cultural myths that enslave, subjugate suppress and oppress women. The method adopted in this work in historic-descriptive which means that this cultural index has been studied overtime and hereby presented.

Keywords: *Womanhood, Male dominance, Cultural Practices, Igbo Society, Social Justice.*

Introduction

Women in Igboland and Nsukka in particular are subordinate to their male counterparts. The general impression is that women are suited more as home-keepers. They are denied certain rights because of this perceived concept. Men on the other hand enjoy the right of having a higher value than the women, irrespective of exposure, age, intelligence etc; he is the undisputed head of the family. In Igbo culture which is patriarchal in nature; women are treated as objects and not as subjects. Their role is mainly domestic; the men thought of them as source of children and cooks, and saw them as material possessions. When describing the pre-Christian days Bartleby (2019:1) wrote that:

As a man made his way in life by farming yams, he needed a strong workforce. This workforce included his wives and children. A man would have many wives. The more wives and children a man had, the more honour and respect he received.

Apart from her beauty, ability to cook and bear children, women had no other value; she has no real role in the Igbo society and the African society at large. Achebe (2019:87) stressed this issue when he described a traditional Igbo ceremony thus:

It was clear from the way the crowd sat that the ceremony was for men, there were many women, but they looked on from the fringe like outsiders.

The whole articulation of this narrative buttress the fact that the women were not in any way included in the discussions. Their opinions were not important and subsequently not counted.

Nsukka

Nsukka as a people has an identical culture, they enjoy a massive geographical land mass. The people of Nsukka apart from political delimitations share the same characteristics. In every aspect they are homogenous, their dialect, music, drama, dance, folk-tales, religious observances, social organizations, festivals and arts, belief system, prejudice and socio-economic stratification are the same essentially. In their history, geography and culture one finds their peculiar ways of life. Nsukka people are Igbo by tribe, they are Enugu state natives. Enugu state is situated in the South-Eastern part of Nigeria. In the words of Ele (2009:)

The nomenclature “Nsukka...” was got from “Nsukka Asadu” which is an ancestral and homogeneous town where the foremost British colonial founders settled finally and adopted as their permanent residence and the head quarters of colonial administration

Ndigbo in which Nsukka belong;

Have one common language and many dialects called Igbo. Igbo language belongs to the sudanic linguistic group of the Kwa division. Their language is characterized by its tonalising, mono-syllabic root-words and absence of inflexional ending. Within this one Igbo language with many dialects like Onitsha, Anambra, Nsukka, Abakaliki, Owerri, Ikeduru, Ohaji, Mbano, Mbaise and Obowo are generated. (Anyanwu 2003:24).

Cultural Practices against Womanhood

The Igbo culture of male dominance has a lot of practices that are against the dignity of womanhood. We shall discuss them thus:

Widowhood Practices

In some parts of Africa a widow is considered impure and contaminated hence, “a widow is placed at par in terms of ritual impurity with the warrior who has slain an enemy because both are contaminated by contact with death” (Okure 2005:1). The purity of the widow is restored by undergoing some ritual washings and shaving of her hair. In some communities and cultures it extends to the shaving of the pubic hair. During this period women must experience diminishment as a person. In a patriarchal culture such as ours the death of a husband is often traumatic. According to Kirwin, (1978:21)

She loses her one support and perceived meaning in life and stands to be inherited by the husband’s brother or close male relative. Her children and, in some cases, her entire means of livelihood are stripped from her by her husband’s immediate relatives, men and women.

She has no place in the husbands family if she has no male issue she is often subjected to mental and psychological torture by being accused of having killed the husband she is subjected to humiliating, dehumanizing and unhealthy rites. This is why Okure (2005:2) wrote to say that: “she must drink the water with which the corpse is washed, sit on the floor, shave her hair, not bath or leave the mourning room for a given period of time and wait non-stop to show her sorrow for the dead husband.”

A husband on the other hand is never subjected to those tortures at the death of the wife. On the contrary, as the funeral rites are going on, brothers, sisters and friends are busy searching for another woman who would replace the vacuum created by the death of the wife. In some cultures he may even be locked in a room with a young maiden when the funeral rites are going on. All this boil down to show the bitter experience of widowhood. This tradition in some areas in Nsukka and Igbo land at large encourages the debasement of the personhood of the widow, hence creating insensitivity to their plight and circumstance.

Death naturally is a common tragedy, a phenomenon that is inevitable and natural to every living creature. Whenever death occurs, it speaks of horror, grief, agony, sorrow, fear etc. This devastating effect created by death on the human person could probably explain why possible causes of death are investigated and probed more especially in the African society. For it is hardly accepted to be natural more especially in the death of a youth. Ilogu (1974:40-41) observes to this end that: I have not come across any death that any Igbo accept as a natural and biological end”. Okoli (2008:48) citing Metuh (1987:252) observed that: “death after a ripe old age is called God’s death or natural death, and is counted a blessing to be sought for... any death before this time is regarded as unnatural.”

In this light, Okoye (1995:139-140) opined that:

No death is accepted on the surface value, so to speak as being a natural phenomenon. This explains why in many parts of Nigeria for example the widow becomes all of a sudden the number one murder suspect as soon as her husband dies.

According to her, widows are often accused of involving in love affair with illicit lovers, poisoning, witchcraft and total deviation from set rules and norms. Being free from such accusations could only be possible if the widow in question surrenders herself to the rites and tortuous rituals as laid down by tradition.

These ill-treatments meted to women during their widowhood may have some historical reasons which vary from one locality to another. Marriages for instance in the Igbo traditional society are contracted between two families and in some cases the girls in question, are not consulted or given free hand to choose their life-partners. Sometimes they are forced into marriages which, in a more civilized circumstance they would never have entered. To this end Okoli (2008:48) writes to say that;

Instance abound where a girl of about fifteen to twenty years will enter into a marriage with a man of sixty years and above, with the result that the girl may want to eliminate her old husband to have more access to younger men. The possibility of such an action makes the wife of the deceased number one suspect. The tortuous rituals or practices laid down to be observed by the widows serve as a deterrent to other women

who may have such negative intention of taking the lives of their husbands.

The circumstance widows find themselves therefore could be difficult. Majority of women under these circumstances suffer physical, social and economic damage as a result of their husband's bereavements. Hobson (1964:222) observes that physically "nearly all the women had experienced insomnia, loss of appetites, headaches, stomach upsets and other nervous complaints. "Despite these, some obnoxious practices imposed by tradition make the state of widowhood more intolerable in the African society at large and Nsukka in particular.

Infidelity

Men dominated every sphere of the Igbo traditional society. The voice of women were not heard, they were only to be seen. In the society their role were minimal, men championed the day to day matters be it religious governance and economic activities etc. A man has the freedom to marry as many wives as he wants. Ani (2016:1) buttressed this fact thus:

The younger wives could be the age mates of the first set of his first set of children. Whether the husband is virile enough to satisfy the innumerable wives is hardly taken into consideration. To check marital infidelity on the part of the women in this polygamous society, the Nsukka Igbo instituted the Ndishi/Nna tradition.

This tradition is shrouded in some mystery that is spiritual and cultic and the origin seems mythical. This tradition in question forbids any form of extra-marital relationship from married women, the men were not counted. This is because the *Ndishi* in question were the ancestors who are spirits and men are considered spirits, in ancient Nsukka tradition and Igbo-land at large. This is why they alone can be initiated into the masquerade cult and masquerade is spirit. If a married woman engages herself in any extra-marital relationship she must tell her husband. Failure to do this the woman will run mad unless the necessary rituals and sacrifices were performed. In some parts of Nsukka culture the husband who eats the food cooked by this wife will die. The food in question here can be natural food or sexual intercourse. In some parts of Nsukka like Enugu-Ezike, married women cannot give any of her relative money without the express permission of her husband. Women married into this culture from other cultural background are forewarned because of the detrimental implications and the efficacy of this tradition.

It is believed by the people that violation of this tradition attracts the wrath of the gods. It is believed that failure to observe this result to instant madness. A critical observation here shows that the male counterpart has no punishment for his own sexual escapade only the women were punished.

Masquerade

There is a general believe that masquerades are the spirits of the dead ancestors, who through series of incantations and rituals were called up to the human world, this is the belief of the Igbo. Masquerade for Africans and the Igbo in particular are believed to be "incarnated ancestral spirits visiting their descendants on earth to entertain, give guidance and exorcise evil spirits". Dastardly (2015:1).

Masquerade in Igbo land is exclusively secretive, known only to a few initiates within a community. Buttressing this fact Dastardly (2015: I) wrote that:

This exclusive group consists of adult males and each member must be initiated into the group with their identity known only to their fellow members. The process of initiation or “iba mmanwu” in Igbo parlance differs from town to town but one central theme is that the initiates who are usually males of a certain age limit are made to undergo cleansing and rigorous “blending and mending”.

Women were not initiated in to masquerades because of the singular reason that the African culture and the Igbo culture in particular is a patriarchal society. In few Igbo cultures women could be initiated. But they must be of certain age; women who have reached menopause. At this age according to this tradition, they are no longer women because they can no longer see their menstruation. Even at that not all who have reached menopause were initiated. The character and the ability of the person to keep secret are taken into consideration.

Since they are not *ab initio* allowed to disclose the mystery surrounding the masquerade cult to the non initiates, an oath of secrecy was administered to the men in order that they will not reveal it to the women. Breaking of this oath of secrecy has its detrimental and consequential implications which amount to mysterious illness and death.

Posthumous marriage

According to the definition of Ani (2016:1)

Posthumous marriage is a type of marriage in which a woman or a girl is married to a man who had already died by the deceased's family or relations so that the children raised through this relationship become children of the deceased.

This tradition exists whereby families contract marriage for their deceased male relatives and through these raise children for them. Other than the normal marriage contract, like wine carrying, the payment of dowries and the other essential marriage rites there is no flamboyant or serious marriage ceremonies. The woman becomes the wife of the deceased. After these ceremonies of marriage, she is not bound to choose her lover(s) from among the family members of the deceased but to anyone she wishes to fall in love with. Buttressing this fact Agbo (2016:1) is of the opinion that:

She may be expected to be a bit reserved, using her sexuality with self control but shall not be given orders about the number of men she will have sexual relationship with.

Posthumous marriage can be viewed from many perspectives. In order that a lineage continues to exist, a marriage is often contracted to raise a male child for a dead man. Often in this circumstance it is the daughters, his widow or relations who will marry a child bearing woman for their deceased one. Another form of posthumous marriage occurs when a wife is married for a dead son or a miscarried male fetus. This is often seen in a polygamous family where there is a denial of inheritance to a widow by her co-wives because she has no male child. Based on this the (aggrieved) woman can marry a wife for her miscarried male child

(fetus) if such is the case or for her dead son. The maltreated woman can only share in her husband's property only if this wife gives birth to a male child through her posthumous son. One sees again this plight and the diminishment on women in Nsukka Igbo culture, a husband does not marry a dead woman as wife rather the reverse is the case.

Patrimony

Land among the Igbo is viewed sacred in the sense that it is from it that all visible things both man, plants and animals draw their power of reproduction and fertility. According to Opata (2017:1)

The Igbo venerate land as an earth goddess. As a predominantly agrarian society; they not only deify land by instituting shrines in its honour, they also take titles that regulate ownership and land use.

In Igbo culture which is patriarchal in nature women has no right of direct inheritance from their father. It is only their male counterparts who have this right of inheritance. In matters concerning land or the sharing of land they were not allowed to speak as their opinions were not counted or considered, inheritance of properties as well were left only for the male members of the family.

Proverbs/Iwa oji/ Igbaputa Nmanya/ Climbing of Trees

Women were not to speak in proverbs and idioms as their men counterparts do. They were not allowed to break kola-nuts even if the gathering were only of women. They were to call the attention of a man or anybody around to break the kola nuts for them, no matter how little the boy is. This superiority complex of men has been built in the psyche of the women over the years that, they seem little before their own very eyes and sees the men as a superior breed of homo-sapiens.

In Igbo culture which Nsukka belongs women were not allowed to pour out palm wine in a mixed gathering of men and women. She is permitted to do that only in gatherings made up of only women. Equally women were not allowed to climb trees especially palm trees. In the cult of the ancestors in the life beyond in African Traditional religion women were not counted it is only the men.

Gender Inequality: Towards a Reconciliation

Since women are becoming ever conscious of their human dignity, they will not tolerate being treated as merely rational instruments but demand rights befitting of human person, both in domestic and public life (Pope Jn xxii) quoted by Okojie (1999).

William (2011:15) is of the opinion that "the future in which our generation is part of, has really not catch the vision of improved relations between men and women in the society adequately because of the high level of illiteracy among women fold".

In Igbo land before the advent of the Europeans women had a strong voice in the decision making of their community. The "Umuada" as they are called has a strong voice Ewe (1992 in Eshiet 2015) was of the opinion that;

Women views were considered as important and critical factors to the community life; therefore, women in these societies occupied a position that was complimentary to that of men rather than subordinate to men.

In Igbo land, it is noted “that the *Ezenwanyi*” the female native doctor (*Dibia*) sometimes is most respected than the native doctor, the *dibia* who is their male counterpart, female discrimination or gender, marginalization was not in existence as it is now. Aderemi (2011:16) was of the opinion that:

The advent of colonization and the Victorian ideology of the exclusion of women from the public sphere practiced by the colonial government altered in this arrangement. Colonization reinforced indigenous gender hierarchies negatively and this pushed women to the background.

Suggestions

1. During the death of a life partner widows should be treated with care and love. This is because it is a sensitive period in her life. It is not a period of punishment for a guilt she was not culpable of.
2. Women are fully human in all ramifications as their men counterparts. They should not be seen as objects and as material possession, whose opinions were never counted; rather they should be treated as human persons who have the right of existence and share equal characteristics with their male counterparts.
3. The patriarchal testosterone which oppresses and dominate the womenfolk could be clearly seen in the punishment for infidelity the “*Nna*” invented only for the women. Men by implication are exempted, free to do whatever they want and to get away with their sexual escapades. This culture should be reversed so that both the male and the female get equal justice (punishment).
4. There should be right of inheritance for the women from their family no matter how little it may be, even if land is not involved.
5. No matter the secrets imbedded in the masquerade cult. The women know, but may not reveal them because of the detrimental and consequential implications faced by such act. Women should be allowed to enter and participate actively in the masquerade cult they should not be segregated for they are equally human beings like their men counterpart.
6. It is an aberration in this twentieth century that women are married to the dead. This obnoxious (practice) culture should be erased from Nsukka (Igbo) culture.
7. It should be put into law that wherever posthumous marriage is found practiced the culprits should be prosecuted and jailed.

Conclusion

From this exposition one will understand that there is a lacuna in the treatment on women as against men. There has been an imbalance between the roles assigned to women by the Nsukka Igbo as against that of men. Women have been debased, segregated upon as an inferior species of the *anthropos*. These treatments have been unimaginable and inhuman sometimes. There should be a re-think of these gender roles and denials since all are equal in the eyes of the creator. The Bible sums this argument up in Galatians 3:28 that in Christ Jesus there is no Jew or Gentile no slave or free man no male or female all are one in Christ.

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