

GENDER AND PROPERTY RIGHTS IN IGBO BELIEF SYSTEM

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Abstract

There is no gainsaying the fact that the post-modernist world is characterized by exploitation and marginalization, class struggle between the haves and the working class, racial tensions between whites and other races, religious intolerance between Muslims and Christians, cultural supremacy between the so called Superior Western culture and the cultural other, balance of terror among powerful nations of the world, reawakening of the feminist spirit against male domination. It is in line with this female reawakening that the Supreme Court of Nigeria made a ruling in favour of the women folk among the Igbo people of Nigeria as it concerns their right to inherit landed property. The court perceives the exclusion of women as a form of marginalization that must not be allowed to thrive in the 21st century. Irrespective of the plethora of reasons adduced by the court, the ruling is being challenged by the aggrieved male folks (*Umunna*) who see it as an affront on the culture and tradition of the Igbo. They want to continue perpetuating the exclusivist template handed to them by their forebears. Against the background provided, this paper examined why it is unjust, inhuman and exploitative to exclude woman folk from expressing her right to inheriting landed property. The paper made the point that, since wealth creation is not a special preserve of *Umunna* it will be wrong to marginalize other siblings on the basis of gender. The paper adopted the analytical, critical and reconstructive methods of philosophy to achieve its aim. While the method of analysis was necessary for the clarification of concepts employed in the research, the critical method subjected the issues raised to deep philosophical thinking aimed at arriving at plausible conclusions. The reconstructive method on the other hand interrogated hitherto held positions thereby making them less desirable. The paper found out that the denial of inheritance rights as practiced in Igbo culture was a corollary of a mythical mind set embedded in ancient traditions that must be addressed. The paper concluded that no human being should be discriminated against if Ndigbo desired to live in peaceful global communities anchored in reciprocity of needs, it would be necessary to rethink property rights for the female.

Introduction

The idea of male superiority is being challenged by the many achievements of women all over the world. Yet some cultural practices within African continent still have not been able to transcend their bias for the female gender thereby subjugating and relegating them to the background. In order to experience 'the good life' as members of African communities, it will be pertinent to revisit some

practices that vitiate the benefits of such life. Most visible of such traditions is the maltreatment of female folk by male folk in Igbo society as it concerns the right of inheritance to landed property. Consequently, will it not be wrong to deny a bona fide member of a family her entitlement to landed property? What confers inferior status to the female sex? Is any culture that pushes for this kind of marginalization not divisive, abusive and oppressive? I shall attempt to answer some of these questions in the course of this paper. I shall begin by taking a cursory glance at the Igbo people. I shall proceed to analyzing the concept of culture as a whole. The need to examine what is meant by African culture will also be taken into cognizance before I proceed to looking at the cultural tradition of Igbo with the view to making visible its bias against the female in regards to inheriting landed property. I shall conclude on the note that the traditional practice excluding the female folk from property is rooted in a mythological mindset that should be expunged from our contemporary culture to pave the way for justice and dignity that has eluded the Igbo female gender.

The Culture of the Igbo of West Africa

Among some of the political systems in Africa that never evolved into great states and Empires as found in many parts of Africa are the Igbo. The Igbo people from their early beginning have always tilted towards segmented political leaning. They are found in where is described as Western Guinea (Davidson et al 1965:). James Wilde in Michael Gould writes that “to the east where they are now trapped, the Ibo people thrived” (Michael Gould 2013:1). They occupy very large and fertile regions of the Lower Niger – the Eastern part of present day Nigeria to be precise. The people are called ‘Igbo’ which incidentally is also the spoken language. They are mainly farmers, craftsmen and traders. They operate a segmented system which means a big family made up of grandparents, parents and children start a hamlet and to cultivate the nearby bushes. Over time, children grow up to break away from the original parent stock to establishing their own homesteads – extending another segment of the original family unit. All the parts are tied together by a common bond which is loyalty to their founding ancestors. This is where the unanimity in cultural practices among the Igbo springs from. Before we return to examining Igbo cultural tradition, let us first examine the concept of culture.

The concept ‘culture’ does not have a concise connotation and it is not likely that one may be found soon (Ginsberg 1937:45). It may not be wrong to assert that the inability to have concise definition of the concept may not be unconnected with the dearth of philosophical interest in the concept until most recent times. Be that as it may, Malinowski believes culture is the widest context of human behavior with overbearing importance to the psychologist, the social student, the linguist and the historian (Malinowski 1944:5). We may also add that the interest of the philosopher in culture might have given rise to the field of study known as philosophy of culture today. Malinowski concluded that it is by means of culture that humans can be organized into groups. In the same vein, Olusegun Oladipo in his interpretation of Kwasi Wiredu wrote that it is by means of culture that a community of meaning that

aids human communication is established. That is to say what makes meaning or that which is meaningful is as conferred by culture. Without culture stamping its meaning on objects, signs and symbols, there will not be meaning and the absence of meaning precludes all forms of human communication. Oladipo went further to make a connection between society and culture when he writes that “culture enables us to appreciate the intrinsic link between culture and society and the place of culture in the development process” (Oladipo, 2009:11). To this end, culture is the means through which the required moderation, and consequently, the creation of order are achieved. Expressing the regulatory role of culture, Oladipo continued that:

By uniting people in common beliefs and attitudes
or at least in tolerance for certain beliefs, actions and
values, culture fills with order that portion of life which
lies beyond the pale of state intervention (Oladipo 2009:11-12).

Culture to say the least, can be said to traverse all aspects of human existence like human rights, beliefs, value systems, traditions, art and crafts etc. It can also be said to be a network of symbols characteristic of a people. H. B. Haruna defines it as:

The totality of the way of life evolved by a group in their
attempts to meet the challenge of living in their environment
which gives order and meaning to their social, economic, aesthetic
and religious norms and models of organization Thus distinguishing
(them as) a people from their members. (Haruna 2002:81-82).

Put differently, while other things may be inherited, people cannot inherit culture because they are born into it.

Having defined culture, let us now examine what constitutes African culture. If culture as earlier alluded to consists of a complex whole including beliefs, knowledge, arts and crafts, laws, morals etc., African culture therefore refers to the sum total of shared attitudinal inclinations and capabilities, art, beliefs, moral codes and practices that characterize Africans (Ezedike 2009:455). It will be generalizing and hasty to assume that there is one culture under which all cultures in Africa can be subsumed because there are relative African cultural traits that differ from one society to another within the broader or universal ‘African culture.’ This brings us to the peculiarities in Igbo cultural tradition.

Igbo Culture

In Igbo tradition, patrilineal system holds sway. In this system, male folks are seen as head of all institutions – family, political, religious etc. The Igbo culture is one that gives primacy to the male child. It is so male dominated to the extent of relegating the female to the background. This is what Ugochi Happiness captured when she wrote that “sexism in the real sense of the word is practiced in Igbo traditional society. Igbo see women as lower class citizens, who require just minimal attention by comparison with their male counterparts. Attendant to this belief is the gross neglect, ill-treatment and discrimination against the women folk” (Ugochi, 2015:2). The alienation and discrimination among women in Igbo culture find expression in diverse ways ranging from female genital circumcision, lack of education for the female child, investment in the male child, humiliation of the widow, conception of ancestors, and limited opportunity and denial of her right to inheritance. Let us shed some light on how these mentioned factors act against the female in Igbo traditional culture.

Female Circumcision:

According to Ugochi, the whole idea of circumcision is alien to the traditional Igbo. It only became a practice when they came in contact with missionaries. How be it, the practice was purely a Jewish one that applied only to the male folks. Even among the male folk, circumcision is best described as cosmetic as it does not prevent or inhibit any biological function. To subject the female to the pains, trauma and future ruin, female circumcision was made part of Igbo culture. The implication of this is that it numbs the clitoris thereby making sex an unpleasant experience to the female. This mutilation of the clitoris has in many occasions ruined many homes in Igbo societies (Ugochi, 3).

Education of the Girl Child:

In traditional Igbo societies, the best form of education female children acquire is mainly domestic and informal (Ugochi, 3). Most women work in the farms and tend to the children while their husbands and brothers attend formal schools that prepare them for better positions in the society. For reasons not far from the already stated, most girls are pushed into early marriages to wealthy old men without their consent where they end up doing domestic duties and giving birth. This is tantamount to slavery in the name of marriage. In any case, they are mostly not the only wives of the men but co-wives with other women of similar fate. It is this that gave birth to the traditional song in Igbo land as found in Ugochi 2015. The song goes thus:

*Nihi ego nna jiri ree nwa nya
Nihi ego nna erela nwa ya
A si na m bu nwoke nna agaghi akpatu m ka
Ebe m bu nwaanyi, nna e reela m woo!*

*Because of wealth father sold his child
For the sake of wealth father has sold his child
If I were a male, father would not do it
Hence I am a female father has sold me oo! (Ugochi, 4).*

This underscores the value placed on the male over the female which to us is best described as not only sexist but relegating and alienating.

Pessimistic conception of the female:

The value attached to the female is found in the names such children are given especially since names are very important to the overall wellbeing of personhood in Igbo culture. Certain names given to the female folks are very derogatory. Ugochi again points out the difference when she cited names like *Nwanyiabughinwa* – a female child is no child, as very humiliating of the female gender in Igbo society. In the same vein a male child in the same context is given a name like *Nwabugwu* – a child is an honour (Ugochi, 4). This is a well thought out scheme to subject the female to the overlord of her male counterpart. Just as the culture downplays the female in the physical, it also does same in the spiritual that is why the female is hardly ever mention or given the role of breaking Kola nut especially at ceremonies. Kola nut breaking is one of the traditional rituals among traditional cultures in Nigeria. Whoever is given the honour of breaking Kola nut is privileged indeed. While women could and do break Kola nut in some cultures like that of the Efiks, Yoruba and Hausa in Nigeria, That privilege is never accorded to the female in Igbo society because such kola nut and libation cannot be accepted by the ancestors. To this end, it has become the preserve of the men. Unlike what is obtainable in other sister cultures like the Akan of Ghana, the Igbo man completely ignores the female in his conceptualization of who qualifies as an ancestor irrespective of the feats such a female might have attained, she is never revered to the extent of being called an ancestor. Giving credence to female ancestors among the Akan people of Ghana, Kwame Gyekye writes that “the Akan people of Ghana call their ancestors *nananom* (singular *nana*) or great grandfather or great grandmother who have become spirits or ghosts” (Gyekye 1996:163). The Akan culture gives recognition to a female ancestor which is at variance with what is the case among the Igbo. More so, the culture prevents Igbo female from entering certain shrines for the reason that she is a female while the male is allowed to venture in and out of it at will. Chinua Achebe captured the importance and emphasis placed on the male in his books *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. In the former Achebe made the point that even though his love for his daughter Ezinma was great, he still would have preferred she was male. He writes:

You have not eaten for two days said his daughter
so you must finish this. She sat down and stretched
her legs in front of her... she should have been a boy

he thought as he looked at his ten-year-old daughter (Achebe, 1958:50).

His preference for a boy is as a result of the patrilineal bias of his culture - the Igbo culture. Male dominance was also expressed in the traditional masquerade cult (*Egwugwu*) where no female was allowed to be a masquerade judge even in matters that concern women (Achebe, 72). No woman has ever worn and would ever wear the regalia depicting spirits which an *egwugwu* represents. In some extreme cases, a woman is made to undertake several sacrifices and purification rites for coming in contact or mistakenly seeing *egwugwu* that must not be seen by the female eyes. While these checks are placed on the female, the male could touch and have a handshake with one if he so desired, yet these *egwugwus* were said to be representatives of benevolent spirits in the world of men. Why a benevolent spirit would exclude the female from his share of benevolence eludes me. It smirks of nothing but the expression of the bias of a cultural tradition on the female folk. It is a form of exclusion confronting the girl child even in traditional Igbo societies.

Elsewhere, in *Arrow of God*, Achebe reiterated the republican system of government of the traditional Igbo society that '*Amala Oha*' represents. *Amala oha* is an embodiment of all adult males in a village. Osazie, in Nzemeke and Eragbe 2002 sees it as "the highest decision making body in traditional Igbo societies" (2002:19). In this assembly, all adult members meet to perform and attend to both legislative and executive matters affecting the community. The meetings were always held at markets or open village squares. The decisions reached were usually on matters affecting individuals or the community as a whole, are binding on all. Achebe captured this practice in *Arrow of God* when all male adults of *Umuaro* gathered to reach a decision on whether to go to war with the people of *Okweri* (Achebe 1964). This again explains the disdain that confronts the female gender in Igbo culture. First the constituted assembly had no female representative even in matters that concern women, the decisions are taken on their (women) behalf irrespective of how it pans out at the end. Secondly, why will the system not consider the women folk in community matters? Are they not part of the community? It is simply because the culture relegates the woman and sees her as one whose opinion does not count. This underscores the reason most women are prevented from shrines and could only go in times of great tribulation. In most cases to be further dehumanized by making her drink portions of concoctions to prove her innocence or guilt in matters they may be ignorant about. These acts point to the fact that the culture subjugates and relegates the female in Igbo land.

Furthermore, at the spirit realm where the belief is that divinities accompany humans as they go about their affairs on earth, the Igbo man goes all out to carve wood representing certain divinities. A case in point is what is called *Ikenga* in traditional Igbo societies. The *Ikenga* is a representation of spirit form of its owner that acts as a conduit between man and God. Among these carvings, one may never find any in female form completely negating the fact that women could play a part in the protection of men. There is also no known female that possesses an *Ikenga* satirically making the male the only gender in

need of spiritual protection. Other than that, in times of communal challenges where sacrifice may be required, that is when the female assumes all importance. Virgin maidens most times are used for communal cleansing. Again the importance attached to the male can be gleaned from this prayer captured by Eze ulu in Achebe's *Arrow of God*. He writes:

Ulu we thank you for making us see another new moon
May we see it again and again. This household may it be
healthy and prosperous... may we increase in the next
counting of the villages so we would offer to you a cow
and not a chicken as we did in last new yam festival.
May our wives bear male children. May children put their
fathers into the earth and not fathers their children.... (Achebe, 1964:6)

The bias is again seen in the above. A prayer to the god *ulu* to only help them have male children ignoring the fact that should *ulu* grant that request that may be the end of procreation for that society. More so, children are expected to bury their fathers according to the prayer what then happens to their mothers? Are they not fit for burial rites also? I believe the whole culture is replete with countless instances where women are targeted for subjugation in order to massage the male ego.

It is an open saying among the Igbo people that a woman should be seen and not heard in any gathering where she was invited. She ought only to speak when spoken to. She is only served palm wine when all the males have had their share. She could only visit her husband's obi (hut where the male resides in the compound and where he receives his visitors) when she is summoned or when she is taking his meals to him likewise his daughters. Also, any other conversation between them was limited to question and answer or request. This underscores the reason *Eze Ulu* (Priest of *Ulu*) would only prefer his son Nwafor to visit his obi than any of his daughters. This disdain for the female negates the fact that "the dignity of a person in truth lies in solidarity of shared full life that lasts forever" (Iroegbu, 2000:97). To this end, the culture upholds aberration instead of right and just values. Consequently, in place of equality, inequality is upheld, in place of dignity, indignity is entrenched.

Humiliation of widows:

The most dehumanizing of this custom is the tradition that compels a woman to shave her hair, her symbol of pride and beauty on the death of her husband. This tradition targets that particular aspect of the female that appeals, and is most precious to the woman (in this case, her hair) and brings that very object of beauty down just to completely humble the woman folk. Other practices include but not limited to making the widow sit on the floor for the specified period of mourning, making a loud cry at the break of dawn and the forceful inheritance by her late husband's willing relation without her consent. Nothing is expected of the man when his wife dies rather than calls to get another woman. The best the tradition

may offer a woman was to take away her right of choice by getting her married to any of her late husband's relatives. The freedom of choosing who she may want to be with in such a serious matter as marriage is taken from her. She has become a family property that could be passed from one relation to another. as is the case among the Igbo of Delta extraction especially the Obiaruku, Otolokpo to mention but a few. Dignity implies the right to choice and the availability of options from which to choose. From the above it is clear that a woman's right to implicit choice is the most dignifying aspect of her being especially the right of choosing whom she would like to marry. In the case of Igbo culture, this right is denied. It is such denial that Sartre in McIntyre describes as "a confrontation with the facts of freedom." (MacIntyre, 149). It also denies the woman her right to dignity of person, intrinsic value, and equal moral worth deriving from God (Gyekye,1996:150). It is very inhumane to deny a woman her right to choice especially her freedom to choose a husband, making her a being without existential worth. Consequently, denying a woman her right to choice as already established in Igbo culture implies living in negation of authenticity. Authenticity requires that the human person is in complete control of his or her faculty, choices, and responsibilities.

Against this background, even though the concept 'humanity' is cherished among most African cultures, same may not be said to be applicable to the woman folk in Igbo culture due to the prevalence of traditions that we consider violent and discriminatory. One of such traditions again is the erroneous belief that the man is never infertile. In case of childlessness in any marriage it is the woman that is most likely to be blamed. She is chastised, mocked and called names by other women in the village while the man goes ahead to marry yet another woman. By so doing, polygamy, one of the banes of Africa's development is entrenched. The indignity suffered by the woman alienates her from self, family and community. Alienation refers to a condition of being separated or being estranged from something. Biblically when Adam sinned, he was alienated from God. Therefore, alienation refers to the situation where a gap is created between two things. According to Samuel E. Stumpf, Karl Marx identified certain senses in which alienation can take place; this include; from self, from nature, from his specie and from other men (Stumpf, 411). In the case of the Igbo woman all the identified senses of Karl Marx apply. All these portray a culture that is insensitive to the plight of its womenfolk. My argument here is that if property right is to be applicable, it must be applicable to all - both male and female. In the same vein, if it is to be denied, it is to be denied to both genders. A situation where one gender is accorded all rights to landed property and the other denied same right to landed property is not only wicked but subjugating and can best be described as another form of apartheid perpetuated to massage the male ego in Igbo society.

John Locke on Property Rights

Philosophers, right from antiquity, have belabored the issue of property because of its overriding importance in human affairs. To make this paper clearer it is pertinent to examine the position of John Locke on the problematic in order to determine whether or not Igbo society is justified in excluding the

female from property rights. Giving credence to the right of everyone to own property Locke argued that in the state of nature “everyone had a right to draw subsistence from whatever nature offers” (Sabine and Thorson 1973:486). He continued that governments exist to secure human entitlements and ensure that lives, liberties and material possessions of all human beings are protected. His emphasis on property was criticized on the basis that he attached greater importance to property than social order. This may be because of his firm belief that one can only have a viable and virile social order if and only if property is safeguarded. His exhaustive position on property went as far as letting us into the condition(s) that may confer right to property. Accordingly, a property is rightly yours for Locke if your labour is mixed with it. For instance the water in the River Benue is for everyone, but if one decides to fetch with either a bucket or a cup, the water in the bucket or cup no longer belongs to everyone because whoever has used his cup or bucket to fetch has mixed his labour with it and so is entitled to that water. And one's right to that property is consequent on the fact that “it is a right which individual brings to society in his own person, just as he brings the physical energy of his body. Hence society does not create the right and except within limits cannot justly regulate it for both society and government exist, in part at least to protect the prior private right of property” (Sabine and Thorson, 487). From Lockean sense, one cannot help but infer that, firstly, every human on earth is entitled to whatever nature offers. In Africa the greatest and most valuable of resource nature offers is land. This being the case, since the female in Igbo culture is also human what justification does the culture have in excluding her from inheriting one? More so, what makes the Igbo male the most qualified and best suited for such inheritance? My response to this is that there is no basis at all but rather it is a product of subjugation of the female that massages the ego of the male that is responsible for this injustice.

Secondly, what entitles the Igbo female to such property again is that according to Locke, once one mixes his labour with a part of nature, he or she is entitled to it. In the face of a culture that would rather send the male to school while the female is to work in the farms – till the land, plant, weed, harvest and process harvest, etc. who is more justified for such inheritance and ownership other than she that gave her all for it in the process of wealth creation? Yet the culture unjustly denies her right to share from inheriting the land she has toiled in thereby negating the ‘mix-labour’ condition championed by Locke as condition for ownership.

Thirdly, the natural rights to property described by Locke as the physical strength one is born with has been completely downplayed by the culture and this amounts to a fundamental denial of the humanity of the Igbo female.

The idea of property in Africa as mentioned can be communal, lineal or individualistic. The property that are communal include wild economic trees as well as games in the forest, drinking brooks and rivers, raffia palms for construction of huts and land. Some of these properties can also be owned by a lineage (*Umunna*) except rivers, drinking brooks and games. An individual may only own land if his *Umunna* gives him a share from that of the collective, or if such an individual having worked hard with

his wives, sons and daughters was able to gather enough money to purchase portions for himself. He may also be entitled to his land if he inherits same from his forebears.

From the above, it can be deduced that in traditional African societies every member of a clan is entitled to and has a right to the property of the clan since in most cases land which is the most prized property is communally owned (Gyekye, 1996:101). Proceeds from the land are shared among members of a lineage for the improvement of the living condition of one's relations. This may be why H. Maurier in Pantaleon Iroegbu writes that "relation is the constituent of the human person: without it, the human person is isolated, and falls into nothingness" (Iroegbu 2000:110). Relationship is expressed in the allocation of proceeds to an individual for being a part of a lineage or community. This underscores the popular African maxim 'I am because you are, and because you are therefore I am.' No member of a lineage or community ought to be denied his or her right to sharing from that which he/she is a part of because failure in this regard negates the idea of community. Since lineages are made up of males and females they all should share in the common wealth of their lineage irrespective of gender. Every individual is important and the community in turn is important to every individual. The legitimization of an individual's importance lies in his/her right to share from the property of the community.

Female Gender and Property Rights

As already noted, the cultural alienation of the female gender in Igbo culture is quite obvious. According to (Ojukwu and Ibekwe 2015:4), it denies the women the right to own property such as land or to inherit her late husband's property or participate in village meetings. This cultural suppression of the female is seen in certain derogatory traditional adages like "*onyeji nwayi buruibu, bu n'si inkiti*" meaning he who uses a woman as a luggage pad is carrying without a pad. Another is '*nkita nwayi zulu na-ata akwa okuko*' meaning a dog trained by a woman eats fowl eggs. The culture is to say the least discriminatory and biased in its handling of the affairs of women. While *Umunna* (male lineage) gets the whole advantage of the community and individual rights, same cannot be said about the women. In the face of this discrimination the woman is expected to work the fields, take care of the homestead and cook for her husband yet in spite her enormous contribution to wealth creation she is excluded from land allocation. She is not regarded as one worthy of such property even when she played her contributory role in its acquisition. This is not only discriminatory but alienating and dehumanizing. It is discriminatory because she was denied ownership based on the fact of her being a woman. Alienating because alienation implies separation through surrender and this is expressed in the surrender of one's control over product of labour. In this case the woman, having wrought and toiled with her man at creating wealth is denied a piece of land considered a symbol of success in Igbo tradition. This act contradicts the three characteristics that describe the human person – individuality, sociality and sensibility as mentioned by D. Ucheaga in G. O. Ozumba (2000:124). The Igbo woman's individuality which qualifies her as belonging to a community of persons is negated on the basis of her not being

qualified to own a piece of symbol of success (land) in Igbo land. Her sociality which is a direct corollary of communal life is denied and her sensibility is abused by this alienating cultural tradition. This may be what E. Burke in Mukherjee and Ramaswamy was against when he refused to support anything that was ancient and only cared about those that held society together by providing order and stability (Mukherjee, Ramaswamy, 242). He continued that all humans have:

Rights to the fruits of their industry; and to the means of making their industry fruitful. They have a right to the acquisitions of their parents; to the nourishment and improvement of their offspring; to instruction in life and to consolation in death... right to a fair portion of all which society with all its combination of skills and force can do in his/her favour (Mukherjee, Ramaswamy, 258).

Clearly this gospel of Burke to the right of humans is completely at variance with what obtains in Igbo society making the Igbo woman one of the most dehumanized among the women of Africa. According to E. Fromm in P. Freira:

The pleasure in complete domination over another person (or other animate creature) is the very essence of the sadistic drive. Another way of formulating the same thought is to transform a human into a thing, something animate into something inanimate, since by complete and absolute control the living loses one essential quality of life – freedom (Freira 1985:35).

In as much as the Igbo female is excluded from inheriting land from her father or husband, her freedom is in chains. Freedom connotes the removal of the restrictions that obstruct the full development of the person. Denying her the right to inherit land because she is a woman places restrictions on her path to self-actualization. J. S. Mill condemns this when he writes that:

The existing relations between sexes, the legal subordination of one sex to the other is wrong in itself, and now, one of the chief hinderances to human improvement, and that it ought to be replaced by the principle of perfect equality admitting no power or privilege on the one side nor liability on the other (Mukherjee, Ramaswamy, 127).

It cannot be better put than this. A culture that favours one gender over the other is a hindrance to the overall advancement and wellbeing of the society. What is still obtainable in Igbo society is unjust. According to Iroegbu, in Igbo societies, “justice is done when each member receives his due in the society given the circumstances. The accomplishment of justice in the circumstances is fairness”

(Iroegbu, 137). The traditional Igbo society with its bias and exclusivist poise cannot be described as being just but rather exploitative, alienating and marginalizing. This is so because it completely ignores the contribution and role of women folk in wealth creation by its continued denial of their right to inherit and own land the chief property in Africa.

If it is true that in Africa the dignity of a person in truth lies in solidarity of shared full life that lasts forever (Iroegbu, 97). And if it is also true that the concept of human dignity, intrinsic value, and equal moral worth generate a notion of moral rights deriving ultimately from God or as belonging fundamentally to every human being as a creature of God, (Gyekye 1996:24), same should be applicable to the Igbo woman because dignity to the female require some modicum of fairness and justice. By excluding and denying her rights to inheriting property (land) her sensibility is abused and her dignity compromised. The consequence of this is that the very women whose rights are being denied have accepted their place and have come to see the indignation they suffer as being normal. Paradoxically, those whose humanity has been stolen are the ones justifying the system that stole their humanity. This may not be unconnected with the fact that “the very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped” (Freira, 22). This may also be why polygamy is rampant because it has been accepted by the woman folk in Igbo society that the male child is superior therefore failure to birth a male child gives the man the lee-way to get another wife. The corollary becomes the proliferation of children sometimes beyond the capacity of what the man can handle. This creates greater contradictions in the society because the many children are left at the mercy of society making a miscreant of a great number of them.

The education of the female Igbo girl child is sacrificed for her male brother because of the same disdain for the female. It is a negation and denial of her rights that has its roots in the cultural tradition of the people. This is at variance with the popular position that:

In the traditional African society, there is little need to assert rights – particularly social and economic rights – because the social and moral structures or values are fashioned by the traditional society in many ways and almost adequately provide for the fulfilment of these rights (Gyekye, 152).

This assertion is not true of the Igbo given the fact of the exclusivism that takes place in that society as well as the denial of social rights to the female. It would be absurd to describe a system that precludes the other as moral. Morality requires the preservation of social harmony by ensuring that moral codes discourage aggression, injustice, deceit and anarchy in any social order (Abam, 2008:22). This is completely absent in Igbo culture from an exclusivist perspective.

Rethinking Property Rights for Igbo Female Gender

From my analysis so far, one can easily agree that there is great oppression of the female by the male thereby necessary to rethink the status of the female in Igbo societies. That we live in a world of opposites does not justify the exploitation of the one on the other. The world is replete with the interplay of opposites that gives the world the dynamism for change. We have good and evil, night and day, hot and cold, *ying* and *yang*, male and female etc. It is the continuous interplay between these opposites that lead to change as nature strives towards perfection. If as it has been established that we live in a world of opposites there is therefore no reason for any form of marginalization of one sex against the other. We are what we are not by our own volition or choice but rather *Chukwu* (God) decides who he would make male or female. Put technically, we are all accidents in the sense that we all just happened without any input from any of us. An accident simply put is that thing that happens outside of what one's control. For instance, it is by accident that one's parents, brothers, sisters and relations are his/hers. It is also by accident that one finds himself being black, white, Orient, Arab, male, female etc. this being so, why the continuous exclusion of the female in Igbo culture on the basis of accident? Why does the culture perceive the male as superior and the female inferior? It is because of what is rooted in the tradition of Igbo societies. The term 'human' does not tilt towards the male or female but to the idea of personhood. Consequently no advantage or disadvantage should be attached to any sex as regards their rights to property. In the same vein, the female ought to be entitled to what the male gets in the spirit of justice and fairness. Plato expressed this in his ideal state when he made the point that male and female have equal rights and are entitled to similar education and can also aspire to the highest level in the society. There is no distinction between a man and a woman mentally. The only difference for him was biological – which is not enough to prevent her from discharging her duties the same way as the man.

Furthermore, it is not out of place for Igbo societies to borrow from Plato as they strive to leave an enviable social order for their progenies. In this case they have to rethink the status of the female by making her entitled to every right the male may have – especially the right to landed property. Both sexes must see themselves as complimenting each other as they strive towards a better Igbo society. That one is superior to the other is fundamentally lacking in merit and can only be a figment of a mythological mind-set that is backward looking. To this end, attitudinal change is required on the part of all to purge the culture of its exclusivists' tendencies for it to be accepted in the contemporary times. After all, there was a time when human sacrifice was acceptable among the Igbo but today that practice has been relegated to the dark corridors of their ancient past. Same can be done with the issue of property rights. The Igbo female should have her stolen humanity restored so she could have primal place in family and community affairs. There can only be complete and enduring order when the culture tailors her development towards the goals of love, peaceful coexistence, equity and global justice. 'Let the eagle perch, let the vulture also perch. Any one that says the other should not perch, let its wing break' is a popular Igbo adage that should not only be in theory but in practice as well.

Conclusion

I began by making the point that a good life was possible only when there was social cohesion devoid of all forms of antagonisms against the female gender as it concerns inheriting property (Land) in Igbo culture. The culture even in contemporary times has refused to accord the female her right to land and this as earlier stated has its roots embedded in mythological mind-set which if left unchecked would lead to further contradictions that may not be good for the wellbeing of society. Justice remains ‘an ever crying child’ in Igbo culture if not addressed, it is the responsibility of the custodian of Igbo tradition to commit totally to the pursuit of the rights of the female folk. To this end, justice can only be done if and only if the female gender was given her natural rights to property either by means of inheritance or otherwise. Anything contrary would best be described as exclusivist, alienating, cruel and unjust.

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