

THE VALUE OF WOMANHOOD IN PRE-COLONIAL IGBO-AFRICAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

A cursory glance reveals that in various ages and cultures, and from different disciplinary perspectives, there have been growing concerns about the perception and value of women in human societies. This work is a philosophical inquiry into the value of womanhood in pre-colonial Igbo society, with a view to understanding the colonial influence on Igbo society. This paper employs analytic and critical methods of inquiry to explore the significance of Igbo women and the roles they played in Igbo culture before the destruction of the Igbo-African cultural heritage by the colonial administration, which has endured to the present day. This research aims to analyze the concept of Igbo womanhood, examining what it means to be an Igbo woman within the Igbo community and the values and ideals she represents. By delving into philosophical analysis, this study would shed light on the multifaceted nature of Igbo womanhood and the cultural force it embodies. This paper has provided a deeper understanding of the value and contributions of Igbo-African womanhood and has provided profound insights into the need to preserve the dignity and value of womanhood, and their empowerment, especially, in the face of cultural changes and external influences.

Keywords: Igbo, African, Womanhood, Pre-colonialism, Colonialism

Introduction

The researcher has researched and written more on women's empowerment based on some experiences we are encountering in society. The impression that a woman is the weaker sex is a well-known factor in our contemporary society. And we see that manifest in different ways. However, in recent reflection, the researcher began to remember that this impression associated with womanhood was not as pronounced as it is now. The woman was valued more in the traditional Igbo culture than it is today. Though some may disagree with this position. For example, as presented by Uche Uwaezuoke Okonkwo, in her paper on “The Gender Question and the Involvement of Women in Pre-Colonial Igbo Warfare in Equiano's Interesting Narratives”. She concluded that “women were relegated in traditional Igbo settings, and the claim that Igbo society was democratic and republican was exaggerated by nationalist historians”.¹ That may be a perspective of which if looked at holistically other perspectives may emerge, like the one being presented in this paper. The researcher realized that the Igbo/African woman was not completely an oppressed species as presented by some authors. Stories and some documentation affirm this. Though it applies to the entire Africa, the choice of this paper narrowed it down to African/Igbo reality. The Traditional Igbo woman/women have areas of contributions to

¹Uche Uwaezuoke Okonkwo, (2021). “The Gender Question and the Involvement of Women in Pre-Colonial Igbo Warfare in Equiano's Interesting Narratives”. Journal of International Women's Studies, 22(5), 116-127.
Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss5/8>. Pg.116.

the social, economic, political, and educational developments of their society. Traditional Igbo/African society attached no importance to gender issues as it is prominent today because every individual had a role to play both in the family as well as in the larger society.

Each gender had its traditional role in the development of the society. In other words, the position of women was complementary to that of men. There was the non-existent of gender inequality. Regardless of who performed each role, it was considered equally important because it contributed to the fundamental goal of community survival. What this simply implies is that indigenous people in Africa performed varying roles to maintain the efficient functioning of their society, before colonialism. The claim, therefore, is that gender inequality came with the advent of colonialism²

Womanhood was highly valued in pre-colonial African/Igbo society and was essential in forming the social structure of the group. The rich cultural legacy of the Igbo people, who are mainly found in southeast Nigeria, honoured the abilities and accomplishments of women, in contrast to the patriarchal structures that resulted from colonialism, pre-colonial Igbo society valued and acknowledged the distinctive characteristics and roles that women played in their communities. As a result, the paper examines the roles, rights, and influence of women in various facets of community life as we investigate the value of womanhood in pre-colonial Igbo society. Women's economic, social, and spiritual significance were also examined by highlighting how they have contributed to the maintenance of cultural traditions.

The paper further examines women's economic, social, and spiritual importance by highlighting how they support upholding traditional customs, the health of the family, and the general well-being of Igbo society. Understanding the pre-colonial Igbo society's value of womanhood allows us to see an egalitarian system that recognizes the contributions and significance of women. Understanding and appreciating the historical setting in which gender roles were established as well as the influence of colonialism on the ensuing transformations in Igbo society is crucial.

A Woman, Who Is She?

Before discussing the cultural definition of an Igbo woman, this paper first discussed briefly the general concept of a woman. Everything that embodies life has male and female including plants—likewise, the human species. The word *woman* can be used generally, to mean any female human, or specifically, to mean “an adult member of the female sex”³ as contrasted with a *girl*. The word *girl* originally meant “young person of either sex”⁴ in English; it was only around the beginning of the 16th century that it came to mean specifically a *female* child. The term *girl* is sometimes used colloquially to refer to a young or unmarried woman; however, during the early 1970s, feminists challenged such use because the use of the word to refer to a fully grown woman may offend though varies among cultures. An Igbo woman or Nigerian woman will be offended if she is addressed as a girl but in some parts of the world, for example, some parts of England, even elderly women are excited when they are addressed as a girl. In particular, previously common

²Afisi, Oseni Taiwo, (2010). “Power and Womanhood in Africa: An Introductory Evaluation”. The Journal of Pan African Studies, vol.3, no.6. Department of Philosophy, Lagos State University, Ojo, Lagos, Nigeria. Pg. 230.

³Restituta B. Igugbe (2004). Women and Gender Studies. Sir Kuf Ventures Ltd. Gwagwalada, Abuja, Nigeria. Pg,25

⁴John Ragai, 2024. 'Woman'. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

terms such as office girl are no longer widely used, though still in use in Nigeria. Conversely, in certain cultures which link family honour with female virginity, the word *girl* (or its equivalent in other languages) is still used to refer to a never-married woman; in this sense, it is used in a fashion roughly analogous to the more-or-less obsolete English maid or maiden.⁵

Philosophically, a woman as established already is a human person, and a person is regarded as a being characterized by a personality, consciousness, rationality, a moral sense, and self-awareness. A human person is regarded as an animal with a difference owing to the possession of rationality and free will. Intelligence and freedom make the woman a self-active moral subject responsible for her actions because whoever is endowed with thinking faculty and free will, ipso facto, can exercise freedom of decision and choice.⁶

Biologically, “the woman is a biological variant of the human species”.⁷ Humanity manifests naturally in two complementary genders: male and female. The woman is the female human. Beyond cultural designations, the woman is physiologically different from the man. The woman evolved in significantly different ways from the male human and did in deep adapt to perform certain natural biological functions that the male human is not capable of, likewise, the male has his biological functions that the woman cannot perform, which is why each is as important as the other and that is why the complementarity is the best way to describe their existence.⁸

Beyond cultural definitions of womanhood, the woman decisively, biologically stands apart from the male human as a biological species. There is no humanity without the woman as reproduction of the human person cannot take place without the woman, just as the woman cannot exercise her function of reproduction without the male seed, which is life itself.⁹

The Cultural / Social Definition Of An Igbo/African Woman

The Igbo woman remains a female filled with cultural meanings and roles in Igbo ontology. She is defined not just in terms of her gender and biological composition but also in terms of her social, economic, political, and religious dimensions. Among the Igbo race, the woman is a person as well as a cultural force. Her gender is a fundamental existence but it does not completely define her.¹⁰ In the cause of my research, it is known that patriarchy existed before the arrival of the colonial masters. But it was not dangerously used as it is today. Though it existed, Igbo/African women were not left without recognition. They were powerful, influential, and respected. Many of them were competent rulers, warriors, and active participants in their various communities.¹¹

⁵Ibid.

⁶Marie Pauline Eboh, (2000). *Philosophical Criticisms: Anthology of Gender Issues*. Pearl publishers. Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Pg. 62-63.

⁷Socrates Ebo, (2022). “The Woman in Igbo African Ontology”. *Quest Journals. Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science* Volume 10 ~ Issue 1. ISSN(Online):2321-9467. Pg. 76.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Socrates Ebo, (2022). “The Woman in Igbo African Ontology”. *Quest Journals. Journal of Research in Humanitie and Social Science* Volume 10 ~ Issue 1. ISSN(Online):2321-9467. Pg. 75.

¹¹Monique Oshame Ekpong, (2018). *Feminist Consciousness in Selected Works of Ama Ata Aidoo and Zora Neale Hurston*. University of Port Harcourt Press. Pg. 19.

Culturally, the Igbo/African woman was capable of fighting injustice and resisting perceived injustices. She possessed the power to organize the family and the society at large. There was an enormous task and responsibility conferred on her. From my understanding, the responsibilities of both men and women were seen as complementary to one another, just as their sexes are. There was a co-dependence and a balance that existed. In various traditional African societies, the African woman possessed the power that binds the society together. The survival of the family and the future of marriage depended a great deal on the woman.

Culturally, African women were the transmitters of the language, the history and the oral culture, the music, the dance, the habits, and the artisanal knowledge. They were the teachers responsible for instilling traditional values and knowledge in children. Men were also essential in transmitting knowledge to the youth because they had a different knowledge of the earth and environment, and also of ceremonies and traditions performed exclusively by men.¹²

Igbo women retain a highly revered status in Igbo ontology. Igbo people seem to be pragmatic in their social definition of the woman.

The exigencies of the survival of the society seemed to be more important to them than biological gender. The Igbo woman is revered as the sustainer of human society and the giver of life while the male child is cherished as the sustainer of the lineage. Igbo recognizes and reveres the woman for her special role in continuously birthing humanity. It is because of this feminine role that the greatest deity in Igbo ontology, known as Ala (the earth goddess) is assigned the feminine gender. Like the woman, Ala is revered as the giver and sustainer of life. Accordingly, the mother is highly revered in Igbo ontology. It is indeed motherhood that is seen as the essence of the woman. Igbo sees motherhood as the most sacred duty. ... Unlike in some cultures where women are seen as second-class citizens who play second-fiddle roles in the society, Igbo people traditionally see women as the sacred bearers of life. They occupy a special spot in the social psyche of the people. The guild of the married women in the kindred plays very powerful roles in Igbo society.¹³

Pre-Colonial Period: Values and Contributions of Igbo Women to the Wellbeing of Society

During the pre-colonial era, Igbo women played significant roles in different areas for the development of their society. Their impact was felt in different areas of life, such as family, economic, political etc.

Family Role

“The value accorded to women extended also to their importance in the making of the home and the society”.¹⁴ When we analyze the level of moral decay we are experiencing today, concerns are being raised about the kind of morals our mothers possess today. This is because,

¹³Socrates Ebo, (2022). “The Woman in Igbo African Ontology”. Quest Journals. Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science Volume 10 ~ Issue 1. ISSN(Online):2321-9467. Pg. 78.

¹⁴Joseph O. Okafor, (2014). “Women in Nigeria History: An Evaluation of the Place of, and Values accorded to Women in Nigeria”. Journal of Research in Arts and Social Science Volume 3 Number 1. Pg. 76.

the traditional Igbo woman owes the responsibility of the nurturing of good morals and upbringing in the traditional homes and society was more or less, entrusted to women. It was a woman's affair. When we consider the importance of good upbringing and good morals in every society, we then appreciate the position of women in those traditional societies. This is one of the reasons why men before getting married in those days, often made serious enquiries of the kind of mother (though the kind of father was as well inquired of) their would-be spouses had. A Good mother was a sign of a would-be-good home and family. That the mother was the embodiment of the good moral of a family is evidenced, for instance, in the traditional Igbo family whereby the husband and father of the house, when a child begins to misbehave, reproaches the wife and mother of the house with such phrases as “woman, talk to your child o!” or “woman, have you seen the behaviour of your child? He is getting lost o!” These were, and remain frequent phrases used by men in their homes.¹⁵ Igbo women are seen to be managers of their homes. The well-being and education of their children, especially inculcating of good morals were not to be played with. This is one of the reasons why girls kept themselves as virgins before marriage because they were taught its importance.

Economic Role

Women were also very influential in the economic contributions of the Igbo society during the pre-colonial era. Their impact was felt in different areas. “Women in the traditional Igbo society were seen to be a pillar in various economic activities especially in agriculture”.¹⁶

In the Igbo system of farming, men usually planted yam, while women tended and nurtured the tendrils. They were also responsible for the cultivation and tending of most other crops such as cassava, cocoyam, maize, groundnut, vegetables, etc. In most cases, women were equally responsible for taking most of the farm produce to the various markets. This is so because

trade in Igbo society was regarded as a central activity that selected no specialty but some areas were more engaged in it than others. Pre-colonial Igbo women were seen as a driven economic wheel moving the economy to the best destination. They traded various kinds of agricultural products. Trade in Igbo land was dominated by women in pre-colonial times. Their central role in the trade was mostly manifested at the local level. You will not get or see any Igbo community in the pre-colonial without its marketplace.¹⁷

There existed four market days, (Orie, Afor, Nkwo and Eke). These market days are found in different villages. So, they travel to those villages on their market days to sell their farm products. However, they are still functioning in some places to date.

The role of women in the production and distribution of goods and services in the pre-colonial Igbo societies made many women not only prominent but also influential in their various communities. For instance, most of the communities along the Niger Igbo gave honours and titles to women who distinguished themselves in economic fields. Such as the one given to the

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Nwaoha Chimaroke. C. & Ejiaga Constance. O, (2022). “Women and their Socio-Economic Roles in the Pre-Colonial Igbo Society”. *International Journal of Innovative Social Sciences & Humanities Research* 10(1):11-16, SEAHI PUBLICATIONS. Pg.3. Retrieved from www.seahipaj.org I. Sourced on May 6, 2024.

¹⁷Ibid. pg. 13.

First Lady in the Niger Igbo community. She was chosen by the Obi with the title of 'OMU' based on her achievement. The Omu presided over market and other women's affairs and enjoyed paraphernalia of office akin to that of the Obi.¹⁸ The Omu attends council meetings just like Obi “by virtue of her position”.¹⁹

Apart from farming, there were other economic values in which women were involved. They could be described as local industries. Women played a prominent role in the traditional industries of Igbo land's pre-colonial economy. Even in the pre-colonial era, the Igbo people had a well-developed and organized local craft industry in addition to other manufacturing sectors. The distinction between genders in the local industries applied to the range of crafts that were offered. In Igbo society before colonization, certain crafts were reserved for women only. These included the manufacturing of salt, pottery, textiles, and mats.²⁰

Social And Political Role

Dual sex- political structure existed in Igbo politics. Its dual nature is based on the “principle of complementarity and shared political power between the two sexes. While female political leaders mainly controlled and managed the affairs of women, male political heads ran the general affairs of the community, especially those pertaining to men. In effect, there existed two parallel political structures”.²¹

In many cases, the Isi Ada, or the oldest daughter of a lineage, played a part in political, judicial, and religious institutions. Her reports to the women of her group could lead to collective action opposing the decisions of the male political leaders. Some wives of a chief might also hold power equivalent to that of male elders. And, in some cases, women ruled as monarchs or regents for under-aged kings.²²

It is impossible to overstate the role and significance of women in politics among the Igbo. In the pre-colonial Igbo societies, women demonstrated themselves to be formidable both as individuals and as groups. The legislative and judicial authority of "Otu Umuada," was described as an organization of daughters from a specific village or community, in addition to its political influence. The organization of Umuada pointed out that the assembly served as the last court of appeal in a particular community in both its political and judicial capacities. It passed laws on issues that men were unable to resolve. Not only did the Umuada do a commendable job of upholding justice and discipline, but it was also well-known for mediating disputes between families, villages, and communities. That is still fairly workable to this day. Something happened last year in December at the burial of my aunt. The day that the villagers gathered to kill the cow brought by her children as the custom demands, one of the men from my village acted obnoxiously, by pulling his trousers and scratching his bottom on the ground. The men could not say or do anything. It was the Umuada who reprimanded him and told us to be calm because, with their

¹⁸Joseph O. Okafor, (2014). “Women in Nigeria History. Pg.⁸⁰

¹⁹Nkeonye Otakpo, (2009). Justice in Igbo Culture. Malthouse Press Limited, Lagos, Nigeria. Pg. ¹⁶.

²⁰Nwaoha Chimaroke. C. & Ejiaga Constance. O, (2022). pg. ¹⁴

²¹Michael Muonwe, (2016). New Dawn for African Women: Igbo Perspective. Xlibris, Bloomington, IN ⁴⁷⁴⁰³, Pg. ⁷²

²²Livia Gershon, (2022). “Women Leaders in Africa: The Case of the Igbo”. JSTOR. Retrieved from <https://daily.jstor.org/women-leaders-in-africa-the-case-of-the-igbo/>. Sourced ^{03/05/2024}.

presence and action, they had neutralized whatever he intended to do. That shows how powerful they can be. If it was in the pre-colonial era, they would have done more than a reprimand.

Otu Umuada and Otu Nludi which is the organization of the daughters and that of the married group collaborated in pre-colonial Igbo society to uphold law and order and advance safety and security. For example, “women rose to challenge colonial policies during the popular anti-colonial Aba Women's Riots of 1929”.²³ In Igbo societies, women achieved significant positions as individuals. For example, among the Niger Igbo, a woman's title of Omu in Onitsha was almost equivalent to that of the Obi, the town's king. Women were appointed chiefs in the Ogbaru communities, bearing titles akin to those of men, such as Onowu, Ajie, Oduah, Omu, and so forth. These served religious as well as sociopolitical purposes. It therefore means that Igbo women had the authority to address issues such as domestic violence, child abuse, and ill-treatment. If a man mistreated his wife or children, these groups of women would administer punishment, which could include physical discipline or other forms of restitution. In Igbo land, “pre-colonial women were generally respected members of the community who were seen as a complement to men”.²⁴

Socially, there is an aspect of Igbo life that is very interesting. That is what can be addressed as the 'Woman-to Woman marriage'. This woman-made man is not the transgender that we are experiencing today. Neither is it a lesbian world. But it is a woman marrying a wife the way it applies to men. Most of the authors that have written on this present it as it happened where there is no male child. It was more than that. My grandmother married a wife because she wanted to. The woman was taken care of by her sons. It was not a taboo in those days for such to happen.

The woman-to-woman marriage was practised chiefly among those who were considered to have attained exceptional values in the eyes of society due to wealth or some social standing, those who have passed menopause. These women could marry wives for themselves and as well for their husbands, sons, or siblings. They were regarded as men and influential, and by paying the bride price for women, their statutes were elevated in the society and this made them enjoy the same privileges as men.²⁵ It therefore means that in the pre-colonial period, women participated actively in the political administration of their various communities. They “played legislative roles, constituted themselves into important pressure groups, and were kingmakers, peace-builders, advisers, priestesses, and diviners” etc.²⁶

This healthy socio-cultural synergy between the sexes in many parts of Africa was disrupted by colonialism. It is also contended that in Nigeria, as was the case in some parts of the continent, the

²³Ngozi Ugo Emeka-Nwobia, (2021). “Understanding Gender Complementarity in Igbo Society: The Role of Umuada and Umunna in Peacebuilding”. Retrieved from <https://kujengaamani.ssrc.org/2021/07/21/...>
Sourced on 08/05/2024

²⁴Joseph O. Okafor, (2014). “Women in Nigeria History. Pg.81

²⁵Nonso Egbo, (2021). “The Life of an Igbo Woman Pre-Colonial Times”. The Guardian Nigeria News. Retrieved 18th May 2024.

²⁶Chidi M. Amaechi, (2019). “Pre-colonial African Gender Cosmology and the Gender Equality Nexus: The Road Not Taken in Igboland, Nigeria”. Asian Women, Vol. 35, No. 3, pg. 94.<https://doi.org/10.14431/aw.2019.09.35.3.93>

British colonial authorities, influenced by the prevalent Victorian-era gender tradition which relegated women to the background, made extensive use of men and thereby stripped women of the rights and privileges they had hitherto enjoyed.²⁷

Igbo people in Nigeria have never had a centralized government in contrast to other tribes before the colonial Masters. They are possibly the world's most republican people. No matter how tiny, every town was a republic with a sovereign and autonomous government. Every town managed its affairs independently of any other external authority. They had never engaged in any political or cultural acts as a people. Neither a central army nor a central religion were present. They were unable to interact with any other tribe or national government. Before British colonialists could establish their dominance over them, they had to conquer them village by village. They had to install warrant chiefs, village by village to administer the village states on their behalf.²⁸

Spiritual Role

The Igbo belief system represents both feminine and masculine deities, presenting an equal spiritual realm. Women's and men's roles in the social structure of Igbo land were very symbolic of their religious practices and beliefs. Male and female gods and goddesses, such as Chukwu and Ala, governed the lives of people. Chukwu was the masculine "Supreme Being" of all creation and actions, and "Ala" feminine deities was the "great mother goddess". Chukwu and Ala seem to represent the father and mother of a human household.²⁹

Women in pre-colonial society played significant roles in the religious activities of their communities and villages and so, make their contributions to the spiritual welfare of their families and society at large. They had diverse ways through which they played active roles. In some Igbo communities, women were Priestesses, known amongst the Igbos as **Eze Nwanyi** and **Nne Mmanwu**. A good number of them belonged to the various masquerade cults and played very active roles. The women priestesses offer prayers for their families and communities and consult the oracles to seek direction and instruction for the society. Though they participated in the religious worship, they were not allowed into the shrine, they could be priestesses to minor deities like the *ogbanye* priestess; "chi" personal spirit for women, etc. A woman cannot handle or be the chief priestess of a family or village deity. It is said in Igbo "Agwụ anaghi ama nwanyi" which means that an oracle cannot suggest a woman as a legitimate person to handle "Isi Agwu" (the head deity). A woman cannot lead public worship in the presence of men. The "Isi Mmoo" is meant for a man.³⁰

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Chidi M. Amaechi, (2019).

²⁹Gladys I. Udechukwu, (2017). "Position of Women in Igbo Traditional Religion". Journal of Linguistics, Language and Culture Vol. 4. Pg. 88.

³⁰Gladys I. Udechukwu, (2017). "Position of Women in Igbo Traditional Religion". Journal of Linguistics, Language and Culture Vol. 4. Pg. 89.

They were traditional healers, and some of these female traditional healers handled women's and children's ill health. They also deliver pregnant women their babies.

Conclusion

The major task of this paper lies in the fact that, before the arrival of the colonial Masters, Igbo women were not feeling marginalized. Though patriarchy existed, women were happy to a large extent with their positions in society. They had their forms of authority as well. It was the British administrative system, their indirect rule system, which was imposed on the Igbo people that ignored female equivalents. "Village assemblies were replaced with Native Courts, run by British officers and handpicked Igbo men, and women's oversight of marketplaces was replaced with male market administrators. While women occasionally snagged positions of authority within the colonial system, it was rare".³¹ Apart from the political aspect of societal life, Igbo women were much appreciated. What existed in the Igbo land was gender complementarity. There is an understanding among the Igbo people that every individual reality serves as a "part of and the completion of the whole and thus, there is unity in the midst of diversity".³² This is what is lacking today. The regaining of this unity and the dual system structure enabled women to protect their economic, political and social structures.

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³¹Livia Gershon, (2022). "Women Leaders in Africa: The Case of the Igbo". JSTOR. Retrieved from <https://daily.jstor.org/women-leaders-in-africa-the-case-of-the-igbo/>. Sourced ^{03/05/2024}.

³²Ikechukwu Anthony Kany, (2021). *IGWEBUIKE: An Operative Condition of African Philosophy Religion and Culture Towards a Thermodynamic Transformation Ontology*. Altgrade Nig. Ltd. Pg. ²⁷.

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