

PHILOSOPHY OF THE BLACK WOMAN'S EXPERIENCE: THE DIGNITY OF THE IGBO WOMAN

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Abstract:

Looking through the historical binoculars of our traditional women, one could see that they lived under great cultural overarching principles. The discipline of silence, *disciplina arcani* and humility in women reveal their original colours of meaning in the understanding of our traditional women before recent world civilizations dye them by dipping them in the hue of patriarchal structures. A reflection on Aba Women's riot of 1929 provides a historical window for a critical investigation into the metaphysical being of women in our traditional epoch. They were not push-overs nor appendages of men but ones who consciously moved towards a cultural goal, the preservation of life and social ethos writ large in the traditional milieu. This backdrop exposes the system rape of colonialism.

Keywords: *Aba Women Riot of 1929; Dignity of Igbo (African) Women; Motherhood; Black Woman's*

Experience; Colonialism; Feminism; Women; Gender; Ala; Urstoffs; Ụmụokpu

Introduction:

Aba Women riot of 1929 was a sign of an unwritten history of Igbo life that passed out with the advent of colonialism. Amadiume (1987) referred to the period as ‘olden days’, the pre-colonial period or the ‘pre-1900 period’ (p. 21). Women of this era are referred to as the traditional Igbo Women in this work. The socio-political structure of the Igbo was impenetrable for the colonizers’ indirect rule agenda because of their egalitarian democracy. Ad hoc attempts like the mission of Leith Ross made to understudy the group naturally and could not yield results. Much about their philosophical coherence and social equilibrium were thus lost through the coerced infiltration of their culture by the impatient and business-minded colonialists.

Leith-Ross (1939) referred to the women of Aba riot as “irate women” (p.97) because of their suppression by the colonial administration. Aba women war, as it is often called, started when warrant chiefs were appointed from men without any female corollary seat of authority. Often, such chiefs were chosen by the colonialists from renegades of the community, who wanted to exact their revenge on the people. Other available colonial jobs went to the men. Worse still, the warrant chiefs exhibited

their authority with arrogance and imprudence, whereby women were made to pay taxes over against their grudges of non-inclusivity in the administration. The backbone-breaker event happened when the women were being billed to be taxed on their personal property, through a census. Uchendu (1993) reports that Chief Akogu at Oloko sent a census officer Mark Emeruwa to Ójí m's household and one of the wives, Nwanyiriowa, assaulted him. Women from Aba, Owerri and Ikot Ekpene gathered at Oloko and started off the popular Aba Women Riot of 1929. Previous reactionary stirrings had been subdued by the military but the women damned the consequences as the colonial administration was viewed as destroying the equilibrium in the life of the community.

Why would it have to be the women reacting against the upheaval of their society? Acholonu (1995) proffers a reason that it is because women were at the foundation of the Igbo society. She maintains that the colonialist's marginalization of women socially and politically is a planned strategy to weaken the very foundation of the society, its inherent power and spirituality in order to destabilize the people and gain full control. She says that the exploiter realized that the cosmological sense of the African world is complementarily: everything comes in twos. Aniakor (1973) would refer to it as being at the heart of Igbo Ontology. Acholonu (1995) maintains that

the colonialists realized the essential place of womanhood in the sense of order and cohesion of the African world. "Thus it was able to quickly uproot the African male by tackling him at the very foundation of his existence: woman." (p.78). Basden (1966) reiterates that the women "... are the purveyors of the salt and savour of the men's lives!" (p.90).

Who are the Igbo?

Geographical territory:

Uchendu (1965) states that the Igbo People are located between latitudes 5° and 7° north of the equator and longitude 6° and 8° east of the Greenwich Meridian. They occupy an area of about 25,280km² (15,800square miles) (p.1). Igbo-speaking peoples can be divided into five geographically based subcultures: northern Igbo, southern Igbo, western Igbo, eastern Igbo, and northeastern Igbo.

The Igbo People are densely populated, which suggests a long occupation of the land. Amadiume (1996) writes that in 1963 the Igbo numbers about 8.5 million and by 1993 has grown to more than 15 million. The Igbo People have one of the highest population densities in West Africa, ranging from 120 to more than 400 persons per square kilometer. Nzomiwu (1999) quoting Ifeemesia stated that the population of the Igbo People

that year was about 15 million (p.5). Encarta Encyclopaedia (2006) has it that the population was something over 17 million in 2006. Smock (1972) maintained that “the Igbo land had the densest countryside population in any part of Africa” (p.21).

The Foundation of the Igbo Society and the Place of Women in Igbo Socio-Religious Worldviews

The Igbo world has been a complex and dynamic whole. It has been a society open to influences from the world outside of them. Complexities therefore abound from layers of historical deposits that defy a linear conceptualization of their worldview. A few areas will be looked into in order to observe what were at the prime of the Igbo world/reality. It would help us reach the place of women in the life of Igbo people.

Myth of human Origin

Udobata (1992) puts forth that when Eri came down to the earth from the sky, he sat on an anthill as the land was a morass or water-logged –*Ala di deke deke*. He was sent down from the sky with his wife *namuaku*. Following *Eri's* complaint, *Chukwu* sent down an Awka blacksmith who used his fiery bellows to dry the land (p.17)

This myth states that man and woman are children of the Supreme Deity. Both came down from above. Insofar as

the myth suggests a late arrival of the *Nri* clan, the woman did not come from the earth as the Awka blacksmith but came down with the man. This is in accord with the Igbo idea of reality as duality. *Ife kwurū, ife akwūdebe ya* - Something stands by another.

Personhood, Igbo idea of dignity

The traditional Igbo thought sees a person, male or female, as a son or daughter of God, *Ife-nta*, and this constitute their dignity. Humans are termed *mmadu*, which can be broken up into *mma ndu* – beauty and goodness of life. Humans achieve this beauty in creation by giving meaning to it through manipulative and dynamic actions on their objects of experience. This constitutes the part of human dignity which is achieved by individual success, a sense of personal commitment or individual response-ability. Thus the Igbo idea of human dignity revolves on two things: *ndu* (life) and *afa* (name). A woman (*ndu*), for instance, is fully dignified when she becomes a mother (*afa*).

Reality as duality: Two gender worlds

According to Aniakor (1973):

When Duru Agwu/Duru Aku, the Chief Diviner at Amauzari in Mbano Division, through whose divination man comes to understand the complicated web of cosmic relationships between him and the gods, looked at the five divination pebbles on his palm, he picked out one,

threw it on the ground, picked it up again, examined it and stared into the vacancy in communion with the gods.

He said:

ihe di abuo abuo - Reality comes in twos

Nwoke na nwaanyị - Male and Female

Ihe ọma na ihe ojọọ - Good and Evil

Ugbu a na Mgbe Ochie - Present and Past

Mmadụ na Mmụọ - People and Spirits

Igwe na Ala - Firmament and Earth

Ọnwụ na Ndu - Life and Death

In saying this, he penetrated the heart of Igbo ontology (p.6)

Reality is two-pronged for the Igbo. Does it mean that man and woman are opposed to one another just as evil seem opposed to good? In Igbo cosmology, there are no such oppositions; rather they bespeak complementarily since reality makes a whole. Man and woman are therefore, the two dialectics that make the human world. Thus the man is the male-face while the woman is the female-face of humanity. None can really exist without the other. Man and woman are therefore equal from origin. Women were never regarded as a thing or as property.

Women maintain their spheres and so are the men; there is no interference or crisscrossing. The African has no

gender conflict but see the sexes as partnership. This can be seen from the artifacts where men and women sit side by side. Acholonu (1995) remarks that Achebe (1986); clearly illustrates the spiritual supremacy of the woman and the female deities in Igbo cosmology and metaphysics. This is to say that what is attributed to the goddess, *Ala*, among the Igbo of Nigeria is predicated of the woman who in turn, occupies a six-dimensional existence in the society. These include woman as wife, as daughter/sister, as mother, as queen, as priestess, as goddess and as husband. A woman can be in many of these dimensions at a time. Acholonu believes that the male dimensions of existence are not the force of the patriarchal system but the females' *Umuada*.

In the four basic elements of reality: *earth*, *water*, *fire* and *air*, the more solid and tangible ones, *earth* and *water* have female characteristics while the intangible ones, *fire* and *air* have the male characteristics. This truly reflects the place of women in the minds of the Igbo as a whole lot can be deduced from this. The gods attached to the first two *urstoff*s are female deities and they have ever dominated the Igbo pantheon. Their influences have percolated down to the spine of socio-religious activities that they rule everything even birthing and life after death, which is the basic preoccupation of the Igbo, who maintain that *ndụ bụ isi* (Life is the central focus). This clearly supports that the

Igbo supreme deity, if it is one being, may have been the *Ala*, the earth goddess.

Women are tangible pillars (*nnenne ogwe*) of human life and family; and around them revolve the *air* and *fire* of existence. *Fire* moulds and gives a face (meaning) or force while *air* rekindles life and movement. Water does not move except through the influence of *air* while the *earth* remains inchoate except when formed by fire as when a blacksmith moulds it. *Fire* and *air* have no beauty in themselves while *earth* and *water* are the beauties of life. *Fire* and *air* have no place; they come and go, while *earth* and *water* are the stakeholders of existence. More of this would be seen from the relationship of the sun god *Amadiḡha*, and the earth goddess, *Ala*.

The Supreme Being, *Ala*: *Ala* is believed to be the Supreme Mother of all things. *Ala* is believed to be the wife of the Supreme Being, who in some places is called *Amadiḡha*. A myth portrayed *Ala* and *Amadiḡha* as being in the water, which covered the whole earth but seeing that humans and animals would have nowhere to bury their dead and rest, *Ala* decided to spread her body out and make a home for humans. When *Amadiḡha* receded to the far sky, it (*Amadiḡha*) fertilized the land with rain water, which helped *Ala* bear food for humans and animals. The Igbo say: *e lechawa ḡdīdī nwoke na*

nwaanyi, a mara ka Amadiḡha na Ala siri biri – One gets the idea of the relationship between *Ala* and *Amadiḡha* from the status of husband and wife. The gods (*Ala* and *Amadiḡha*) are therefore the prototype of the family life. Thus to the extent the abstract relationship between the gods are described, to that extent or more does it x-ray the original understanding of husband and wife.

The ontology of womanhood in Igbo socio-religious heritage

Ekwuru (2009) avers that *Ala* is nevertheless, the prototype of Igbo feminine beauty and fertility. Hence, it is said that: *Ala bụ nma*, “*Ala* is beauty.” *Nma Ala bụ ọmụmụ*, “the beauty of *Ala* is her fecundity.” This also highlights the traditional Igbo concept of feminine beauty; which comprises of “bodily fitness”, “fecundity” and “humility.” A woman who lacks any of these three qualities of beauty in the traditional Igbo society was considered to lack the “functional” ontological fitness for womanhood (p.106).

The ontological woman-Being is the *Ala*, who exacts her ontic-ontological existence in all women, who are mothers. *Ala* is The Woman, while women share in the Being of *Ala*. Inasmuch as they participate in this Being, they possess the integrity of being a woman; they are fulfilled. Their physical powerlessness and silence

represent the humility and the unassuming characteristics of the goddess, who remains low, silent but all pervading.

In explaining the understanding of the place of women in Achebe (1986), Okafor (2011) says that Okonkwo's fixation in his exaggerated masculinity to the extent of showing disdain for womanhood was ill-conceived and even naïve for a lord of *Umuofia*, who should understand the principle of *omumu* and reverence for the *Ala* goddess. Okonkwo contravened the code of silence of the sacred week in respect of *Ala* by beating no other person but a woman and mother that fully signified *omumu*, which in turn is the life giving essence of *Ala* goddess. Okafor maintains that this led to his suicidal act by hanging and so, was not taken into the labyrinth womb of *Ala*.

A woman, who becomes a mother, becomes at the same time an ambassador, a daughter of *Ala* and draws upon herself, the integrity of the goddess. It is the ontological presence of this goddess in every mother that bears, feeds, cares for life and socializes the children of *Ala*, the entire society. She inspires or energizes the woman to stand for and defend the life of the goddess in her children and in the society at large. *Ala* is the goddess responsible for perpetuating the life of the Igbo society. Ene (2003) assures us that we thrive and derive life itself

from the bounties of *Ala*. Little wonder, Acholonu (2009) says that they were called the children of the Goddess.

Thus the spiritual power of the woman came naturally from her identification with the *Ala*, which was renewed monthly (menstruation) by sacrificing some of their blood to *Ala*. Agbasiere (2000) says that meeting a woman at such times may infect a man with *orịa nwaanyi*, (woman-sickness) named so probably because it was a breach of communion between a woman and the woman-essence. This is lent credence by the way the Igbo refer to it: *nwaanyi iba na nsọ*, which literally means the woman going into being holy. “Holy” for the Igbo means the same thing as for the Jewish word for it, *qadosh*. Benner (2012) says that *qadosh* literally means "to be set apart for a special purpose", from worldly usage or being in ritual seclusion. At such times, the woman ceases to move about freely as usual. Egwuatu (2008) calls it a cleansing and purifying exercise that signified peace with the ‘gods’. She says that women at such times dug holes at remote or hidden corners of the compound (e.g. the barn) and well away from the main house, over which they sat or squatted continuously or intermittently.

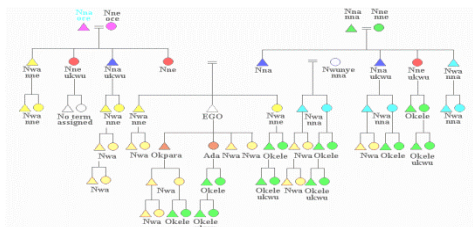
Referring to the understanding of older women, she reports that sanitary pads which the western world

introduced is the cause of many problems women have today as they do not allow menstrual blood to come out and freely mingle with *Ala*, the Woman. This communion sacrifice of the woman with her woman-essence, *Ala*, often brings blessings when the woman is disposed to the goddess of fertility. Egwuatu (2008) says that at Abakaliki area, “The river brings good luck to any woman looking for child, if she bathes there regularly during her menses” (p.113). *Ibana nsọ* is also predicated of priests, native doctors and some traditional rulers like the *Eze Nri* and the *Igwe* of Enugwu-Ukwu. In all of these usages, the phrase means the same thing. They portray a time the subject is set aside for a kind of communion with his/her ritual anchor.

The identification with *Ala* gives the *Ụmụọkpụ* the autonomy and spiritual influence they wield in social matters. They are somewhat the untouchables and their decisions and sanctions are feared, not because of physical prowess but because of the presence of the Goddess in them.

Woman in kinship ties:

Ardener (1954) maintains that in Igbo kin terms, a person's mother's patrilineage is seen as a special category and a strong emphasis on generational and seniority distinctions are evident but not on gender.



There are no differentiations on the basis of gender. Males and females both bear the names *nwanne*, *okele*, *nwanna*; while on the other hand, parents and children do not bear the same names. They bear different names like *Okpara*, *Ada*, *Okele*. The specialized names for generations are attached to the names (e.g. *Okpara*, *Okpara* *ukwu/oke* attached).

Ego is the subject of this finding. Referring to his parent's generation, he uses essentially the same term *nna* for his father, father's brother, and mother's brother, and similarly classifies his mother, mother's sister and father's sister as *nne*. (The terms *nna/nne ukwu* are basically variants on the *nna/nne* theme and can be taken as "big father/mother", also implying seniority). The seniority principle is also applied to younger siblings of Ego's parents who are actually given brother/sister terms that tend to emphasize similarities and differences in chronological age. This reflects a basic emphasis in Igbo social organization that is incorporated into a formal system of age sets and age grades. Age-grade as an institution thus, dates back into the antiquities of the

Igbo people. The generational principle is also apparent in Ego's own generation where alternative forms of the basic sibling terms, *nwa nna/nwa nne* (father's child/mother's child) are applied to a wide range of relatives. Broad generational identification is further apparent in Ego's children's generation in the application of the *nwa* (child) term. Seniority is marked in the special terms for Ego's oldest son (*okpara*) and daughter (*ada*). These designations mark special age-based statuses. The *okpara* is Ego's main heir, and both he and the *ada* perform leadership functions within the immediate family and the wider descent group – that explains the special titles given to them. Also, Ego's mother's elder sister and brother are addressed as *nne oche/óchè* (*ochie/ukwu*) and *nna oche* (*ochie/ukwu*) while the mother's younger brother and sister are addressed as *daa* or *dee* respectively.

One notices that the Igbo are basically polygamous. Three basic descent lines are noticed too: (i) the children born of a single mother, the *umunne*, literally mother's children; (ii) Ego's patrilineage, his *umunna* (father's children); and (iii) Ego's mother's patrilineage, his *umunne* (this term cannot be reduced to components). The *umunne* comprises the relatives of Ego's mother's patrilineage, with whom he has an extremely special relationship involving joking, indulgence, and even protection from punishment within his own patrilineage.

This pattern is partially marked in the terminology by the extension of the more intimate *nwa nne* sibling term to cousins in this group.

One of the major areas of relevance of his study is in its application of land ownership issue. Ardener (1954) maintains that "... no woman ever comes to own any of her father's land in ... any sense" (p.87). However, as ownership of land is vested on males in the kinship unit, the married females have the onus of the lands' daily administration. He uses the polygamous family which he considers the model family unit for the Igbo. Ardener (1954) says that even though, "... a son can only inherit ... land from his father, the actual amount of land he receives is determined through his mother" (pp. 88-89).

Nwanne (collectively, *umunne*) is accepted as a major Igbo kinship idiom. It is the nucleus of the patrilineal descent, where the idea of relatedness is traced to the one woman at the apex through whom all the members of the patrilineages have descended. Within the *nwanne* confines, Ego has a trust and confidence and some special relationship. This is why the Igbo say *Izu ka mma na nne ji(nne Ójĩ ji)* – Confidence is better kept within the circle of persons of the same mother.

Agbasiere (1985) deconstructs this basic kinship idiom, *nwanne*. *Nwanne* comprises two words: *nwa* (child) and *nne* (mother). *Nne*, which points at the mother of Ego

or his mother's elder sister has a meaning which stems from fecundity. *Nne* denotes fertility other than human fertility when used as an adverb. *Ji akaa ruru nne* – 'The previous year's yam produced mothers'. This is the literal translation but it means that the yam crop of the previous year had a good yield.

Nne, in conjunction with some root words denotes big, large or important values. *Nnekwu okwu* –an important discussion; *nnekwu mmadu* – a very important or great person. Agbasiere goes further to say that *nwanne* is often used to refer to any person with whom Ego interacts in a warm and in-depth basis. The Igbo say: *nwanne di na mba* – which literally means that 'siblings are found abroad'. This means that true life-long friends that desire the wellbeing of one can be found outside the natal environment of one. It is good to note that *nwanne* cannot be used to such a depth but is often applied to a negative connotation. *A naghi ezi nwannadi otu anya e ji ahụ ụzọ*. Literally, this means 'one cannot show the son of the husband's father the only eye through which one sees'. *Nwannadi* stands as a word to mean an enemy but it is coined from *nwa* (child) plus *nnadi* (husband's father). No such coinages may be seen with *nwanne*.

Finally, *nwanne* is an all-inclusive term, which is often used to refer to certain categories of kinsmen and women. It may even be used to refer to a large extent of

extended relatives of Ego, both matrilateral and patrilateral. All these show the matrilineal influence in the cultural economy of the Igbo society which is undoubtedly patrifocal. This is the complementarities in life which has been so imbued into the cultural system of the people. Wherever the woman is involved, life (*ndu*), confidence (*izu*), humility/silence (*umeani*), beauty (*mma*) and fecundity (*mkpuru*) become operative. Note that this silence is not the feminists' patriarchal silence but one that denotes humility. Humility itself is the strength – *ume* of the Goddess of Igbo religion, *umeani/umeala*. *Ala* is always said to be quiet and humble (flat) in providing for life for all her children but very bewitching when it comes to moral rectitude. *Ala* owns all, both living and dead and provides the stage for all to play. She is the center of Igbo life.

Conclusion:

Women are daughters of the Goddess of Igbo religion. This semantics, this meaning of the woman is almost lost in the consciousness of Igbo women today. Colonialism carted it away while Feminism and the like enabled the paradigm shift from complementarities of the two gender worlds to syncretism. The reason for womanhood is brushed off completely. Fittingly enough, Achebe quoted W.B. Yeats, who cried out in his poem, *the second coming*: 'Turning and turning in the widening gyre. The

falcon cannot hear the falconer; Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. For this paper, that anarchy is the indefinability of our women now.

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