



Research Paper

The Woman in Igbo African Ontology

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Abstract

Among Ndigbo like in any other society, the woman is not just a biological species but also a social construct. Ndigbo like other people give meaning to life as they culturally experience it. In Igbo ontology the woman is a female and a capsule of cultural meanings. She is defined not just in terms of her gender and biological composition but also in terms of her social, economic, political and religious designations. Among Ndigbo, the woman is a person as well as a cultural force. This work critically analyzes in philosophical formation, the concept of womanhood among Ndigbo. What does it mean to be a woman among Ndigbo; who is an Igbo woman? This work is a philosophical inquiry into this aspect of the Igbo worldview.

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I. Introduction

Ndigbo like all nations among humanity have their unique conception of the world around them, and reality as they experience it. Gender is one such experiences of Ndigbo as well as the rest of humanity. Biologically humanity manifests in two forms: male and female. However, societies generally assign peculiar roles to these genders. Although there have been agitations to continuously bridge the role gaps between the genders, role differentiation between genders nevertheless persists. The quest to bridge the social gaps associated with role differentiation between genders has led to so many legislations and numerous forms of biological attempts to transform a man into a woman or to biologically transform a woman into a man. This has led to emergence of a third gender known as “transgender”.

Gender remains a thorny, supersensitive issue in so many societies. The conceptions of womanhood continue to vary from society to society. Feminism, a very powerful social movement evolved in the agitation to reconceptualize womanhood in many societies, especially Western societies. Ndigbo have not been completely immune to the debate on the definition or redefinition of womanhood. Traditionally, Ndigbo had their own peculiar definition of womanhood and the status of the woman in Igbo ontology. But who are Ndigbo?

II. Ndigbo

Ndigbo are an autochthonous people found predominantly in southeastern Nigeria [1]. They are Black Africans of the sub-Saharan stock. Ndigbo belong in the Kwa subgroup of the Benue-Congo language group [2]. Until contact with Western slave dealers and Western Imperialists, Ndigbo remained largely insulated to the turmoil that bedeviled their neighbors and the rest of the world in the Middle Ages and the early modern era. They were largely a sedentary people who engaged in trade and farming. They were largely a peaceful society as Ndigbo never fought any war as a people until the Nigerian/Biafran War of 1967-1970.

Ndigbo inhabit the tropical rain forest region of southern Nigeria which today have been split into: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states. Ndigbo are also found in the rain forest region of Delta State as a significant portion of the state's population. They are found in Rivers State in the Niger Delta as the dominant portion of the population although so many Igboid communities in the state have tended to deny their Igboness since the Nigeria/Biafran War which Ndigbo lost bitterly with severe consequences. So many communities had to change their names to modify their explicit Igbo identity. Nevertheless, in any anthropological analysis, they remain culturally and linguistically decisively Igbo. Ndigbo are found in a few communities in Akwa Ibom and Cross Rivers states [3]. Although they remain very small minorities in these states, they tenaciously retain their Igbo identity. In the northern part of Nigeria, especially in the boundary areas, there are Igbo communities in Benue and Kogi states. They are minorities in these states, very small minorities but they are decisively Igbo, by history, traditions and language. Edo State in the mid-western Nigeria has its portion of Ndigbo. Igbank community in Edo State is an unambiguously Igbo community.

Unlike other tribes in Nigeria, Ndigbo never had a central government. Ndigbo are arguably the most republican people on earth. Every town among Ndigbo no matter how small, was a republic with its sovereign and its completely independent government. Every town ran its affairs without reference to any other authority whatsoever outside the town. Thus, Ndigbo as a people had never performed any political act or cultural act. They had neither a central army nor a central religion. They could not engage any other tribe or government as a people. Even when British colonialists came around, they had to conquer Ndigbo village by village before they could establish their authority over Ndigbo. Of course, the British never established a central authority among Ndigbo. They had to install warrant chiefs, village by village to administer the village states on their behalf. That was a very expensive venture [4].

But Ndigbo had a very strong culture which wove them together with bonds stronger than any government could ever. But for this strong culture, the region would have turned into something no less than a mosaic of chaos. But the, before Ndigbo ever become a people, there was the woman as a species. Humanity has always manifested in male and female. The woman has always existed. Before the Igbo woman was ever conceived, there was the woman. Beyond the Igbo woman, who is a woman?

III. The Woman as a Species

The woman is a biological variant of the human species. 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 which the male human is not capable of. 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. Essentially, the man and the woman are complementary halves of humanity. While the man and the woman are closely physiologically related, they show marked differences in sex organs and biological adaptations. The woman is the only human that conceives, incubates and gives birth to a new human. She has been physiologically adapted with the necessary organs that make the production of the human eggs, conception, incubation and birth of the human young possible. Beyond the birth organs, nature has equipped the woman with other organs that although found in men are more pronounced in women. The woman's breasts unlike those of the man have been enlarged to make them capable of producing milk for the nourishment of the infant. The woman's hips are always enlarged to facilitate parturition. Physiologically, nature designed the woman to give birth.

The biological classification of the woman notwithstanding, different societies all over the world culturally define the woman often in ways peculiar to their culture. Hence when the African woman and the European woman are mentioned, different imageries conjure up in the mind. Cultures designate roles to women differently from the men. These roles vary from the social, economic to the political or otherwise. These roles are neither biological nor necessarily physiologically warranted but purely cultural creations that portray the way the culture in question defines a woman.

Most cultures conceive the woman as subordinate to the man. The men generally assume the dominant roles in most societies. Social equality of both men and women is relatively a recent happenstance. In the past, many societies did not consider the woman to be equal to the man. Accordingly, most societies excluded the womenfolk from active involvement in the political affairs of the community including participation in wars. The woman's economic roles were often subdued in many societies. Women were majorly consigned to domestic activities. Many societies deprived the woman of the major path to economic significance, namely the ownership of land or landed property. This singular act not only decimated the woman's economic power but also reduced her political significance. Of course, it has abundantly been argued that those who control economic power in a society also control the political power [5].

The above painted picture appears to have been universal among human societies but vary only in degrees and nuances. While some societies tended to be progressively liberal in woman empowerment, some societies seemed to be downright severe. To this day, the Taliban government of Afghanistan appears to be hellbent in eroding whatever gains Afghan women have made in history towards equality before the law [6]. To this day, there are still marked differences in the status of men and women, the world over. Western civilizations seem to be in the forefront of removing the barriers that keep women down and make them unequal to men. Islamic civilizations on the other hand have not been as liberal. While women enjoy significant freedoms in many Islamic nations, there are still some Islamic nations in which being a woman automatically subjects one to limitations that do not apply to men for the mere fact of being men. From dressing to many forms of social participations, women suffer limitations in these countries. There are some societies that forbid women from leaving their hair uncovered, participating in certain kinds of dance or dancing at all [7]. Some societies still regulate or limit women's economic participation. These are functions of their cultural definitions of the woman.

These limitations are not necessarily biologically warranted. Far from it, the limitations often come as the result of the cultural opinion these societies have of the womenfolk.

IV. The Igbo Woman

Like all human societies, Ndigbo have their cultural definition of the woman. They designated roles to women, politically, economically and socially differently from the menfolk. A critical look at the Igbo conception of the woman would reveal respect, power, influence, limitations, discrimination or differentiation and even ornamentation of the womenfolk. The Igbo woman was not really an oppressed species. She was certainly powerful and significantly had a say in the running of the Igbo society. Culturally, she was capable of fighting injustice and did in deed resist perceived injustices [8]. The Igbo woman certainly did not fare worse than her counterparts in other cultures in the past. Although she certainly faced certain economic, political and cultural limitations, she did in fact enjoy respect, and even veneration in the scheme of things in Igbo ontology. The Igbo traditional conception of the woman is factored in her physiology and psychology, the Igbo identity as a distinct people with a distinct territory, the Igbo traditional economy and politics.

V. Factors that Define the Igbo Woman

a. Physiology

The Igbo woman possesses the basic physiological characteristics found in women all over the world yet easily stands out. Though she shares in the universal features that define womanhood, she possesses certain peculiar physiological features that differentiate her as the Igbo woman. She is sub-Saharan African and shares in the physical features found among the women of the region. The Igbo woman could be easily distinguished from the Yoruba woman or the Fulani woman. These physiological features include body build, skin color, gait, and height. The Igbo woman is neither generally thick nor thin. Among the Yoruba, a great percentage of the women are thick while a thick Fulani woman is a rarity. Igbo women generally are not busty. They are not generally tall like Fulani women neither are they generally brief. They are dark but significantly tone towards the fair complexion. However, they are not generally as fair as the average Fulani woman neither are they as dark as the average Yoruba woman. The Igbo woman is physiologically Igbo before anything else.

b. Psychology

Women definitely see the world in many different ways from men. They generally desire validation by men. Women seem not to be attuned to the abrasive aggressiveness generally associated with men. They generally tend to be psychologically averse to aggression and war. All these were true of the traditional Igbo woman. It is in response to this feminine psychology that the Igbo girl child was generally pampered. Igbo men traditionally express their capability by extravagantly taking care of their wives' needs. Ndigbo neither took women to war nor killed women in wars. The women were general seen to be frail. Not even war could break the cultural code of respect for women's psychology. The psychology of frailty tends to put women in a supportive role rather than the dominant position with men. Suffice it to say that women are psychologically wired to be supportive to the male gender. Otherwise, they would have naturally dominated the society by the sheer operations of the forces of the law of natural selection.

c. Igbo Identity

The preservation of the Igbo identity as a distinct people with a definite territory was a very powerful factor in the conception of woman in Igbo ontology. Ndigbo traditionally inhabit a portion of the rainforest in the southeastern part of Nigeria, a territory comparably small for their population. They must be rooted in their territory if they must continue to retain their identity as a distinct people. This sense of identity goes down to kindred units. It is pertinent to note that Ndigbo traditionally did not have a central government. The town was the biggest Igbo political unit. Marriage presented unique challenges to the Igbo identity. If a woman married outside her town, her town loses her as she goes to join the membership of the community that she has married into. If she were to retain land or leadership position in her community, her husband and his children would inherit the land, meaning that her community and kindred would lose it. This posed threats to the identity and territorial integrity of her kindred unit as a distinct unit and the identity of her town state as a distinct, self-sufficient sovereign entity. To preserve this identity, the woman was defined fundamentally as a supportive personality. The community could not be built around her because, she must leave her kindred unit at marriage. Ndigbo forbid intra-kindred marriage. Citizenship among Ndigbo is conferred by the kindred unit [9]. It is also the kindred that owns the land. The identity of the Igbo person is rooted in his kindred unit called *Umunna*.

d. Igbo Traditional Economy

Igbo traditional economy was basically agrarian. It required aggressive manpower. It was also significantly dependent on the availability of land, especially fertile land. Land belonged to the kindred unit.

Since every Igbo woman must marry outside her kindred, she would automatically have no land except her husband's. Not having land put the woman on the lower rung of the Igbo traditional economy. Wealth came from the land. Since men owned land, men dominated the economy. Wealth gave influence and status in the society. Naturally, a gender that did not own the wealth of the society would not direct the affairs of the society. Women thus, became for Ndigbo, the gender that must be supported. The gender that must be taken care of. They participated basically at the marginal levels of the traditional economy. Ndigbo call their wives, *oriaku* – “one who should consume wealth”. The greatness of an Igbo husband was measured by how well he takes care of his wives.

Some women often did accumulate significant wealth by trading in agricultural produce as middlemen. The instances were few. Such women were highly revered by the Igbo society. Ndigbo did not consider women to be major players in the economy. They were always in the background. Unlike their neighbors to the south where women played central roles in the traditional economy, Igbo women operated marginally in the traditional economy.

e. Socio-Political Factors

Women retain a highly revered status in Igbo ontology. Ndigbo 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. Ndigbo recognize and revere the woman for her special role in continuously birthing humanity. It is in view of this feminine role that the greatest deity in Igbo ontology, *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. Ndigbo see motherhood as the most sacred duty. For Ndigbo, a woman without a child is an incomplete woman. The pains of such a woman are deep.

Unlike in some cultures where women are seen as second-class citizens who play second fiddle roles in the society, Ndigbo 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 play very powerful roles in the Igbo society. Although Ndigbo cherish their daughters and sisters, and sometimes did go to their husband's houseto fight on their behalf, Igbo society places more premium on the wife than the daughter. This is because the daughters unlike the wives ultimately belong in their husbands' houses and communities, not their birth communities. In the same vein, the female child was excluded from inheriting land from her father's estate, it was a custom based on the need to preserve the identity of the tribe. Ndigbo are a patrilineal people with very little land mass. For a kindred unit to retain its identity, it must concentrate its lands only in the hands of the males who would never leave the kindred even after marriage. Unlike the females who become members of another kindred at marriage, the men would always remain in the kindred. The women who get married to the men in the kindred naturally make use of their husbands' lands.

A lot has been said about the so-called Igbo exclusion of women from the political affairs of the town-state. It all boils down to the Igbo sense of identity. Unlike their neighbors, Ndigbo never had a central authority. Most of the town-states in traditional Igboland had no central authority. The kindred unit which is a group of families related by lineage was the basic and most effective administrative organ among Ndigbo. The kindred, not the town-state nor the tribe confers citizenship. This arrangement necessarily would not put women in the forefront of the political affairs of the town-state. By custom, the Igbo woman must marry outside her kindred unit as intra kindred marriage was considered incestuous, and a taboo. Thus, the woman on maturity (which always coincided with marriage), must belong in another kindred via marriage. This necessarily limited her political participation in her birth community. Ndigbo traditionally did not practice suffrage of any kind. The political system was gerontocratic and primogenital. The most senior male from the oldest family gave leadership to the kindred. Same applied to the town-state if it recognized a traditional head. There was no way the oldest daughter could play such roles unless she did not marry. There were instances of such occurrences in history though not widespread. The critical issue was tribe identity rather than gender.

It is noteworthy that Ndigbo did not have any standing administrative structure. Even among the town-states that had a head, the office was more or less ceremonial. The council of elders took all important decisions. Ndigbo never had kings in the same sense it applied in other cultures. That was the situation British colonialists sought to overcome by appointing warrant chiefs to administer the villages they conquered during the colonial era [10]. Since the council of elders were all males, it would appear to an uninformed observer as if the women did not matter in the scheme of affairs. The women had more social than political influence. Adult women indigenous to the kindred were always married out. The wives who were married into the kindred were necessarily not indigenous to the kindred. So, they could not be entrusted with the fate of the community. They were always free to terminate the marriage contract and return to their birth community. Among Ndigbo, a woman was always regarded as her father's daughter regardless of her marital status. Accordingly, Igbo women even at marriage traditionally bore their father's name. They never bore their husband's name nor his surname.

This cultural perception of a woman even after marriage as her father's daughter limited her level of inclusiveness in the scheme of things pertaining to the running of the affairs of the village state. Even in the West, women married into the royalty of another nation are seldom allowed to rule over the nation.

f. The Domestic Perspective

Ndigbo defined women primarily as home makers. They were considered to be managers of the home who saw to the feeding, wellbeing and education of the children [11]. From adolescence, the Igbo society tended to separate the roles of the girl child and the male child. While the girl child is trained on how to run the home, cook and keep the house tidy, the male child is trained on how to fend for the home, protect it and protect the community. Ndigbo did not permit women to participate in wars neither did they kill women when they fought. They considered killing of women or children at war as sacrilegious. The womenfolk were deemed by Ndigbo to function primarily in the domestic domain.

g. The Woman Made Man

Among Ndigbo, a woman could socially become a man. In such circumstances, the woman performs all the functions socially and politically assigned to men. This is the situation that obtains when a woman who cannot have children marries another woman to beget children for her. It is not a sexual relationship though. There were also instances where a father who had no male child would designate his female child as man. The woman would not marry but would stay in her father's house to have male children who would inherit her father's portions of the kindred land. There were also instances where a woman was designated as a man to lead the community. In such instances also, the woman did not marry even though she might have children.

It is evident here that biological gender was not really the issue but role performed in the kindred and the viability of the protection of the kindred or community land and identity. The only reason a father would designate his daughter a man was to protect his own lineage's portion of the kindred land and his own legacy. Among the names Ndigbo give to their children is *Afamefuna*, meaning "may my legacy not be lost". By tradition, Ndigbo believe that only the male child can carry on their legacy when they die because the male child will always be a member of the kindred while the female child will move into another kindred when she marries.

VI. Critique of Igbo Traditional Concept of Woman

Igbo defined the woman primarily from the prism of the limitations in their physical environment. The need to safeguard the kindred's land and identity was the fundamental theme in the Igbo social definition of the woman. Of course, there are unchangeable biological realities all humanity must factor in their social definition of the woman. The dominant theme was the need to secure the kindred's identity by building it around those who would never leave the kindred. The womenfolk statutorily left the kindred at marriage. The smallness of the Igbo landmass gave land undue importance among Ndigbo. The fact that Ndigbo are mostly patrilineal also heightened the stress on land. If Ndigbo practiced bi-lineal kinship, the stress on land in the definition of the woman would not have been so pronounced. It is pertinent to point out that the Igbo society never considered the womenfolk to be an inferior gender neither was a woman considered to be the property of a man. The Igbo woman continued to answer her father's name even after marriage. Unlike in some societies where social restrictions were placed on women the Igbo adolescent woman enjoyed basically the same social freedom as the adolescent men until marriage when she was expected to behave as a wife. There were no social segregations between men and women neither were there any restrictions placed on wives on movement or economic pursuit. The Igbo woman suffered mostly political exclusion.

The fact that there were certain circumstances where a woman was socially regarded as man is a testament of the fact that the Igbo social definition of the woman was not predicated unduly on her biological gender. The leadership of the community was entirely dominated by the male elders. Interestingly Ndigbo had no suffrage of any kind because the idea of voting on political offices was alien to them. There were no established monarchies among Ndigbo neither was there any central authority. Government was decentralized down to the kindred level. All male elders took decisions, while the age grades enforced them [12]. It was not necessarily because of biological gender that women were excluded from political participation. As stated above, Ndigbo by custom marry outside their kindred unit. The women who are citizens of the kindred by birth marry out of the kindred before they become elders. The wives were not citizens of the kindred by birth, bore their father's name as surname and could leave the kindred at anytime via divorce. In those earlier times of rampant communal wars, mostly about boundary demarcations, Ndigbo did not believe they could entrust their fate to their wives who still traditionally maintained affiliations and active participation in their kindreds of birth. In the final analysis, it would be inescapable to conclude that although Ndigbo considered their wives to be citizens of their husband's kindred, they did not consider them to be citizens with equal political rights.

On the family front, Igbo women definitely did not share equality with their husbands. The husband was unambiguously the boss of the house. First, unlike the practice in the West and India where the wife's family provided dowry on the wife, the reverse was the case among Ndigbo. The husband paid the bride price on the wife to the wife's family. The Igbo woman knelt down to present a cup of palm wine to her husband to seal the marriage. The European on the other hand, must kneel down on a knee to propose to his wife. The Igbo husband thoroughly dominated his wife. It was an unequal relationship. Traditionally, Ndigbo practiced polygamy. A man could have as many women as he could take care of. This greatly reduced the power of the women as they were apparently replaceable, though not so easily as marriage was always a very expensive ceremony among Ndigbo. All the same, the man was the unmistakable lord of the house.

VII. The Modern Igbo Woman

Colonialism radically changed the Igbo culture. The introduction and emergence of Christianity as the dominant religion among Ndigbo had far reaching impact on Igbo culture. Globalization also came with the attendant westernization. Polygamy became unfashionable, and almost a taboo. Feminism is catching on among young women, especially through the social media. The modern Igbo woman has dramatically changed from her traditional counterpart. Monogamy is the order of the day. The new rule in marriage is co-equality. The Supreme Court of Nigeria recently dusted the Igbo only male inheritance tradition. Women can now share in the inheritance of their late father's estate. Women now have equal rights to vote and be voted for, and do indeed occupy high profile political positions. Today's Igbo woman mirrors the Western woman in trends and outlook.

VIII. Conclusion

This work has detailed in philosophical perspectives, analyzed and critiqued what it meant to be a woman in Igbo worldview. It brought out the beauty, the hiccups and the philosophical foundations of the definition of womanhood among Ndigbo. It is a hitherto uncharted research territory. This research effort has added value to the repository of knowledge about Ndigbo, and especially about the Igbo woman. Africans need to tell their stories themselves. The Western paradigm seems to be actively pushed by the forces of globalization as the only viable paradigm. Other ways of being in the world needed to be put out there in academic and philosophical formations in order to create a diversity of knowledge.

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