

## A CULTURAL PANACEA TO THE PROBLEM OF 'MALELESSNESS' IN IGBOLAND OF NIGERIA - THE STUDY OF EZE-CHIMA CLAN

By

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### INTRODUCTION

**T**he subject of the study is the Igbo of the Eze-chima (anioma) Clan, a unique group believed to have descended from Benin-city. They have the tradition of sacred and divine kingship, as exemplified in the Obi of the commercial town of Onitsha, a member of the clan. The other children who make up the clan are Ezi, Obomkpa, Issele-Uku, Issele-Azagba, Issele-Mpitima. The Eze-chima clan villages are mainly farmers and traders with usually much wealth to pass on to subsequent generations.

The Igbo see marriage as a sacred institution set up by 'Chukwu' (God) from time immemorial for the perpetuation of their existence and for creating a distinct people. This goes to say that the major cause of marriage in Igboland is first and foremost procreation. In this patrilineal society property inheritance is uppermost, since everyone would love to hand over his life-long acquired property to a son. A marriage not blessed with a male child is to the family a childless marriage, especially since women cannot be 'counted' as they are thought to be unable to retain a family name. A childless woman according to Basden (1921) is not a human being since she cannot fulfil her being; Man who has a lot of children is counted as wealthy and fortunate (Basden 1966-188).

A glance at some Igbo personal names suggests the importance of male children.

- |           |   |
|-----------|---|
| Okeibunor | - a man is the home.  |
| Nwaohai   | - The one that carries on the sacrifice or child of the shrine.   |
| Isekwei   | - Translated literally to mean "the head accepts". It means it is my luck or destiny to have a male issue who will. |
| Nkemcho   | - This is my heart's desire   |
| Okeibuike | - A man is the strength.  |

Even among other ethnic neighbours bordering the Eze-chima clan, the importance of male children is also obvious. For instance, Orona (1995:215) argues that among the Isoko the male is more desired, prized, esteemed and cherished. The male is desired because the lineage is traced through him, and his membership of a clan or quarter is determined by the clan or quarter of the father and not the mother. The importance of a male child in Isoko is reflected in names such as Ighe or Ada Igheji (He who builds the compound) Ovietegu (king of the compound) Enaduera (the boy we are looking for), etc. Indeed Onmoke (1993) observes that in African societies procreation is a social obligation in the group to which one belongs.

### **The theoretical Background of the Study**

The theory adopted by the paper is functionalism in the Radcliffe Brown's tradition. To study culture is to study the social behaviour of man and the products of such behaviour (Hoebel 1958:7). Each culture is made up of a multitude of selected traits integrated into a total system in which all parts have special relationships to the whole. The specific forms of each part such as a pot, bow, legal process, do not stand in a vacuum, they all contribute to a total life-way. The way the parts relate to each other or affect each other forms the structure of the culture.

A strange custom may appear meaningless and uncalled for but within its cultural setting taking into consideration the postulates of those practising it and in term of its functions within the system of which it is a part the significance of the custom becomes apparently and scientifically meaningful. Functionalism emphasizes the dynamics operating within a culture. The functions of each part like 'Idegbe principle' or custom are found in the contributions it makes to the maintenance of the life-way that is the total culture.

### **REASONS FOR WANTING MALE ISSUES**

#### **a) Maintenance of Culture of Primogeniture**

A male child is needed in the home for a smooth transfer of family property which is normally from father to a son. A male child becomes the centre of all training and importance. As he grows, his father tells him some secrets about family property and relatives, and at times ends by saying 'in case you don't see me tomorrow'. The mother of the boy assists

the father in reminding him of what to tell the boy. In short, the social gap between the man and his wife is closed on the arrival of the boy. Consequently, all relatives of the man who had previously hoped to share his property because he has no boy now look somewhere else for such booties. All those are reflected in the names given to such sons on arrival:

- Ogbogu - The one who settles the quarrel  
 Udoka - peace now obvious  
 Ebite - I am now apart i.e. no one will interfere in my affairs.

Whenever any man is asked why he wants male children, he will in the answer subtly avoid the obvious 'so that I see whom to hand over my property to'. This is because it is believed he has his brother's sons to hand it over to, if he has no son of his. No one wants to do this and this is why there is that 'ecstasy' on the part of a man or a father whenever a male child arrives. Subsequent male children do not bring this initial joy.

Male children are desired also because a man needs to be properly buried upon his death. The first male child is the 'Onye nwe ozu' i.e. the owner of the dead body. Other children are there to assist him. Burial ceremonies are becoming very expensive and only a person's son (not relatives) can put in the best to bury the father because of the family's name which the boy prices highly but which means not much to other relatives.

### **b) Male Children as Source of Prestige**

Male children are also a source of social prestige and even wealth for the family. Any family where much noise is made (Achebe 1965) is always respected. People, especially the young men and women; respect a man when they know that he has many sons and daughters of their age and social standing. In the remote villages of the Eze-chima clan such as Obior, Obomkpa, Onicha-ukwu, a large family is still an economic asset. Where five boys and two girls go to their fathers farm during the peak of weeding, the work gives way immediately. On the more important issue of children being a source of social prestige, the names children bear tell it all:

- Nwabueze: a child is the source of royalty  
 Nwabuaku: a child is wealth  
 Nwabuoku: a child is our fulfilment; children are the 'oil' in a marriage.

In this Eze-chima clan, one cannot speak of marriage in isolation. It is always marriage and procreation. The social standing of the family is defined by the number and later the quality of the children.

### **CAUSES OF 'MALELESSNESS' IN FAMILY**

In the clan, there are certain conceived reasons why some families do not have male children.

#### **a) God's Gifts to Whom He Wills**

God has the right to give or withhold a male child from a family. His infinite power cannot be questioned by mortal beings. He is all powerful but loving and gives according to His decision for He knows everyone. He is just. This is why people appreciate His gifts as indicated in the names they give their children such as:

Onyenwe:	Who has, if not God.
Okechukwu:	The creature of God
Ogochukwu:	The gift of God.
Nwachukwu:	God's own son
Kenechukwu:	Give God the praise.

#### **b) The Choice of One's Personal 'Chi'**

"Chi" in Igbo cosmology is a personal guardian spirit. It is believed that whatever the person's guardian spirit has chosen from God is what the person comes up to have. If someone's 'Chi' did not choose a male, child it means that it is not the person's destiny to have a male child. There is no contest with one's Chi. One often finds people rejoicing after a big fortune and says 'Chi m di mma' my guardian spirit is good. When this statement is fully expanded it could stand for: 'My God is good'.

#### **c) Punishment from gods**

People in Igboland generally attribute 'malelessness' and generally childlessness to punishment from gods such as Ani (earth goddess) 'chimumu' (the owner of fertility). It is believed to be a punishment for one offence or the other.

#### **d) Witches**

It is strongly believed that 'Ndi amusu' (witches) can cause someone never to give birth to a male child. If a woman is pregnant, the witches can kill the male child right in the womb or turn it into something else. They can prevent the woman from ever being pregnant too.

### **Excessive Flirting**

The Igbo of this clan believe that most women abort all their male children God had sent to them even before they decide to marry. Some men because of excessive sexual involvement use all their useful male-forming sperms before deciding to get married.

It is very serious indictment from God that one has no male issue. This means that the clan's belief about 're-incarnation' is not applicable to that family. The clan believes that new children are re-incarnated ancestors who come back with some old trait of theirs. Parrinder (1961) observes that the Igbo take childlessness as a serious issue because it prevents the rebirth of old ancestors.

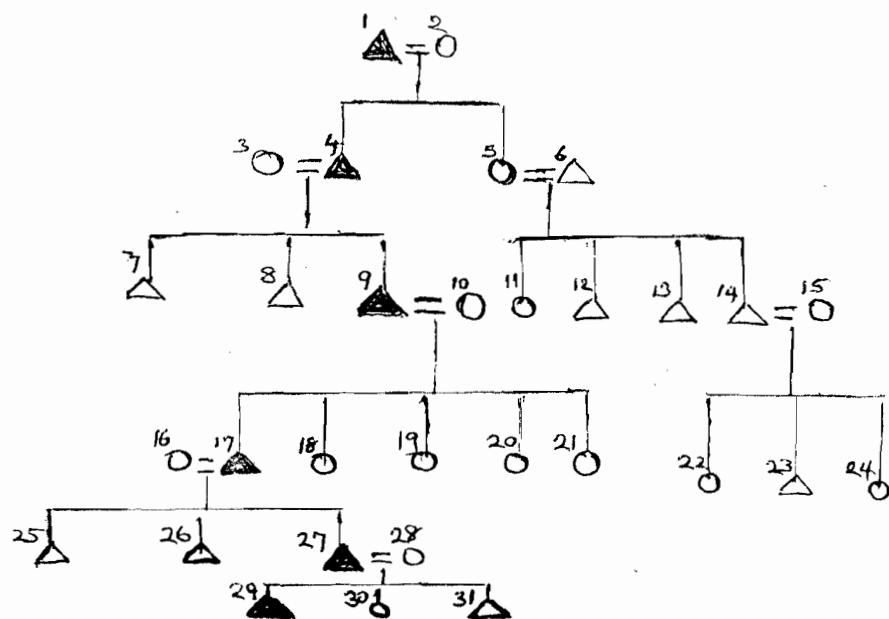
Nwahaghi (1995) sees childlessness generally as a tragedy in a family which causes psychological trauma. It could lead to divorce, suicide, abandonment, etc. Malelessness is generally weighted as childlessness and when men talk about childlessness, they mean malelessness even if several females had been born.

### **Cultural Remedies for Malelessness**

A family stops at nothing to have a male issue: The absence of a male child in the family signals a blockade to returning or re-incarnating ancestors. It also stops family property from being transmitted to the younger generation based on patrilineal descent, as in the figure 1 below:

The cultural system of handing over property is from father to first son. In the above diagram, numbers 1, 4, 9, 17, 27, 29, are patrilineal lines through which family property must pass. Failure to have a male child is therefore a serious issue and a blockade.

Fig. I: Patrilineal descent

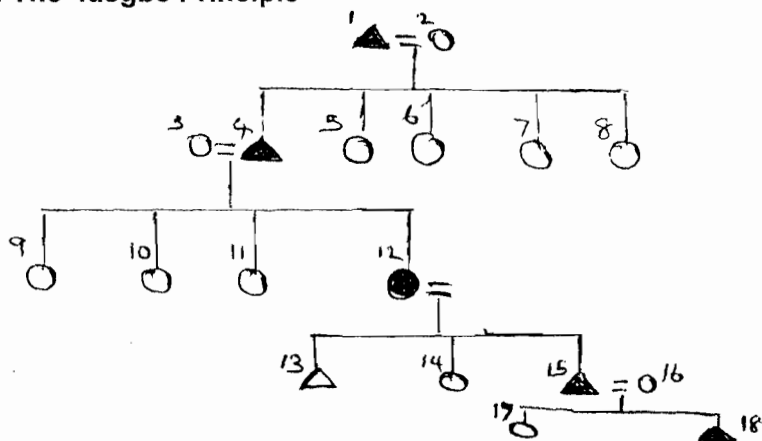


### The 'Idegbe' Principle

A family without a male child is never happy, no matter the number of female children. Traditionally, the oracle must have an explanation for such a misfortune. The reasons could be that the gods or ancestors are being withheld and only sacrifices could untie them. Such 'lavished' sacrifices may still not produce the male. Some men may pick on their wives as the problem; then divorce them or put them aside and marry other women. Some wives even arrange for their husbands to marry other women. Some condescend in their search for males by consciously allowing their wives to meet with a man known for giving birth to only sons. This last solution could not be acceptable even before their ancestors because in the real sense it is now not the family ancestors but another family's ancestor that has reincarnated to take over the line. In the real sense, the writer regards this as an abuse of one's ancestors.

The cultural and honourable way of still ensuring male descent where a family is producing all women is through the 'Idegbe principle'.

Fig. 2: The 'Idegbe Principle'



In fig. 2, number 1 gives birth to number 4 (a male) who marries but gives birth to all girls; try as hard as he could. For there to be a male descent, one of the daughters must be placed in 'Idegbe'. This means that one of the daughters must not be given out in marriage to any man. She will be recognised as one in Idegbe by the community. She is allowed to choose a male friend. The male friend could come into her parents house and meet her. It is culturally agreed and known that the children who result from such contact belong to the girl's father and not to the man who is just a boy-friend. Through this cultural arrangement, it is normally possible for the girl to give birth to male children who are legitimate descendants of her father and his ancestors. This arrangement is culturally approved and pure, in the sense that the girl is not married out. She still belongs to her parent's ancestry. In fig. 2, number 12, the girl is married to no one (0=) hence number 15 can culturally inherit the descent and property of 4; as 4 inherits that of 1.

The culture allows as many girls as possible 9, 10, 11, 12 to remain in Idegbe depending on their feelings that their parents line must not be allowed to close. Usually not more than two are retained in Idegbe, while others are allowed to marry.

### Implications for such Practices

It is obvious that with the recognition of this Idegbe principle, the intractable problem of male issue is resolved. Parents do not need to

separate, divorce, as long as God has given them a daughter who could remain at home and give birth to males who will inherit the family name and property. Since such an arrangement is fine for the ancestors and the community, theoretically order is restored in the family and in the community as their needs have been met.

## CONCLUSION

Every community has its cultural arrangements for ensuring that the society continues undisturbed. Lack of a male child in a patrilineal community with much wealth from farmland means that the property will pass to other people. The Idegbe cultural arrangement helps the community to restore order and remove strain by ensuring that a male child from the descent group still emerges to inherit the family property.

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