

THE IGBO CARE FOR THE ELDERLY IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES: AN OLD TESTAMENT EVALUATION

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Abstract

Indications of aging challenges in most world societies are evidenced from the statistical records and projections of the World Health Organization and United Nations. The challenges of aging and how to cope with caring for the elderly are therefore not peculiar to Igbo society. This study examined the traditional Igbo philosophy about the aged and the problems encountered by care-givers in contemporary times. The task which this research undertook was to explore a possible means of alleviating the plight of the elderly by pragmatically applying the Old Testament (Israeli) strategies, family involvement and government assistance. The paper argued strongly that to properly address the challenges of the elderly, there is need for consistent and intense enlightenment and adjustment on the part of the aged. The Old Testament was used as a parameter to evaluate the Igbo care of the elderly in recent times. Data for the study were gathered from over fifteen years of participatory research, oral interviews and library research. Historical method of data analysis was adopted in the study. Findings show that there is a paradigm shift in caring methods between the traditional and contemporary Igbo societies. The study recommended that the old people be sensitized about the changing times that necessitate change of strategies in providing care to them. The family and the Igbo people should borrow a leaf from the Israel's strategies.

Keywords:Elderly, Aged, Seniors, Senior citizens, Gerontology, Contemporary societies.

Introduction

The aged - elderly - are those who are undergoing depreciation physiologically, mentally and otherwise and at this stage are incapable of doing most chores without

assistance. These vulnerable members of the community are often exposed to some sicknesses that are associated with ageing. In most foreign countries, Israel for example, they are addressed as seniors or senior citizens. The study of aging and its associated problems is gerontology.

In the traditional Igbo setting, much honour was attached to old age so that the elderly people felt privileged while the younger ones looked forward to becoming old. Parents made concerted effort to educate their children to value old age, respect, and assist the aged. It was common practice for young people to provide care to the elderly ones (by running errands for them, fetching firewood, water and providing other help when need arose). The extended family structure and the communal lifestyle of the traditional Igbo society provided a good atmosphere for elderly care. Igbo people's sense of brotherhood, coupled with the philosophy that a child is a child of all - *nwa bu nwa ora* – further enhanced elderly care. Children, on the other hand, received correction and discipline from any elderly irrespective of who the child was (Okwueze 2004). Taking care of old people therefore was a collective business.

Religiously speaking, old people occupied a significant position in Igbo land. Old people's counsel was highly esteemed both in times of peace and war since they operated beyond the physical world. Only those that lived up to good old age and lived good life were qualified to join the ancestral cult at death (Ugwu and Ugwueye 2003). The high premium placed on old age made people to aspire to attain this age in the olden days.

Exposure to western civilization and technology introduced a paradigm shift in the lifestyle and philosophy of the younger people. They began to lose their attachment to the family and village life and in fact many migrated to the urban centres. They discovered that the urban centres offered them more job opportunities for wealth acquisition. The mass exodus of the younger and middle aged people has created a gap in the traditional Igbo structure and the welfare of the elderly. The result is that in contemporary Igbo society, the old people are faced with the challenge of loneliness and neglect among others. In fact, a recent development of the deportation of some batches of Igbo people by Fashola (the governor of Lagos state) was reported in one of the Nigerian dailies. These people were deported on September 2012 and July 2013 down to Upper Iwaka, (a location in Onitsha), a town in Igbo land. One of the deportees, an aged person died in the incident.

In recent times, the plight of the aged in Nigeria, not only Igbo land, has become so crucial that it is now a topical issue in the Newspapers. Much emphases are placed on government minimal participation especially in not giving the aged the desired assistance in health care and other social amenities. All these have aggravated the sufferings of elders in Nigeria. It is a surprise that the National Policy on the Care and Welfare of Older Persons is still in draft form since March 2003 (Aboderin 2006). In fact, Maina (2013) opined that Nigeria is described as the sixth worst place on earth for the old people and as having the highest rate of depression among the elderly people (Oguntola 2013). Other challenges facing the aged include lack of proper health

care, inadequate social amenities, non regular payment of pension, gross neglect or abuse of the elderly and lots more.

Much focus has been given to the challenges faced by old people in Nigeria, though very skeletal works exist on Igbo land, one of such being that of Uwakwe and Modebe (2007). This study therefore specifically examines the challenges that caregivers to the elderly encounter in Igbo land in the process of rendering care to them. The paper therefore applies the Old Testament strategies as parameter of evaluation and see how to proffer solutions.

Who are the Igbo people?

History has it that the Igbo people are a group of people who are believed to originate from Nri, a cultural group that shares a strong religious and cultural ideology with the Igbo in general. In fact, it is impossible to isolate what derives from Nri culture from what derives from other Igbo cultures. Nri people are known as both the progenitors and the priests of the whole Igbo race and as such they are high priests and king makers. Duhaze in Onwuejeogwu (1981) acknowledges that they take precedence of the other fraternities, priestly and social activities. The Igbo live in patrilineages called *Umunna*. Patrilineages grow to form villages and groups of villages known as *Obodo*.

The Igbo culture area covers the settlements of the present South-East geo-political zone in Nigeria, as well as Agbor, Kwalle (west Niger), Diobu, Umuabayi (Port Harcourt), Arochukwu, Afikpo, Isiagu (Abakaliki Area), Enugu Ezike, (Nsukka Area) and Ebu-West (Niger Igbo) (Onwuejeogwu 1981). Onunwa (2005) adds that the Igbo people share a common boundary with Edo state in the West, Ijaw and Kalabari in the South, the Idoma and Igala in the Northwest, Tiv and Ogoja in the North. They are therefore found in Rivers, Delta and part of Akwa Ibom states. Their spoken language is generally Igbo language and a wide range of dialects.

The Igbo Communal Lifestyle

The people of the traditional Igbo society have a communal mindset which made them to settle in clusters of small hamlets. They run an extended family system. Ekeokpara (2011) regards the extended family as the social and ethical aspect of Igbo traditional society. He defines the composition of this family unit as father, mother, brothers and sisters of their immediate families and those who can trace their origin by blood to a common ancestor or progenitor. The extended family structure was a means of providing care to other family members outside one's immediate family. Uchendu (1995), a known scholar on Igbo affairs, writes extensively on the extended family structure and its mode of operation. Uwakwe and Modebe (2007) describe the family as the bedrock and source of care for older persons. The traditional Igbo people knew the place of extended family participation in looking after the elderly ones. Young people were educated to offer help to elders outside their home. People shared in the joys and sorrows of others and therefore elderly care was also a collective business.

Communal living was useful in guaranteeing their security. Whenever any internal or external enemies threatened their peace, they could mobilize forces and ward off any intruders. Extended family structure began to weaken overtime because of interactions with external cultures.

The Igbo Diaspora Tendency

The Igbo people are migrants to the core. They are one of the largest three ethnic groups in Nigeria who spread to all parts of the country and beyond because of their enterprising disposition. Onunwa (2005) agrees that the Igbo people are the most widely spread and travelled single ethnic group in Africa. He estimates that over ten million of their population live in other parts of the world (Onunwa 2005). Chukwuezi (2011) also comments on the Igbo migration issue from a socio-economic perspective. He describes the Igbo people as developers who turn a place around economically shortly after their settlement. Dike (1981) and Iheriohanma (2012) subscribe to this view stating that the Igbo are very enterprising and can dare any condition of life in order to acquire wealth.

Care - Giving Methods and the Problems Encountered by Care-Givers in Contemporary Igbo Society

Paid home worker's method: Care giving in Igbo society is a family affair and mostly provided by the children to their aged parents/ parent or relations. If the children live within the environment of their parents, care- giving becomes less stressful because they either perform it directly or supervise those who do it on their behalf. In situations where direct parents of a couple live far away from home, they provide paid house helps or stewards to look after their parents. Female children in particular visit their parents from time to time to supervisor how the services are rendered.

First daughter/Ada method: The female children are traditionally believed to be fundamental care givers to parents. They indeed play outstanding roles in this case more than the male children. If the woman especially the first daughter /*ada* does not live near home, she could take the aged parent to her marital home so as to provide reasonable help. Female children are the pride of Igbo families when it comes to looking after their parents at old age and their absence in homes create some gaps. Parents look forward to the time of old age when their female or other children would take care of them. In fact, this is one area where the Igbo people hold their female children in high esteem. They generally believe that *O bu umu nwanyi n'ele ndi okenye na nka*. In other words, it is mainly the women that nurse their old people at old age. The male children could equally be helpful but this is rare. However, they prefer to be financiers most of the time.

Rotational method of care-giving: Where the *ada* (first daughter) is not financially buoyant or is incapacitated for some other reasons to look after the parents /parent, other siblings can organize themselves and take turns in visiting home. However, in

times of incapacitation of the aged one, especially due to sickness, such a parent has to be taken to one of the children's homes. This can be done rotationally to make for convenience. If a family member is better disposed to render such help, the others could send regular support.

Monthly contribution method: Well organized families make regular contributions of money and foodstuff every month for the upkeep of their aged people back home. One of the children of the aged takes up the responsibility of gathering the money or food items and sends them down to their parents.

Problems Encountered by Care – Givers in Igbo Contemporary Society

Silverstone and Hyman (1976), though writing from an English perspective, aptly captured the scenario which is that “the children of the aged are caught in the problem of trying to rear their own children, live their lives and carter for their aged parents”. What they observed is the true state of elderly care-giving in Igbo contemporary society. Some of the problems of care-givers in rendering help to the aged are highlighted below.

Psychological attachment to biological children/ Resentment: When the method of using paid workers is introduced, some elderly ones found it difficult to cope with outsiders. Some parents who have been nursing the idea that their children would look after them in old age feel unfulfilled. This is a serious psychological problem because of the attachment the elderly people have on their biological children. Many close in and feel lonely even though they have people to attend to them (Nwoke 2014).

Elderly Abuse and dishonesty of hired workers: In her own view, Okoye (2014) explains the issue of elderly abuse as being generated by lack of government intervention and the weakened traditional family care-giving system. With the family minimal assistance to their aged ones, the need for hired workers arose and obviously the issue of elderly abuse. Some elders may lose their money, wealth and other precious things to hired workers. Some are abused by being beaten or threatened.

Problem of coping with disabled elderly persons: It is an uphill task to cater for a disabled and incapacitated elderly one especially in the rural villages. Uwakwe and Modebe (2007) who researched on this dimension of the problem recognize the immense demand such a state places on the family. Care – givers find it very difficult to cope with disabled elderly ones coupled with their job demands.

The elderly male: Pa Joshua who was interviewed in an Old People's Home where he resides said “at home I would have been alone. Loneliness is a disease. It kills you faster at old age”. He added that he is well fed and interacts there at the Home. Pa Joshua is a male elderly person who had no one to cater for him. This is the case with most male elderly persons in Igbo society. This class of people suffer loneliness more than their women counterparts due to male ego and ties of tradition and culture. In the

instance of loss of wife and where the children have left home, the widower is left all alone. Leaving their home to join one of the children for more effective care- giving could have been one of the options but this is usually difficult with Igbo men. Men find it difficult leaving their homes. Traditionally and generally, they have a lot of authority conferred on them as care takers, spiritual heads and overseers in their homes. They are regarded as the *okpara*, the family priests who should sit in the family *obi* (a house where the father of the home lives) exerting constituted authority. It becomes psychologically difficult for them to either move to their children's home or even reserved homes for old people.

Lack of vacation for the care-giver: Some persons who look after their old parents or relations do not have capable hands to relieve them of this duty when the need arises. It is a big problem when one is faced with caring for an aged without any form of relief. Such persons end up feeling frustrated because the possibility of vacation is inexistent. The result is that they are stressed out and can only offer very minimal service.

The Aged in the Old Testament

The aged - elderly - are all translated from the Hebrew root (*zaqen*) noun meaning old (Ebo:2005). (The verb is rendered "be, become old, old") and *zoqen* old age. They are people whom God himself placed high regard on in the Old Testament. In the list of laws given to the nation of Israel early on in their life as a nation, God included the law instructing young people to honour their parents for them to experience good living at old age. In Leviticus 19:32, God enjoins young people to rise up in the presence of the aged and show respect to them. The above given injunction shows how God cherishes old age, and how invaluable old people are to the society. God considers them as vulnerable but at the same time as people crowned with the glory of gray hair while the young are crowned with strength (Proverbs 20:29). They are reservoirs of wisdom and their wisdom is based on life experiences. In them is entrenched records of the past (Josh 3).The younger generation are asked to consult them- hence, they are to ask the former generation, find out what their fathers learned "for we were born but yesterday and know nothing and our days on earth are but a shadow. Will they not instruct you and tell you, will they not bring forth words from their understanding" (8:8-10)? The old people were a big asset to the Hebrew society; they acted as overseers and decision makers on national issues (Zech.8:4). For instance, the elders accompanied Moses to the presence of Pharaoh when God sent Moses to meet him and demand for the release of the Israelites (Ex 3:16, 17). It was the elders that assisted David to secure the throne when **all The Elders of Israel** had come to King David at Hebron, the king made a compact with them at Hebron before the Lord and they anointed David king over Israel.

By their age disposition, they headed the family unit/*bayith* (Hebrew word for family, clan and village). Given the social and cultural setting of the Israelites, an elder and probably a father was recognized as the superintendent of the immediate family, all the relations, the cousins , the married people, children and grandchildren (Gen 13

and 42). Abraham fathered all his children, grandchildren and great grandchildren (Gen 46:8-26). The Hebrew family includes the sojourner, visitor and slave (Ex. 20:6).

Elderly Care In Patriarchal Times The communal and extended family structure of the patriarchs enabled them to take good care of their elderly folks. This patriarchal family structure vividly exemplifies and typifies the family structure of the Israelites. For instance, Abraham lived with Lot and his family and both family shared everything together until they grew to uncontrollable size (Gen13). Even when they separated, it is the same spirit of communal living that made Abraham to muster three hundred and eighteen men to a rescue attack for Lot against Chedorlaomer and the kings that allied with him. He defeated them and brought back his relative, Lot (Gen 14: 14-17). They shared in their joys and sorrows. Isaac lived with his grown children even after Esau married (Gen 28:9).

A good picture of patriarchal extended family and communal lifestyle is shown in Jacob's family. Jacob lived together with his children and grandchildren until his death. His children and grand children took care of him. Jacob sent his married sons to Egypt in search of foodstuff. He asked them "Why do you keep looking at each other? I heard that there is grain in Egypt. Go down there and buy some for us so that we may live and not die" (Gen 42:1-2). Obviously, the sons of Jacob at this time had their individual families yet they lived under their father's headship and were responsible for their parents' welfare. Such socio- cultural family structure was a strategy which the Israelites used in dealing with the elderly demands. The elders on their part provided advisory services and could direct the children hence being a defense for them. Just before the monarchy, the Naomi –Ruth story in the Book of Ruth exemplifies further how the Israelites took care of their elderly ones. Naomi lived with both her sons and her daughter's in-law before the children died. Ruth provided care for Naomi and was able to sustain her.

Elderly Care In The Monarchical Era Much cannot be deciphered on the way people related with their elderly during the monarchy but glimpses of communal living can be detected. The king David had a large family comprising the children Amon, Tamar and Absalom and grandchildren. In fact, it was only after the murder of Amon that Absalom was sent out. When Absalom threatened Davidic kingdom people rallied round David and dissuaded him from going to war against him. When he was very old and could not be warn, a wife was married for him (1kgs 1:1-3).

Elderly Care in Contemporary Israel Caring for senior citizens in contemporary Israeli society has taken a new turn. Change is inevitable in societal existence and adjustment to change a necessary reaction. The family though still the mainstay of the security of the seniors is exposed to new challenges of modernism and the pressures of capitalism. Family members are faced with the challenge of raising money from their work place and giving adequate care to the old folks. All these demands make it difficult for people to look after their old ones without experiencing a burn out. People

have resorted to other methods. In Israel presently care giving to seniors is organized through Senior Day Care centers which run from morning to evening. There are Hebrew Rehabilitation Centers and Homes that cater for the elderly, providing them interactive, recreational and socialization opportunities. The Israeli government further complements the efforts of families by establishing welfare policies and schemes. Their welfare policy renders an array of social services that benefit the weakest population groups. It covers family, retirement, elderly in work- force and national insurance and generally institute programmes for poverty reduction.

Evaluation of Igbo Care for their Elderly from the Old Testament

The Old Testament teachings and principles are appropriate yard stick for the evaluation of how the Igbo society provides care giving to their old folks. The Old Testament contains sound teachings on social responsibilities of man to his fellow man. It also gives several commands to the youth concerning their attitude to the aged and even attaches blessings to it (Ex 20:12). The Old Testament makes it clear that God is concerned about the state of such helpless people like the seniors in Israel and all through the ages.

Placing the Old Testament as an evaluation tool for measuring Igbo family and societal involvement in the care of the aged, shows sub standard performance. Since the Israelite community represents the Old Testament, it should therefore be seen as a model society for others. In contemporary Israel, various policies are operative and these are meant to benefit the senior citizens in one way or the other. They believe that the older citizens can make significant contributions to the nation and so they have special programmes for them in work places. One of such policies is providing the senior citizens a place in the University programme to utilize their expertise and experience to conduct research. Another strategy that is used in Israel currently is to mount cameras at home to monitor hired workers and this helps to control elderly abuse. Their commitments to the seniors show that they are aware of the invaluable position of her senior citizens.

Conclusion

Ageing is a natural process that is inevitable and cannot be substituted with anything if God grants one the honour to experience it. This gift of God should be cherished and valued by the aged themselves and their care givers. Those now classified as the elderly were once strong and vibrant and even contributed a lot in the development of the society. God recognizes their vulnerability and therefore put some structures in place for them to ensure their comfort. They are irrevocably instructors to the younger generation and equally dignified in spite of their frailties.

God's attitude towards them and their relevance to society were issues of consideration in the study. The Old Testament provides instances of God's concern for the aged. The dignity accorded to them is particularly x- rayed in the patriarchal era (the period of existence of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob). Coming to our contemporary time, the life and practices of the Igbo people and their care for the elderly was

critically considered. The paper discussed both the contemporary plight of the elderly and the challenges associated with caring for them by their families.

It is the conclusion of the paper that any effective solution to alleviating the plight of the aged must start with a consistent education and enlightenment to them. They should be lectured on the dynamisms of life, adjustments and compatibilities to life's changes. Such sensitizations would pave way for the government, Church and private people to introduce new schemes that can help the society to assist them better.

Recommendations

Nigeria and the Igbo people in particular need to borrow a leaf from the Israeli government and implement necessary welfare schemes that would better the lives of the elderly. In fact, welfare programmes should get to the grassroots of society where their effect should be felt. Much sensitization should be done to make the younger generation restore back the seemingly lost value for the aged.

The old people should equally be sensitized to accommodate and corporate with the children when alternative arrangements are made for them. There is much need for adjustment on their part. They should face reality and not allow some cultural notions to hold the bound especially in the area of leaving home to find help elsewhere.

Findings from this study reveal that many elderly people in rural Igbo land are helpless due to loss of close relatives and some have their children all dwelling in cities. Some care takers for the aged are stressed out due to lack of vacation. Introducing both Day Old People's home and boarding homes would provide relief for such people. Aged widowers and those who have no relatives could also be helped. Government participation in providing care to this class of people is very minimal. The need for establishing homes for the aged is desperately needed and both private people, Churches, Governmental and Non-Governmental Organizations should get involved.

Day Care Centres should be re- introduced where it is extinct. It provides elders the opportunity to interact with their fellows. It used to be common many years back especially when the moon appeared. In some Igbo communities, it still exists even though it may be under the guise of some other forum or name. In Nkporo according to John Nwoke (2014), one notable elder's forum that is still in existence is the "*Otu bu ike*" (group is power). Under this forum, elders gather to interact with each other and every compound is represented. It gives elders opportunity to discuss issues that concern them. It makes them relevant and also to have a sense of belonging in their community.

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Oral Interview

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