

THE HERITAGE OF IGBO RELIGION: CHALLENGES TO THE HOTCHPOTCH OF VALUES TO WOMEN

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Abstract

This work sets out to investigate the original understanding of the dignity of women in traditional Igbo socio-religious world (before 1900). This is engendered on the one hand by the extreme misinterpretations leveled against the traditional societies especially the African nations on the dehumanization of women; and on the other hand by the scandalous advances of the contemporary feminists' campaign and advocacy for an equality that sets aside the dignity of the sexes, ranging from single parenting to masochism, deformation of the natural family setting and widespread abortion. The method employed for collection of data was mostly through literary survey and partly through examination of some resilient language culture and mythical stories. The phenomenological method was the tool for an encounter of the Igbo traditional life without preconceptions. Oppression of women was not a fact in Igbo traditional society nor were they mere appendages of men; but they complemented men. Women were rather at the centre of the culture of life, which was the priority of the traditional Igbo ideology. The woman was a messenger of the supreme goddess of life and morality, Ala. As long as she fitted into this ontological woman-Being, she was fulfilled and dignified since dignity for the Igbo rested on ndu na afa – life and life fulfilling response-ability. The autonomy of the two gender worlds in Igbo society and respect for women as sharing in the divine motherhood of Ala enables their caring and fending for life. It negates the feminist theory of patriarchalism and masochism and shows a way out of the chaotic imbalance of gender relations in the contemporary world.

Introduction

This world has been noted as the world of men with women being appendages to men. For some, women are simply properties of men, slaves of sex and objects of entertainment for men. They are referred to as the weaker sex with an ability that does not extend beyond the inner courtyards of the family. This is completely foreign to the traditional Igbo mind, a confused and infused misinterpretation of the real value and place of women, who live in their world without the interference of the male counterpart in a culture that situates its central priority, life, on the laps of the woman. The juxtaposition of the modern world culture of syncretism, where according to Hauke (1988), the woman almost sublimates into the men posits a lot of social problems. Betz (1979) states a heretical and syncretistic gnostic gospel of St. Thomas:

When you make the two one and make the inside like the outside and the outside as the inside and the upperside like the underside and when you make the male and the female into a single one, so that the male will not be male and the female [not] be female,..... then you shall enter [the kingdom]. (P.196)

A kingdom where there is dissolution of roles, dissolution of gender and dissolution of statuses cannot exist in a culture of life but rather in a culture of death. This means collapse of the family system, the natural regeneration and the socialization school and then the rise of the human-machines.

The Igbo People

Contemporary views about Igbo people punctuated by genetic, archeological, linguistic, scriptures exegetical and ethnological findings dismiss completely the hypothesis of hamitic (Jewish or Egyptian) origin and tend to situate the cradle of the modern man, *homo sapiens*, in the Igbo people. When taken as a whole, these contemporary scholarships open up new vistas of study and research into the interior of human origin on this planet. Scholars are of the opinion that what is hitherto unknown is much greater than what is known and opening up the unknown can proffer solutions to some problems we experience now in the world.

Acholonu (2009) said that the Igbo story is not the story of a localized community but one of the black people all over the continent of Africa. *Ndi-Igbo* therefore is said to mean “the Ancients, the First People, the Aborigines (*Ndi Gbo*)” (p.2). She maintained that their origin came from the Grimaldi/Bushmen, who were direct descendants of the *homo erectus* (Early man) (p.114). They traversed and migrated out of Africa as hunter gatherers. They were called Igbo by the earliest migrants, probably the Nri (as asserted by Jeffrey (1951) and other researchers) who met them *in situ* on arrival in the Niger-Benue Confluence area. They went by the name *San* or *Shan* (South Africa), *Bushmen*, *Twa* and *Pygmies* in other parts of Africa. In China, they were known as *Shan* (the creators of the *Shan* Dynasty of God-men) and in Igboland as *Eshi/Nshi* or *Nwa-nshi*. Afigbo (1981) maintains that the Igbo have lost all memory of their migration into the area they now occupy if it ever happened. He avers rather that the Igbo emigrated from an original location at the plateau region (Northern Igbo stretching from Nsukka-Okigwe cuesta and Awka – Orlu uplands) to the southern areas of Uratta, Ikwerre, Etche, Asa, and Ndoki as well as the west and east.

Invariably, Uchendu (1965) outlines three senses in which the word is used:

- I. To refer to domestic speakers of the language
- II. To refer to the language spoken by the people
- III. To refer to Igbo territory (p.1)

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). 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 Igboland had the densest countryside population in any part of Africa” (p.21).

The Place of Women in Igbo Socio-religious World View

The Igbo world was a complex and dynamic whole. It was 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 kwuru, ife akwudebe ya* - Something stands by another.

According to Aniakor (1973):

When Duru Agwu/Duru Aku, the Chief Diviner at Amauzari in Mbanu 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:

<i>ihe di abuo abuo</i>	-	Reality comes in twos
<i>Nwoke na nwanyi</i>	-	Male and Female
<i>Ihe oma na ihe ojoo</i>	-	Good and Evil
<i>Ugbua na Mgbe-Ochie</i>	-	Present and Past
<i>Mmadu na Mmuo</i>	-	People and Spirits
<i>Igwe na Ala</i>	-	Firmament and Earth
<i>Onwu na Ndu</i>	-	Life and Death

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

Reality is double fold 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, it rather bespeaks complementarity 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 nor as property.

Edeh (1985) avers that the Igbo have a view of a dual world “*Uwa n'ani muo*” (p.73) depicting the spiritual and physical worlds. Egbujie (1976) believes too that:

For the Africans the world is *dual in nature*. Beyond and over above the visible, tactile, physical world, there is a non-visible, nontactile world which envelopes the former. It permeates the former through and through; it is simultaneously within and outside of the earth and the seas. (p.107).

The spiritual reside with the physical; separating them is applying the Platonic theory of duality. The world is one with spiritual and physical corollaries and it is composed of four basic elements: *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. Agbasiere (2000) avers that “the belief system, more than the rules of social organization, depicts clearly the true place of the woman in Igbo society... there is traditionally high regard for women” (p.48). 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 *urstoffs* 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 *Ndubuisi* (Life is the central focus). This clearly supports that the Igbo supreme deity may have been the *Ala*, the earth goddess.

Women are tangible, *nmenne ife*, pillars of human life and family and around them

revolves 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 *Amadioha*, and the earth goddess, *Ala*. It is also good to note here that the adjective employed by the Igbo to depict “tangible” is formed from the female word for mother. We shall come back to that.

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 *Amadioha*. A myth portrayed *Ala* and *Amadioha* 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 the body out and make a home for humans. When *Amadioha* receded to the far sky, it (*Amadioha*) fertilised the land with rain water, which helped *Ala* bear food for humans and animals. The Igbo say: *e lechawa odidi nwoke na nwanyi, a mara ka Amadioha na Ala siri biri* – One gets the idea of the relationship between *Ala* and *Amadioha* from the status of husband and wife. The gods (*Ala* and *Amadioha*) 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. Ekwuru (2009) speaking on this analogy said that *Ala*:

is nevertheless, the prototype of Igbo feminine beauty and fertility. Hence, it is said that: *Ala bu nma*, “*Ala* is beauty.” *Nma Ala bu omumu*, “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).

In this *Ala-Amadioha* typology, the place of the woman is projected into *Ala*, the earth-goddess. *Ala*/woman is humble and unassuming, always stretching it/her(self) out to accommodate all. *Ala*/woman is the foundation of all human thriving or at the centre of preservation of life and is full of sacrifices for its daughters and sons. The woman feeds the children and she can keep away from the husband in order to rear the children. However, as Chiegboka (2009) acknowledges, the husband comes from time to time to fertilise it/her with rain for the teeming and preservation of life.

The husband often strikes the land with thunder in the bid to protect it/her from evil.

The man has not the patience and humility (the sign of *air* mentioned above) to tend life but the strong hand of discipline (the sign of *fire*, also mentioned above). *Ala*/woman is beautiful and for love of it, Igbo People can traverse distances in order to acquire/marry more. This also explains why the land is not the business of a woman except in special cases when it is necessary.

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 responsibility for one's actions. Thus the Igbo idea of human dignity revolves on two things: *ndu* and *afa*.

“Ndu” and “afa”: **Igbo categories for human dignity:** *Ndu* means life and so the Igbo are evidently preoccupied with good health, physical vigour and preservation of life. *Afa* is literally translated as 'name'. It stands for a personal identity in the community, and for the purpose of human dignity, a 'distinctive name or reputation', which is as a result of an achievement recognized by the community. This view is evident in men's life as much as the women's. *Ndu* is thus a potential given to all in order to achieve *afa*, a social reputation, which presupposes a moral rectitude, *mma* (beauty) in the society. It can thus be said that *mma-ndu bu afa* – the beauty of life is the reputation of the individual in the society. It is by this reputation that one qualifies to join the ancestors and insure or perpetuate one's lineage. One of the preoccupations of the Igbo is being community luminaries, having foothold or being known in the community. The Igbo man struggles to raise his head in the community wherever he is found. Achebe (1986) maintains that they are afraid of being labelled failures. This leads to their busy lives and title-taking in the community, which is a show of success in life.

Women in Life of Igbo Traditional Society

The place of the woman will be viewed from pre-historic times, which includes pre-colonial times. This is a time one can truly get to the heart of the Igbo People since there were no coercive infiltrations on their culture. Amadiume (1987) says:

The pre-colonial period, pre-1900, is considered by present-day Igbo as the 'olden days', when traditional customs were 'pure and unspoilt'. In contrast, after 1900, including both colonial and post-colonial times is considered as the modern period. This division does not imply that in the 'olden days' there was no external contact or change. Change would have been gradual or negotiated, and neither sudden nor immediately apparent. (p. 21).

A gradual change is always accepted by the people and builds into the fabric of their

culture, not destroying the overarching principles but enhancing the cultural components. Igbo cultures can be deceptive to an observer scholar since the principles of their existence are not written anywhere but have been fabricated into the being of the people. This is what led early researchers like Leith-Ross (1939) to pen down some contradicting statements about our women.

Surdarkasa (1989) regrets the above position thus:

Whenever most writers compared the lot of women and men in Africa, they ascribed to men a better situation, a higher status. Women were depicted as saddled with home and domesticity; men were portrayed as enjoying the exhilaration of life in the outside world. For me, the pieces of information did not ring true. Not only was there an obvious distortion of the ethnographic reality – women were outside the home as well as in it – but there was also something inappropriate about the notion that women and men were everywhere related to each other in a hierarchical fashion as was implied in most common usage of the concept of status of women. (pp.25-26).

Greater results are achieved when one studies the phenomena without preconceived ideas and when the phenomena are not seen from other cultural binoculars. In Igbo culture there are the tacit and implicit categories and these are co-terminous with what is often seen and said and what is lived. What is often seen and said is deceptive without being grounded in what is lived and passed on to generations. What is lived points at the process of socialization and for Nwoye (2011), this is crystallized in the office of the woman. Women in Igbo have public outfits and have their own world that is not interfered with by the men but they have a sense of men being the heads of families and other kinship ties, while women are the backbone of life and socialization. As a matter of fact, in accord with Surdarkasa (1989), the two gender domains in African societies were internally ordered in a hierarchical fashion and both of which provided personnel for domestic and extra-domestic (or public) activities. Okonjo (1976) blames the Western world for making public-status-bearing roles the exclusive preserve of men while women, who want to achieve distinction or recognition become appendages to men. Acholonu (1995) maintains that:

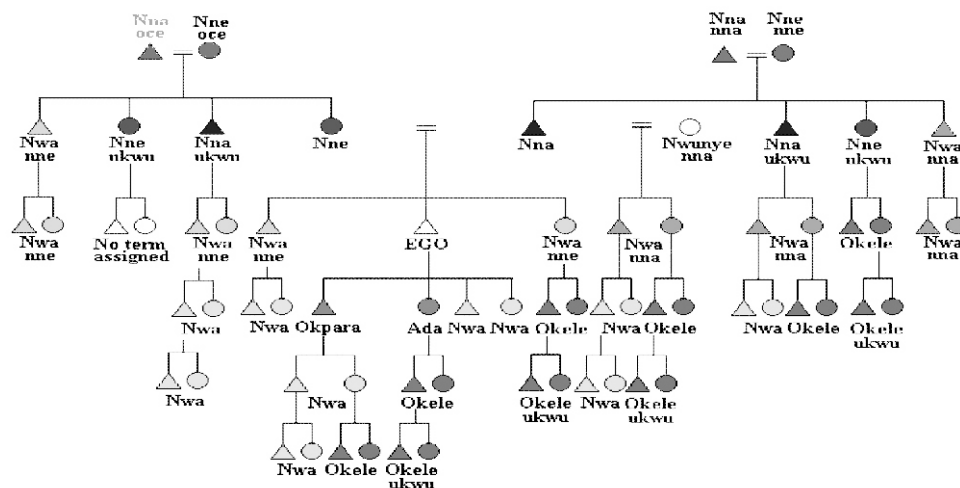
what determines social status in Africa, in all parts of Africa, is economic power; and hardly gender. A rich woman, an educated woman and enlightened woman who is outspoken, hardworking and fearless can hardly expect to be looked down upon by any member of the society or of her own immediate family... Rich and enterprising women are better placed on the social ladder than poor unenterprising men, without prejudice to the individual customs of African Communities. (pp. 44-45).

Surdarkasa, N. (1989) further argues that the notion of “status”, which stands for social

stratification on the basis of sex, is inappropriate in describing the relationships between females and males in Africa. Male and female form two distinct genders yet make up some sort of interwoven sexual entity that propels life in the societies of African nations. In fact, Amadiume (1987) in examining the structures that enabled Igbo women achieve power stated that roles were neither rigidly masculinized nor feminized. Women could play roles usually monopolized by men and were then classified as males – a classification facilitated by women's independent economic resources and the existence of a strong goddess-focused religion. As has been demonstrated above, this strong presence and reverence of the *Ala* goddess in Igbo religion is a transposition of the value of women in the said society, which has a pervading presence in all social relations. Let us now consider the position of women in the Igbo kinship ties.

Women 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.



(O Represents the female while Δ represents the male. There are no differentiations on the basis of gender. Male and female alike both bear the names *nwanne*, *okelu*, *nwanna*; while on seniority level, Parents and children do not bear the same names. They bear specialized names: *Okpara*, *Ada*, *Okele*. The specialized names for generation have the suffix *-ukwu/oce* 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 oce* (*ochie/ukwu*) and *nna oce* (*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 *umune* (this term cannot be reduced to components). The *umune* 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 nma na nneji* – 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 ahu uzo*. 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 meaning 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 matrilineal and patrilineal. All these show the matrilineal influence in the cultural economy of the Igbo society which is undoubtedly patrilineal. This is the complementarity 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 (*nma*) 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, *ani/ala*. *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 and so is the woman in the real Igbo thought and life. It is rather the position of the woman that is trans-fixed into the Goddess.

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*. In as much 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 messenger 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, *Ala* 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.

The tenacity and the widespread nature of the worship of *Ala* all over Igbo land is a strong pointer to the fact that the earliest religion here is matrifocal and that there may have been a Supreme Goddess, *Nneka* or *Nnem Chukwu*. This is often portrayed in the ancient sculpture of the Igbo, especially the Igboukwu pot, which has an image of a woman carrying children on her laps and having an *ichi* scarification on the forehead. *Ichi* is maintained by Acholonu (2009) to mean “the identification scar of Igbo god-men (women) called *Nze na Ozọ* and of Igbo gods and goddesses.” (p.82).

Conclusion

It is not an exaggeration to believe that the earliest Igbo society may have been a matrifocal community. But however it is seen, no sex subjugates the other since there existed two worlds in Igbo worldview that rather complements one another. The women lived in their world and ruled it. Green (1946) remarks of a case where women pulled all the men to the oracle to swear against a conspiracy to hurt the women world and this they did before there was peace. Also Leith-Ross (1939) refers to the women in the famous Aba women riot of 1929 as “irate women” (p.97). This action of the women brawled at the minds of the colonial masters as they could not understand our women on the backlight of their Victorian women. That was the reason of the mission of Leith-Ross to understudy our women. Basden (1966) reiterates that the women “are the purveyors of the salt and savour of the men's lives!” (p.90). Acholonu (1995) avers that

women were at the foundation of the Igbo society. She maintains that the colonialist 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.

The issue of widowhood which so many point at as a sign of patriarchy is not an affair of men but women living and ruling their world. A woman may not be married just by one person but to the whole lineage. After *ikwa di* comes *ikwa ajadu* and this means the re-absorption of the woman into the family, whereby an elder brother to the husband becomes the husband of the widow. Thus *ikwa di* is a rite of passage for the re-absorption of the widow into the lineage. Like all rites of passage not all widows are qualified for the next level of existence. Widows who are so arrogant and proud that they cannot undergo such experiences choose to leave the family and some also choose to re-marry. As Turner (1967) explained, the neophytes for initiation (rite of passage) go into liminality, a kind of passivity to the normal life processes and undergo a harrowing experience that implants the system of the new life into their being. It is not peculiar with widowhood. The masquerade cult and Nze na Ozo cult also are rites of initiation, where similar or more harrowing experiences happen.

Life is rather built around the woman, though unassuming like *Ala*, she is humble; like *mmili*, water, she is beautiful yet nameless; assuming the name of the man and later, the family. The more tangible urstoffs are female, yet humble/unassuming but show their teeth when life is at stake, where they had even assumed the roles of men.

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