
The Practice and Significance of “Female Father” among the Igbo Traditional Society of Nigeria: The Ngwa Community in View

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Abstract

The culture of patriarchy and ‘male child’ dominance underpins a number of parents’ gender preferences for male children. The qualitative methodological approach involving ethnographic observations and oral interviews of informants were adopted and data were interpretatively analyzed. This study reveals that in Ngwa land, the practice of female-father socially and culturally gives women the legal rights to have their own children especially male ones through various means. It also reveals an advanced knowledge on the diversities of Igbo cultural practices. In spite of the disadvantages that follow this practice such as encouraging promiscuity, and even with the impact of western education and Christianity, Ngwa people and indeed the entire Igbo community continue to resist any attempt to abolish this tradition. Given the paucity of literature in this area of Igbo culture, this study will avail readers and scholars better insight to the reasons, advantages and disadvantages of this practice.

Keywords – culture, patriarchy, inheritance, male child, female child

Introduction

Individuals, groups, societies or even organizations are recognized by their cultural practices. Culture is a way of life, especially, the general custom and beliefs of a particular group of people at a particular time. Ngwa people as a group of Igbo speaking clan have a number of cultural practices. Notable among these cultural practices is that of ‘Female Father’.

The geographical location of the Ngwa people is captured in the following from Ngwa Community UK (April 1965:187, www.jstor.org/stable/1158231):

The area covering the old Aba division Ngwa, is situated in the tropical rain forest of southern Igbo plain in the present Abia State of Nigeria. It has a population of over one million people and an area of little over nine hundred square miles. The area is bounded on the north by the present Umuahia zone, on the west by Owerri and Mbaise, on the east by Ikot-Ekpene and Abak and on the south by Ukwu. The important waterways are the Imo River to the south and west, the Aba or Aza River that rises at Abayi, and flows south through Aba Township into the Imo River at a point near Okponton. Around Nsulu to the northeast, there are two minor rivers, the Otamiri and the Ohi. At no point does the land rise above an elevation of 50ft. The people are largely farmers, producing yams, cassava, cocoyam, maize and other tropical farm products. Major rural industries include garri and palm produce in addition to Akwete cloth weaving in which most women from Ihie area were engaged. The old divisional headquarters was Aba, a very important commercial and industrial center. Center of major population concentration includes Aba, Mgboko, Osisioma, Umuoba, Owerinta, Nbawsi (Nvosi) and Okpu-Alangwa.

Ngwa Igbo as a patriarchal society and similar to all Igbo tribes, believe in passing the family inheritance along the male line excluding the female. This socio-cultural belief leads to gender bias and prejudice. Such prejudice towards one gender over the other has taken a deep toll in the history of Ngwa land. In Ngwa land, every male child is expected to have a male child who will perpetuate his name even long after he has joined his ancestors. This is reflected in the choice of such names as *Ahamefule* (may my name never be lost), *Azubuike* (legacy is strength). Also in Ngwa land, the wealth of a man goes to his male children, never to the female children. As captured by Nmah (2011: 138), "...there is what is called ancestral land. The father gives it to his son. The son gives it to his own son. It is never paid for with money. Any son that does not inherit an ancestral land is seen as having been disowned." The absence of a male child in the family raises a problem of inheritance of the wealth of a man who is not survived by any male issue. In such scenario the man cannot pass on his property and it will revert to his brothers or other male relatives upon his death.

Amongst the Ngwa Igbo, a way out of this quandary, is the custom that allows woman to woman marriage. Urama (2019:1) declares "that "male daughters," "female husbands," and same-sex marriage among women in Igbo culture are cultural devised practices to solve the problems of impotency, barrenness, and male child succession or inheritance syndrome". In the past, woman-woman marriage was a mark of wealth and for economic exploitation and was popular in parts of Igboland in the second half of the 19th century as captured by Ekejiuba (1967) and Amadiume (1987). However, in most cases, women who married fellow women were either barren or had passed the childbearing age or have given up trying to have at least a male child of their own. Marriage in Igboland (Ngwa Igbo in focus), is regarded as futile and

a woman unfulfilled if there is no male child. This belief, however, places a woman in a state where she has to accept cultural practices that will make her get a male child she can call her own.

Jean (1998) has outlined three circumstances under which women take wives as 1.) Barren women take wives to gain rights over children produced 2.) Rich women accumulate wives to gain prestige and wealth in the same way men do through polygyny and 3.) Societies where women possess the right to have a daughter-in-law, a woman without a son may take a wife to give her a non-existent son. In such cases, woman to woman marriage acts as prerequisite for “female-father”. ‘Female father’ is a practice whereby a daughter, wife or widow ‘marries’ a woman (and pays the bride wealth) through several channels depending on the circumstances, the woman so married has the opportunity to become pregnant through the husband of her female husband, If he is still alive or through a selected male relative for the purposes having children to perpetuate the family lineage and rights to inheritance of the woman who married her.

The woman who pays the dowry, although a female, acts as a father to any child born by the wife she marries. The researcher observes that this culture is prevalent in all of Igbo land. The same culture has been observed amongst various Igbo groups like the Igbo in Okwelle clan of Ideato in Imo state, Mbaise Igbo also in Imo State, and the Ngwa Igbo in Abia State. The present study therefore examines this practice in Ngwa Igbo traditional society of Nigeria Where the husband of the Female-Father (that is the woman who goes to pay the dowry of another woman) is still alive and the she is either barren or have passed the age of childbearing without having a male-child, the wife ‘marries’ a woman, hands over the woman she married to her husband for another opportunity at attempting to

produce a male child. In this situation, the woman so married is not considered the wife of the man, but the wife of the woman who ‘married’ her even though she may meet the man with the consent of her female husband for procreation. She refers to her ‘female husband’ as her husband and may refer to the man as her father or uncle or any suitable nomenclature (oral interview, Eze Nwamara (2019). Children born by her are forbidden from addressing her as mother. The wife of the Female Father may be addressed as aunt, sister or any suitable nomenclature by those children biologically born by her under this arrangement and while in the marriage, her female husband is addressed by the children as their mother.

However, as Ezinne Ugonna, a native of Osusu in Isialangwa North LGA who granted us an interview pointed out that in families where there is peace and rapport amongst members of the family, circumstances may change. The female husband may relinquish her control of the woman she married and allow her free interaction with her husband and even address her as *nwunye di m* or *my husband’s wife*. Children born by her may address her as mother and rightfully so. Her joy is more complete in the fact that her husband has male children of his own who will perpetuate the family name. She can also decide to treat her as her wife this implies that the woman she married have no rights to her husband, she will be solely her wife (wife to the female father) and not her co-wife.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to examine

1. The practice of ‘Female Father’ in Ngwa-Igbo traditional society of Nigeria
2. To ascertain the significances of ‘Female Father’ practice in Ngwa-Igbo.

Methodology

The qualitative methodological approach involving ethnographic observations and oral interviews with 30 consultants was adopted. These consultants are born and bred in Ngwaland and have lived over 40 years in Ngwaland. They are comprised of farmers, elders, traditionally titled chiefs, village heads, educationists, traders, etc., aged 40-100 years. Data used in this study were collected from ¹²Obingwa, Isiala Ngwa , and Osisioma Local Governments Areas of Abia State. The data collected were descriptively analyzed.

Review of Literature

Woman-woman marriage is a prerequisite for implementing the Female Father practice and is not to be misconstrued as lesbianism. Woman-woman marriage in Ngwa land did not involve sexual relationship between the couple as opposed to lesbianism. Lesbianism involves a relationship in which a woman is romantically or sexually attracted only to other women. Duruamaku-Dim (2019) asserts the lesbianism is simply the practice of a female having sex with a fellow as opposed to males.

This is not the case with woman-woman marriage as practiced in Ngwa land. Several literature on woman-woman marriage. Egodi, Nwoko, Jean, Urama have touched this subject in diverse ways. While Urama (2019) “values and usefulness of same-sex marriage” discusses the importance of same-sex marriage, Egodi (2006) “Woman-woman marriage in Igbo Land” expresses a general view of the practice of woman womam marriage in Igbo land. Amadiume (1987) “Male Daughters and Female Husbands”, discusses concept of male daughters and the roles they play as female husbands to foster the family lineage while Nwoko (2012)

“female-husband in the southeast of Nigeria” focuses on the concept of Female father in the South East. The present study extends all of these with a focus on Female-Fathers in Ngwa land.

Female Father in Ngwa Land

In Ngwa land, the family constitutes the basis for their sociological organogram, thus, the family is viewed as a sacred institution. Family sometimes could refer to the nuclear family of a whole lineage ‘*onumara*’ (that is extended family) and whenever an Ngwa person talks of family ‘*Ezinaulo*’, he is referring to both nuclear family and extended ‘*Onumara*’ which includes even dead ancestors. The nuclear family unit ‘*Ezi*’ is headed by the father ‘*Nna*’, but in a compound where there are several nuclear family units it is referred to as ‘*Eziukwu*’. ‘*Eziukwu*’ consists of households whose members have a mutual and palpable decent through a patrilineal ancestor ‘*Umunna*’ while ‘*Onumara*’ is the largest extended family unit in Ngwa land (B.C Otuonye, informant 2019).

The central reason for marriage in Ngwa land is procreation. A marriage is said to be fruitless if for some reason they are not able to have children because children are believed to be a blessing from God ‘*Chukwu*’ to every family. The women are often held responsible in a case of childlessness, it is assumed that her childlessness is as a result of her reckless lifestyle before marriage or as an inherited curse from her family. For this reason, before marriage is contracted in Ngwa land, the families tend to make enquiries (*iju ajuju*) as he would look up to families whose history evidences good reproductivity. (B.C Otuonye 2019)

The present study focuses on the practice of ‘female father’ and its significance in Ngwa, Nigeria. It is the search for a male child that has made women engage in practices that will assure them of a male child. One of such practices is the female father.

According to Egodi (2006:3), "The over-riding goal for woman-woman marriage in Igboland was for women to have children through other women for inheritance purposes." This is also the driving force for woman-woman marriage in Ngwa land. According to Nwoko (2012)

In the Igbo world view, importance was attached to a male child more than a female or indeed any full grown woman. The obsession for a male child in every Igbo family, and in Africa generally stood as restriction to the efforts and further contributions of women. This cultural preference for the male child and restrictions against the female had hindered the development of women and denied them self-actualization. It is within this obsession for the male child that the 'pregnancy' or the concept of the female husband in Igbo land was conceived.

In the traditional Igbo society and in line with the patriarchal traditions, a man's genealogy and lineage were preserved in the personalities of his sons. According to this practice when a man was unable to have a male child, he appointed one of his daughters, in most cases the first daughter to stay back in the family and procreate. Igwe (2009) writes about himself in the following:

I hail from Mbaise in Imo State in Southern Nigeria. Traditionally, in my community, marriage is taken to be a union between a man and a woman as the case may be. But there are circumstances where a marriage between a woman and a woman is permissible. In a situation where a woman has no son or no child, if the husband dies, it is culturally allowed for her to marry a wife. And in this case, she becomes the husband. Like in every case of marriage, this

woman goes out, inquires and gets a wife of her choice. She pays her dowry and fulfills other traditional rites as it is done when a man is marrying a woman. After that, the woman brings her "wife" home and they start living together as "husband" and "wife." Nobody frowns at it. To have children, both the "woman-husband" and "woman-wife" will agree to allow a man from the same village or neighboring town to sleep with the wife. The children born by the wife bear the family name of the woman-husband, not that of the man responsible for the pregnancy. I want to add here that the men who sleep with such wives in most cases are married men. And normally it is regarded as immoral, in fact it is a taboo for a married man to sleep with or "father" children from another woman. But in this case an act normally taken to be immoral is allowed.

Amadiume (1987) has inferred that a man who did not have a son could pass land and trees to his daughters if the daughters were recognized by the society. To her, this translation from femalehood to malehood of the female child and the rights of "sons" could only be accomplished and recognized through rituals.

Nwoko (2012) adds that the practice of female father or female husband confers on female children the same rights without rituals. The daughter so conferred with such rights goes for what Nwoko refers to as *ikonwanna*, a male sex mate with whom to procreate. Alternatively, the daughter with such conferred rights chooses for herself a younger female who she takes in as wife by performing the traditional rites and paying the necessary bride price. In Ngwa land, this process occurs with a male member of the daughter's family leading the marriage process. The male member speaks to the

intending inlaws on behalf of the daughter who intends to pick a wife.

A wealthy woman may take a wife as captured, in Ngwa Igbo. This occurs if she is barren or if her husband died without a male child to continue the family lineage. Nwoko (year 2012) mentions the case in Mbaise Igbo where the female children of a family collectively paid the pride price of a younger woman after the demise of their father in the name of their eldest sister so that the new bride could procreate and raise male children to preserve the family lineage.

Regardless of the method, the reason for woman-woman marriage is for procreation, the young bride taken as wife is expected by her female husband to identify a well behaved young man from the kindred, but in most cases blood relation of the female husband as her bedmate. Nwoko (2012) notes that

This was of serious implications; firstly, it was believed that by so doing, the blood tie of that particular family was preserved; secondly, the family was sure that the young bride would not pollute the family by raising children fathered by miscreants, thieves or even persons with strange ailments. It was also to prevent the introduction of unwholesome and undesirable traits into the family

If the woman-woman union is blessed with a child, the daughter who has been conferred with the rights of malehood, automatically became the female father. She becomes the sociological father of any resulting offspring. The children belonged to the lineage of her father, not to their biological father. "Consequently, she played the role of the father, provider, protector and indeed all the functions and responsibilities enshrined in the patriarchal concept which included physical protection of the family and its territory, the male economic sphere, the spiritual sphere, the social sphere, etc". The

same holds true where the woman who picks the wife is a barren wife or a widow who is unable to produce male children for her husband.

Among the people of Ngwa, the female husband in theory enjoys equal status with her male kit and kin. Among her female mates, the *Umuada*, she is regarded as a man and *Okenwanyi* or (*nwaanyi* politics) in recent times. She is treated like a man. Her opinion is sought after and taken with high regards. The practice in Ngwa is similar to what Nwoko (2012:5) has outlined about other Igbo areas, in any ceremony, she enjoyed equal privilege with her male counterparts and in some Igbo communities like Uguta, she could break kola nut, but only among her female folks. She also combined both secular and spiritual functions and obligations. She participated in secret rituals and sometimes associated with the male elders in communal rituals.

Similar to the oral interview by Nwoko (2012), the female father's limitations show up from the emotional and biological realities. While her wife went out in search of a bedmate, it was also expected that she had a male companion, usually known as *dinwanna*, who satisfied her erotic desires and supported her when the biological realities became inevitable. As is elsewhere in Igboland, in Ngwa, it was not expected of the female father at this time to get pregnant or seen openly with any man since as Nwoko (2012) concludes, "she had crossed the maternal Rubicon." Any offspring directly from her is considered illegitimate and an outcast and treated as such. Unlike the children from her wife, her direct offspring will not enjoy or share from any communal inheritance. We discovered that in the three core areas of Ngwa land, female father is a general practice. A situation where a barren woman or a woman without a male child goes out to marry a younger woman to have children with her husband on her Behalf. This is because of

the high value the Ngwa people and Igbo land in general place on children, especially on the male child. The people believe that male children are very indispensable for the continuation of the ancestral line and inheritance. Mere (1973) concludes that the reality of family extinction cannot be ducked where children are not forthcoming.

It is seen as an abomination when a family has no male child to carry on the ancestral line. This is expressed in names like *Nweze* (child king), *Nwabueze* (child is king), *Nwakaego* (child is bigger than money). The family is the most fundamental and the primary social institution which must be sustained through the male child. On this note, every family seeks a way to have children especially male children and because adoption was not rampant like it is today, the female father relationship became the only option for most families. Female father can also be seen as woman to woman marriage. In our interaction, we discovered that the marriage is contracted like in a normal marriage between a man and a woman but in this case, the woman in need of a child goes in search of a suitable girl to marry, and she can also talk to her friends to help in the search and wooing the girl, this is because most of the times, it is difficult for a girl to accept a marriage proposal from a fellow woman, for this reason, the searchlight is beamed on girls with a social disability, whose chance of getting their own husband is slim.

These social disability include a girl who got pregnant out of wedlock (*ime okwa*), or already had a child – in this case, the girl will be married along with the child. A girl whose family finds it very difficult to fend for themselves, can also be a suitor like in the case of Allen Madukoma, a native of Isiala Ngwa whose wife was not able to conceive, she married Victoria, a girl from *Umuojima* whose father died long ago leaving his family to fend for

themselves. Victoria was quick to consent to the marriage as that will ensure she gets a better life.

We interviewed many cases of such marriages in our research, we got many similar cases but for this article we will only look at different situation that lead to such marriages.

Selected Circumstances of Female Father in Ngwa Land

Here we will look at information gathered from natives in different areas in Ngwa land. From Ananaba's family of Ugwunabo in Ngwa, their daughter Nwanyidiya got married to Mazi Eze. The union produced nine daughters and no male child. She and her husband had already acquired lands and wealth over the years. After her husband passed on, she knew that neither she nor her daughters could inherit those properties, as tradition demands that right to inheritance rests on the male child. To ensure that their wealth will not be rubbished by their extended family and outsiders, she decided to marry a woman to have children for her. She went back to her hometown and married one of her sister Ugochi, who in turn had male children. Today, though Nwanyidiya and Eze are both dead, Ugochi still lives in the compound with her children and control the entire wealth of Mazi Eze.

Ogechi is a wife to a woman, Daa Helen. Daa Helen married Ogechi just to have male children to carry on the family's ancestral line. Ogechi told us that she wasn't good in academics at all even though her family was well to do and tried everything possible to make sure she got basic education, all to no avail. She was the last daughter of her family but not the last child because her mother had twin boys after her. She admitted to have spent so many years in primary one that her parents were advised to withdraw her from school. She resorted to joining her parents in farm work, an endeavor she engaged in for many years. When her mates and

friends started getting married and leaving to their new homes, she felt like she had been left behind. Then, her family got a marriage proposal from Daa Helen of Ituukpa. Daa Helen had been married for 15 years without a child. She contacted her friends from nearby villages who told her about Ogechi. When Ogechi's family accepted Daa Helen's marriage proposal, Ogechi's bride wealth was paid as per tradition. She is very happy and excited to share with us that she already has 2 sons and will have more.

We discovered that this a general practice and totally acceptable in Ngwa land. It helps to alleviate the pains of childlessness in families. It gives the wife of the female father room to be in her matrimonial home as she may not be able to find a good man of her own hence the saying '*E mee nwanji ka emere ibe ya, obi adi ya mma*. (If a woman is treated like her mates, she feels happy). In Ngwa and Igbo Land in general, at a point in a girl's life, the society demands she has to leave her father's house to her husband's house. If she cannot find a man to marry her, she is subjected to all manner of indirect and even direct ridicule by her family and society at large. Therefore, if a girl is not married for any reason at that stage, she doesn't feel happy. This makes her accept any proposal of marriage whether from a male or from a female.

Despite all the advantages female father offers, we still find some disadvantage to it. One major incidence that gave rise to female father in Ngwa is that women do not have rights to inheritance. In 2004, a long legal battle that challenged the age long tradition of the Igbo custom that disinherits women from their father's inheritance began in Umuahia after the death of a certain Ukeje. After a decade, the legal battle was concluded by the apex court, the Supreme Court in Nigeria. The ruling would change the Igbo world. Women of Igbo decent now have right to inherit their father's property. However, despite this milestone ruling by the apex

court, little was expected to change in the Igbo culture. The overwhelming resistance that met this ruling was widespread across the Igbo community. Igwe Simeon Osi Itodo, the traditional ruler of Aji Autonomous Community in Igbo-Eze North Local Government Area of Enugu State, told Vanguard that the Supreme Court ruling will not change the custom of Ndigbo, and any effort to enforce it will bring chaos.”

Igwe Christopher Nnamani (2012) of Likke Iheaka, in Igbo-Eze South Local Government Area of Enugu State, who added his voice to the development, said the Igbo custom that denies females’ right to their fathers’ property has been unfair, and needs to be changed. But he acknowledged that it would be difficult to introduce something new in place of the old custom.” Despite the Supreme Court ruling in 2015, the Igbo community still continues to resist any attempt to modify the standing tradition of disentanglement of women from their father’s inheritance and the average Igbo woman does not anticipate inheriting any estate of her parents, based on the age-long customs that make male children statutorily entitled to such.

Therefore, many families still continue to seek ways to have their own male children who will inherit their property and perpetuate the family lineage. The researcher observes that this practice is only now more prevalent amongst the uneducated female in the society. Modern day technology has provided alternative methods for women who seek to have their own children.

Though we gathered that amidst the joy and fulfillment the arrangement of female-father brings to the parties involved, it also has some disadvantages. There are cases where the wife refuses the man that was chosen for her thereby neglecting the instructions of her female-husband who has no choice but to tolerate her wife’s excesses because she needs an heir. There are cases where the wife

is maltreated by the daughters of the family because she is an illiterate or mentally unsound. The mere fact that the wife so married does not usually make a choice of a male mate for herself encourages promiscuity especially when the male mate handed to her does not fulfill her desires. The wife so married may begin to feel like a lord and savior with an over-bloated ego especially if she successfully gives birth to male children that her female-husband could not. She may even begin to have overbearing influence even over her female-husband.

Sometimes, the bond between her and the husband of her female-husband (or *di nwe ulo*) may become stronger than the bond between that of the father of the house (*di nwe ụlọ*) and her female husband spurring jealousy in her female-husband with dire consequences if the family is not a peaceful one. There may be consequential stigma and ridicule of the children borne out of these kind of union. Where care is not taken, strange genes may be introduced into a family that may lead to strange traits, sicknesses, etc. Close relatives and even the larger community where these children are born, may make them objects of ridicule at a later time in life aided with the knowledge of the origin of such children. This scenario usually affects the self-esteem of such children.

In the modern world, where lesbianism is taking hold, woman-woman marriage may encourage lesbianism leading to cases where women may marry for pleasure rather than for procreation. Worse cases also include situations where the wife married by the female husband is also unable to conceive male children. In such cases, the quest for male child continues. Cases of a futile search for a male child have been narrated by some of the respondents. Such a family is regarded as a lost compound, *ama nchiri echi*. In conclusion, we suggest that *ndị Ngwa* and *Igbo land* in general heed to the court ruling which gives the girl child right of

inheritance as this will bring to an end the obsession for a male child which gives rise to different forms of marriages.

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Appendix: Personal Communication

Name	Age	Village	Date of interview
Chief B.C Otuonye	80	Obichukwu 1-Isialangwa	17/3/2021
Allen Madukoma,	61	Osusu 1-Isialangwa	20/3/2021
Victoria,	40	Umuojima-Isialangwa	20/3/2021
Chief Ananaba	85	Obegu- Osisoma	8/3/2022
Daa Helen	60	Ituukpa-Obingwa	8/3/2022
Ogechi	40	Umuitiri-Osisoma	8/3/2022
Daa Roseline	69	Obeaja-Osisoma	8/3/2022
Dee Ikechi	70	Ovungwu-Isialangwa	8/3/2022
Deede Agu	70	Osusu- Isialangwa	8/3/2022
Eli Nwamkpa	87	Umuobikwa-Obingwa	13/4/2022