

# NWANYI WUIHE: IN THE LIGHT OF THE IGBO SOCIAL WORLD

Dr. Dominic N. Obielosi,  
Department of Religion and Human Relations  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University,  
Awka, Anambra State  
E-mail: [dobielosi@yahoo.com](mailto:dobielosi@yahoo.com); Phone: 08032776139

Mary Emilia Aboekwe  
Department of Religion and Society  
Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University,  
Igbaram, Anambra State  
E-mail: [emiliachy@gmail.com](mailto:emiliachy@gmail.com); Phone: 08039328992

## Abstract

*In Igbo social setting, male child traditionally is preferred to female child. Igbo society is gender sensitive and patriarchal in nature. Even at birth, warm welcome and special recognition are accorded to male child as against the female counterpart. Male child is perceived as sustainers of lineage, holders of central and most important positions of authority and inheritors of immovable properties. Early in life, male child is made to understand that he is superior to the female. Thus, mothers wish to give birth to a male child as that will properly entrench her to her husband's heart. On the other hand, men are joyous because he has a man that will take his place after his death and continue his family line. This paper therefore argues that urbanization has drastically changed this pattern of old belief. It is observed in the contemporary society that female child takes appropriate care of her parents more than male child. Parents prefer spending holidays in their daughters' house as against the male child. This paper advocates value for female children because of their role in the society. Both male and female children must be equally empowered economically and psychologically.*

**Keywords:** Female, Male, patriarchal, Gender Issue, Igbo Society

## Introduction

*Nwanyiwuihe* (a woman worths something) is a name given to a female child in Igbo traditional society. In the name, one hears a challenging question: 'who says that women worth nothing?' *Nwanyiwuihe* is a screaming riposte. In Igbo society, naming is not ordinary; it is an embodiment of meanings. Experience in life of parents or the wider society informs the name given to a child. Names are not merely tags by which individuals may be distinguished, but are intimately associated with various events in the life of the individual as well as those of the family and the larger social groups.

*Nwanyiwuihe* in this case is a subtle way of telling the society that women worth something

just like men are ascribed. According to Nwankwo (2014) in an unpublished paper, there is vehement protest packed into the name. Invariably, a child named *Nwanyiwuihe* could be the last child out of the many daughters of her parents. In this case, one could figure out the frustration behind the name.

Igbo society is gender sensitive. For many reasons, male child is preferred to female child. This remained one of the most lasting cultural values among the Igbo. Akpon (1995) asserts that this phenomenon is evident in societies where male child is accorded special recognition and higher status relative to the female counterpart. This distinction arises because of certain beliefs and practices which assert that male child is the sustainer of lineage, holder of central and most often important positions of authority and inheritor of immovable properties. According to Isiugo-Abanihe (1993), the Igbo with very few exceptions are patrilineal and attach strong significance to male-determined and dominated structure. He highlights the situation more vividly thus:

A man who died without a son lived a worthless life; he is inherited by his brothers, and is soon forgotten since his branch of the family tree has ended ... Also, in traditional Igbo society, the status of a man is assessed in part by the number of his sons, a man with many sons is viewed as a wealthy or an accomplished man; his neighbours cautiously avoid confrontation or litigation with him; he is assured of a befitting burial at death. For a woman, the birth of a male child is of paramount importance as well, because it establishes her firmly in the family. She is said to have “taken root” or “established a solid foundation” when the first son arrives. Since the birth of a son ensures marital security, given the prevailing high childhood mortality, just a son is not enough. The desire to ensure that at least one survives his father encourages prolific childbearing ... (p. 6).

Worthiness of a man legitimacy of marriage is properly established with birth of a male child. It is apparent that the quest for such legitimacy motivates women to continue bearing children in anticipation of the 'desired male child' even in conditions that threaten their lives (Arkutu, 1995). The outcome of this quest for a male child often leads to high maternal mortality and morbidity. Moreover, as Ottong (1991) and Ekong (1988) observe that preference for the male child warrants men marrying many wives, which in turn leads to large family size. According to Nwokocha (2003) when this is the case, family planning programmes and the need for adequate birth spacing are undermined. Werner et al., (1995) analyzing the above scenario note that there is great danger for women who carry many pregnancies to die in childbirth leaving many children motherless. The situation is worsened in communities that lack adequate maternal health facilities to cater for complications and emergencies.

In the traditional Igbo setting, women are not counted when it comes to inheritance and continuation of family name. It is counted a grave loss when a man is devoid of a male child to carry on the family name, lineage and inheritance. All the man's achievements will then be inherited by extended family, who will not even remember the man anymore. Without a male issue, life seemed like a social suicide. In order to avoid this, couples went all length to get male children. Men married more than one wife, some daughters felt compelled to bear children out of wedlock in order to bequeath a male issue to their parents.

### **Woman's Place in the Contemporary Igbo Society**

Detailed study and critical thinking nullifies the notion which says that in Igbo society, both in traditional and contemporary setting; women are simply not cherished or reckoned with. Gone are the days of such reckoning. It is obvious that in contemporary Igbo setting, things have drastically changed as to the perception of female child. These changes are the center of our discussion in this paper. The good news is that things are changing, and fast too. In a landmark judgment on April 11, 2014, the Supreme Court of Nigeria upheld the right of women to inherit property from their parents (Mrs. Lois Chituru Ukeje and Mrs. Gladys Ada Ukeje). The judgment states thus:

No matter the circumstances of the birth of a female child, such a child is entitled to an inheritance from her later father's estate. Consequently, the Igbo Customary Law, which disentitles a female child from partaking in the sharing of her deceased father's estate, is in breach of Section 42(1) and (2) of the Constitution, a fundamental rights provision guaranteed to every Nigerian.

This judgment is quite apt when the society has come to realize the importance of female child in the society and particularly in the home. It is interesting that those involved in the above narrated case are in Igbo region. Consequently, the judgment is therefore a new element that will initiate faster evolution of Igbo culture and other cultures that deny women the right of inheritance.

Significant though the Supreme Court judgment is, there are other changes that are taking place that show that for parents, daughters are better insurance for the future than sons. It is now a known fact that parents and siblings do not feel as comfortable and at ease in their married son's or brother's house as in their married daughter's or sister's house. This assertion is confirmed in an interview with a friend. According to him, though the wives of his brothers are wonderful people, but the joy of being in their homes cannot be compared to being in his sister's home. He also observed that the siblings of his brother-in-law do not visit as often. May be, they feel more at home with their sister just as he feels more at home with his own sister. Thus, the changes that have taken place make the home the woman's turf. It makes the daughter's home more like an extension of her parent's home and her parents and siblings feel more welcome and more at ease there than the parents and siblings of the husband. Someone jokingly, although with understandable exaggeration, proposed a hypothesis that 90% of grandparents staying for an extended period in Europe, America and in the big cities in Nigeria are staying in their daughter's homes. By implication, parents have more and better chances of being taken care of and of traveling to places with their children's family if they have daughters than if they have only sons. This represents a sea change in culture. Our effort is to put this change in perspective and thus show that *Nwanyiwuihe* can now be asserted not in vehement protest but as a statement of fact.

### **The Home: From a Man's to a Woman's Domain**

Old age is one of the main challenges that colour the valuation of male and female children in traditional Igbo society. Being patrilocal, wives moved in to the family of their husbands. This means that the female children of a man would marry out and join their husbands' family when they grow up. If a couple is to have only female children, they will not have any of their children living with them in their old age. However, they could have their grand-children

living with them. But these would not be capable of taking the important decisions and providing the care needed by the elderly. Such parents would therefore be faced with the prospect of going over to live with their in-laws in their old age. In the traditional setting, this is unthinkable. But the problem weighed more on the women than on the men. With polygamy, men marry more than one wife. This ensures that they will have male children to take over the homestead and take care of the parents in their old age.

But things have changed. The core thing that changed is that the home has become the domain of the woman rather than of the man. The consequence is that daughters are now better placed to take care of their parents. Three factors are to be highlighted that precipitate this change. First is the supplanting of polygamy by monogamy, second is the changes in the architecture of the home and the third is urbanization with greater population mobility.

### **Supplanting of Polygamy by Monogamy**

In the pre-colonial and colonial era, the commonest type of marriage being practiced is Polygamy. This type of marriage continues because economically it enriches men who are farmers by providing them cheap labour. There are multiple wives, many children, extended family members to provide essential services in the farming practice. With modernization and globalization, agriculture gradually steps aside for the formal labour market. Most men who are now civil servants no longer cherish polygamy because of their merger resource. Comparative studies from Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania show that monogamous households have taken a greater hold on society (Bigombe & Khadiagala, 1990). Among the Igbo of Nigeria, polygamy seems to be declining as the strength of the conjugal relationship predominates over other family and community relationships (Bigombe & Khadiagala, 1990). Poor economic conditions in the society, education, change of occupation from agriculture to the formal labour market, religion, and modernization are some of the factors that yield the rise of monogamous over polygamous marriage. This therefore has changed the Igbo marriage and family patterns.

### **Architecture of the Home**

Besides functionality, every architectural design embodies an idea or vision. Polygamy gives rise to an architectural design that is prevalent in traditional society. I remember my grand-father's homestead. It is a large compound with several huts. It has a compound wall with one main gate and another inconspicuous door to the back of the compound. My grand-father's hut faces the main gate. He has direct view of the gate and sees whoever was entering the compound. His hut was placed in a way to highlight his authority and to enable him exercise his role as the protector of his family. He has four wives and the huts of the wives are arranged in a horse-shoe shape around his hut. Each of the huts has a smaller living room that doubled as sleeping area. Behind these huts are the kitchens for the wives and the pen for their goats. The yam barn is constructed in one corner. In the afternoons, my grand-father provides yam to the wives and the wife whose turn it is to feed him will make sure that she brings him cooked food at the appropriate times.

Attention to this architectural design and way of life shows that just as the man's hut is the command and control center of the homestead and the women's huts are oriented towards his,

the man is indeed the head of the family in a way that justified the traditional appellation for him, '*nna anyi ukwu*' or '*oga anyi*.' He is the big father and the home is his domain. His several wives jostle for his favour. Of course, he has his obligations to them too. In this arrangement, it is unthinkable for his father-in-law for whatever reason to have an extended period of stay in his daughter's place of marriage. However, there is no reason for such extended stay because daughters marry into families from neighbouring villages within walking distances. In-laws can visit and go back conveniently same day.

### **Urbanization with Greater Population Mobility**

Urbanization brings about a huge shift and affects even the architecture and mobility of members of the community. With the introduction of new economic activities, people are drawn away from their villages to these places of new economic opportunities. New architectural designs arise in these urban centres. These designs change over time. Initially, at the city centres, the building plan is what is known today as 'face-me-I-face-you.' Single rooms are arranged facing each other with an open court-yard in the middle. All the tenants share the kitchen and the restrooms. A man and his wife live in one room or rented two adjacent rooms, using one as living room and the other as sleeping area. Gradually, block of flats become the vogue. Each family unit has a flat with a number of rooms and all the conveniences. While there are still buildings designed this way, members of the upper class have duplexes where a family unit has the whole house to itself. But nothing in all these different forms comes close to the traditional architectural system described above as regards the mechanism of the distribution of power between the husband and the wife. All the new architectural designs brought husband and wife spatially together. Often they share the same room. Those men, who, for whatever reason, marries a second wife, often keeps one in the village and lives with one in the city. All these show a radical departure from the traditional architecture and the values it upholds.

Unlike in the village where all are farmers, and husbands and wives often work side by side in the farm; in the city men often have jobs that keep them away from home most of the day if not many days at a time. When the man is absent most of the time, the upkeep and control of the home slowly devolved to the woman. The home became the woman's domain and only those who are at ease in the woman's orbit of influence feel welcome. Inasmuch as the woman may be a wonderful person, visits from the parents and siblings of the husband are more likely to be stressful for both parties. Having different family traditions, the daughter-in-law treads cautiously so as not to be found wanting by the parents-in-law or other relatives of her husband. These on the other hand, tend to become hypersensitive so as not to appear as intruding into the privacy of their son's or sibling's family. But this sensitivity and stress are absent with regard to the bride's family. The wife's parents and siblings can therefore afford to spend extended periods of time in their daughter's home. With the man's parents and siblings not drawing very close, it is often the problems, the opinions and ideals of the wife's family that gets to the man's attention. To keep his wife happy and maintain family harmony, he has to attend to them first and sometimes only to them. The man's parents and siblings are often left to pick the crumbs. This in itself is not tragic. If they have a daughter, the dynamics will hopefully work in their favour in their daughter's home. Those who have discovered these dynamics affirm the worth of women and their daughters with their hearts and soul. They

affirm that 'nwanyiwuihe.'

### Hyphenated Surnames

It is interesting that women have become bearers and transmitters of their family names. Evidence of this is in the growth in the popularity of hyphenated surnames. The wife's family name is hyphenated with her husband's family name. Two examples readily come to mind, Ngozi Okonjo-Iwuala and late Professor Mirriam Ikejiani-Clark of University of Nigeria. In my estimation, this trend will continue and may even be supplanted soon by women who retain their full family name. More women settle down in marriage after their studies or after making their career. They need to retain their family names in order to avoid the complication of having to clarify their identity.

### Conclusion

In sum, the table has turned. Those factors that pressured Igbo men in traditional society to treasure male children as if these worth more than female children are pressuring them in the other way. Daughters are to be trusted more to care for their parents. The laws of Nigeria defend their right to inheritance and they can transmit the family name. We can therefore simply state without any hint of protest 'Nwanyibuihe.'

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