

ANDROCENTRICISM IN IGBO FEMALE RITES OF PASSAGE: AN EXAMPLE OF THE *INE-EZI* OF THE ANAM OF ANAMBRA STATE, SOUTHEAST, NIGERIA

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Abstract

People of all cultures have remarkable emotional attachment to the stages of physical or social transformations that occur in their lives. These notable transitions such as initiations into adulthood and marriages are celebrated with fanfare, which often varies in degree, from one culture to the other. This study examined the pre-marriage tutelage phase of girls' passage rites of the Igbo people. The *Ine-Ezi* girls' passage rites of the Anam people of Igboland were examined as an example of Igbo girls' passage rites. Primary and secondary sources were employed to understand and the meanings, import and essence of the *Ine-Ezi* girls' rites of passage among the Anam people of Igboland.

Keywords: Girls-rites of passage, Patriarchy, Igboland, *Ine-Ezi*, pre-marriage tutelage

Introduction

There is no gainsaying the fact that people of all cultures have deepened emotional attachment to the stages of physical or social transformations that occur in their lives. These transitions such as initiations into adulthood, priesthood and marriage are celebrated with fanfare which may vary in degree according to the diverse cultures. Although different forms rites of passage had existed for different transitional purposes in various societies and traditions, it was Genep who first explicated on the concept in his book *Les Rites de Passage* (1909). In his book, Genep examines the

ceremonies that accompany the transitions that individuals make between various life stages. Rites of passage, therefore, denotes the various rituals and ceremonies that are structured by different societies for the marking of transitions from one social or religious status to another. These rituals are used to celebrate and mark life cycles such as puberty, marriage and death. Gennep distinguishes three sequential stages of rites of passage as separation, transition/liminality and incorporation (Gennep xi). He observes that, “For every one of these events there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined” (Gennep 3). The separation in passage rites is the phase “in which the individual is symbolically removed from society and his own identity”.

The liminality, is that stage in which the individual is secluded from society and is under constant supervision; and the incorporation phase, in which the individual is reintegrated into the society with his new statuses” (culturalstudiesnow.blogspot.com, 2012). Later on, Victor Turner was to draw on Gennep’s triadic stages of rites of passage, and defines the second phase termed “liminality” as “the manner in which society uses space to evolve through rites of passage.” He explains that rites of passage are structured by society, and marked not just for the individual participant’s transformation, but it is also important for the facilitation of collective social change. (Krasner, 2000). Turner notes that the fundamental role of rites of passage is aimed at effecting social change. Passage rituals are thus, celebrated to prepare the participants for nobler statuses with the expectation that they and the entire society will benefit from their new statuses and roles. The quest to examine how these rites impact on individual participants, in term of their

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perceived self-image and how society benefits from their transformations necessitated this research.

This study examined the content of girls' rites of passage in Igboland. The *Ine-Ezi* girls' passage rites of the Anam people of Anambra State, Southeast, Nigeria. The pre-marriage tutelage session of the ceremony is examined to determine the significance of the rite and how it helps to equip the participants for their next stage of life. Its overall essence to society is also noted. Though, all the phases of *Ine-Ezi* rites of passage are analysed here, more attention was paid to the pre-marriage tutelage phase, since it is the stage at which the participants get secluded and instructed with the lessons on the ideals of marriage, which is the overall goal of the rites. Granted that rites of passage are primarily considered to be effective means of preparing people for significant social and religious roles, their plots are differently structured in line with the ceremonies being celebrated and their purposes. "Rites of separation are prominent in funeral ceremonies, rites of incorporation at marriages. Transition rites may play an important part, for instance in pregnancy, betrothal, and initiation..." (Gennep, 11). The ceremony being celebrated and its purpose determines the degree at which any of the three phases/stages of rites of passage is heightened. The purpose and expectations of girls' passage rites among the Igbo people require that pre-marriage tutelage phase be the most formal of all the phases. It is the liminal phase of many girls' rites among the Igbo people. Liminality according to Turner is the stage of rites of passage at which participants are withdrawn from "the wider society – men, women, adolescents...to raise them to a higher rung of some structural ladder, inwardly transformed to match their outward elevation" (Krasner, 452). At this stage, the girl-participant is placed under supervision and tutelage of an

older woman who watches and instructs her on cultural expectations of an Igbo wife. Gender is therefore a determinant of which passage rites one participates in. It is also true that a complete scheme of rites of passage theoretically includes the three stages of passage, “in specific instances these types are not always equally important or equally elaborated” (Gennep, 11). This is to say that the purpose of a rite dictates which of the triadic phases is given more prominence during the rites. Female rites of passage in Igbo society offers pre-marriage tutorial instructions which the girl is expected to abide as a wife. It is aimed at preparing girls for marriage (Chukueggu 8). Pre-marriage tutelage is therefore an exclusively a females’ affair among the Igbo people.

Girls’ Passage Rites among the Igbo People

As it is with other similar cultures in the world, girls’ rites of passage among the Igbo traditional people are used to mark the transition of the adolescent girl into womanhood. They are particularly “used to mark the socially recognized transition to sexual maturity. Among some of the indigenous societies of Africa and Australia, intentionally painful genital surgery has been an integral part of such rites of passage” (Dennis O’Neil, 2007). But while the transitional process for girls in many traditions is accompanied by genital mutilations, boys’ rites of passage to new status in some cultures are yet more severe than for girls. In addition to other painful undertakings, ...the cattle herding Barabaig culture of East Africa, the boys’ heads are shaved and their foreheads are cut with three deep horizontal incisions from ear to ear. This scarification leaves permanent scars that identify a male as

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having received “gar”. Sometimes, the incisions are deep enough to show up on the skulls. (O’Neil, 2007).

But contrariwise to those of the boys with their excruciating processes, the girls’ rites of passage are embodied with some enticing and elating processes. “Many Native American societies publicly celebrated a girl’s first menses. For instance, the parents of girls among the Luiseno Indians of Southern California proudly announced to the community that their daughters were beginning to menstruate and becoming a woman” (O’Neil, 2007). Similarly, girls’ transition rites such as *Igba-Nja* of the Awka people of Anambra State of Nigeria is designed to nourish and beautify the participants. Its processes involved the use of *uvie*, (red camwood) in scrubbing the participant’s skin to reveal a suppler and more radiant skin; the painting and designing of her body with *uli* liquid make-up, and finally the adornment of her legs with *nja* (brass anklets). This means that for a girl to participate in the *Igba-Nja* festival, her parents must be materially wealthy. The processes required the buying of exclusive food items for the feeding of the isolated participants by the facilitators (who were contracted for that purpose), and the buying of accessories and clothing needed for the *igba-nja* outing.

Regardless of the accompanying fattening room practice however, the beautification and adornment sessions entrenched in most female passage rites of the various areas of Igbo land, the common aim is to tutor a girl for marriage. They embody Van Gennep’s sequential stages of rites of passage namely; separation, transition and incorporation. The fattening room performance is the separation period which is succeeded by the pre-marriage tutorial (transition/liminal). The transition experienced during the pre-marriage tutorial

progresses into the final sequence termed incorporation (marriage) by Gennep. The female participant having undergone these phases of passage is then considered due for marriage.

Pre-marriage tutelage is therefore a common and quintessential aspect of female passage rites of the Igbo people. It entails the structuring of a marriageable girl with instructions on how to cook, how to manage a home, and most importantly on how to be submissive to her husband; it is believed that a submissive wife sustains her marriage. Ezenweke, Elizabeth O. recalling the import of rites of passage as an efficacious step in the building of ideal family, decries its disappearance in the itinerary of most Igbo people's lives' journey in contemporary times. She laments that:

...the marriage institution which used to be held with utmost care and moral decorum due to the various rites and rituals attached to it has been reduced to mere social union. The resultant effects have been witnessed in the incessant marital crises and broken homes in many parts of Igbo land (Ezenweke 21).

She blames these anomalies on the neglect of the importance of puberty rites as an effective means of preparing young people for marriage (21). Ewwierhoma, Mabel I. E., however, warns that it is important to ensure that the result of such grooming does not further gender adversity which excludes any affirmation of the woman's ideal position (8). Gayle Austin also remarks that, feminist theory means paying attention and making some mechanisms visible. It means taking nothing for granted. He believes that the things we take for granted are usually those constructed from the point of

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view of patriarchy (1). Austin's position on not taking anything for granted is a critical standpoint which provides a framework for this study.

The reexamination of the tutelage session of female rites passage is therefore imperative. The emphasis and demand on the submissiveness of the wife to the husband appears at the end to reduce and stifle the participant's self-esteem. This is because female submissiveness in the Igbo context denotes unquestionable subservience to the male. Anedo observes that Igbo tradition often devalues and exploits the female at the expense of their male counterparts (141). Hence, many activities of the traditional Igbo man is aimed at enforcing the privileging of masculinity. Yam crop which is considered a masculine crop is thus held in high esteem and dignity whereas, the so-called feminine crops such as cassava and cocoyam must not be planted on the same farmland concurrently with the yam crop. Oha explaining the Igbo philosophy of masculinity and privileging of the male among the people, draws an analogy between yam crop and the Igbo masculinity. Associating yam crop with masculinity he observes that:

In fact, men in traditional Igbo society were so very protective of the yam they had planted that they prevented their wives from planting any other crop like maize and cassava early on the same farm until their yam had grown adequately and would not be in disadvantaged position in competing for nutrients with these other crops...in many cases, cassava, the female crop, either came later into the farm to share space with the yam during the farming season (Oha 277).

It thus appears that the Igbo man, unsure of the ability of the yam crop to survive in the face of competition with the feminine crops, takes measures to protect it from being outdone by the female crops. Inferring from Oha's explanations, one could say that just as the yam crop is privileged against the feminine crops, pre-marriage tutelage was also structured to check and prune the inherent potentials of females that could threaten the ideal place of males in the family. It seems to be a measure drawn up to check the female and contract her to "fit" into the male's archetypal female. In other words, the Igbo traditional man being unsure of his abilities to excel more than the female in the face of "competitions", had tactically drawn up measures to check her ego and potentials. Through these measures embedded in customs and traditions (which are enforced by patriarchy), the Igbo female is manipulated and emasculated from her potentials just as the feminine crops have been denied the chance to compete with the male yam so that male dominance may continue. According to Oha, "A man that takes a wife takes a challenge to prove his manhood...A man cannot be a man when he has no voice in his family, when his wife determines what has to be done" (Oha 277).

Though the significance of rites of passage as viable means of transition into various life's cycles cannot be entirely dismissed, female rites of passage as structured by the Igbo tradition appears to enforce androcentricism. Androcentricism as defined by Dobie, is a "term used to describe attitudes, practices, or social organizations that are based on the assumption that men are the model of being" (124). Also corroborating Dobie's definition, Bailey, LaFrance and Dovidio describe androcentricism as "the propensity to center society around men and men's needs,

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priorities, and values and to relegate women to the periphery” (1). It is therefore not surprising that while the modern Igbo woman struggles through various means to free herself from the shackles of objectionable dehumanizing traditions like widowhood rites, girl-child marriage and female genital mutilation, the subjugation of the female gender among the Igbo has persisted. Ezenwanebe in her investigation of the role of women in Ahmed Yerima’s plays notes that, “Bondage persists only when the enslaved is not aware of his or her predicament; or being aware, lacks the potentials for freedom” (Ezenwanebe 186). Regrettably, those humiliating acts through which females are suppressed are founded on tradition. Obnoxious acts such as the widowhood rites, female genital mutilation among others are embedded in the people’s tradition. So, the uncritical mind might not perceive them as avenues intended to concretize male supremacy. Femininity presupposes societal conception of attributes associated with female gender. Gender being “entirely socially rooted” (Butler 142) as observed by Judith Butler, has been argued to be the chief determinant of femininity. Ayakoroma, F. Barclays affirms that:

Gender roles are culture-based, in the sense that they are theoretical constructs involving a set of social and behavioural norms that, within a specific culture, are widely considered to be socially appropriate for individuals of a specific sex...different cultures have very different norms of maleness and femaleness; they have different expectations for the two basic sexes” (Ayakoroma 15).

Ayakoroma gives an understanding of gender roles and classification as he reiterates that, “In most parts of Nigeria...the woman has her place in the society, distinct

from the man. What obtains in most ethnic groups is that she cannot talk or act, like a man, at any point in time” (Ayakoroma 15).

These and many other patriarchally engendered notions are what most female passage rites among the Igbo are designed to inculcate in the participants. The participants who have been brought up with the consciousness of divinity and the retributions that precede disobedience to tradition; swallow these notions hook, line and sinker. Osuji Ijeoma observes that the stifling of female productivity, talents and creative energies “...result[s] when females attempt strict conformity to patriarchal ideals of normative femininity” Submissiveness of a woman in Igbo society denotes the female’s active acknowledgement of the supremacy of the male and her undiluted submission to his authority. But while the woman is moulded to abide by the rules which negate her self-actualization, male rites of passage such as the *iwa-akwa* of the Imo area of Igboland aims to extend male dominance by bequeathing men with qualities that boost their self-confidence, as opposed to what obtains in the female rites of passage. The examination of the phases of the *Ine-Ezi* female rites of passage of the Anam people of the Omambala area of Anambra state reveals some obnoxious cultural practice

Women who have undergone pre-marriage tutelage do not only live in accordance with the ideals of patriarchy but, also become carriers of androcentricism which does not only relegate them to the background but also “position[s] men as the gender-neutral standard while marking women as gender-specific” (Bailey, LaFrance and Dovidio, 1) Attesting to Igbo women’s collaboration in enforcing gender differentiation, Oha exhilarates that:

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As a man, why wouldn't I be fascinated with this theory of masculinity as the fortress and the *panopticon*, a theory that my father, my uncles, and even my mother, spent all my growing years trying to inculcate in me through various narratives and cultural engagements? ...It is just easy to imbibe this philosophy of *nwokeness* because it is the privileged mode of thinking and indeed the centre of one's cultural education! (Oha 279).

Nwokeness is the term used by Oha to refer to Igbo philosophy of masculinity. He attests that male privileging is the notion many Igbo men "have received as part of their indigenous education in a patriarchal culture..." (Oha 279). Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh in her study of Nigerian female playwrights and the evolution of a literary style also draws attention to women's role in enforcing androcentricism and male privileging in society. She observes that "...there is a gradual shift from highlighting instances of gender discrimination to interrogating the dual role of women, as both the oppressed and the agents/aids of oppression" (Utoh-Ezeajugh 134). Thus, in order to be accepted as a marriageable woman, the woman suppresses her will, talents, voice and all that could threaten the place of the man as the essence and standard of human. According to Osita Ezenwanebe, "Female oppression is therefore seen as the imposition of a patriarchally defined notion of a "female essence" to which all the sex's biological traits and functions are expected to adhere..." (Ezenwanebe 17). Furthermore, Charles Nwadigwe stresses subjection of expression as one of the ways in which traditions subjugate female. He observes that "Freedom of speech and expression especially for women is often challenged by age-long traditions as prejudices

subsisting in various society” (Nwadigwe 121). Ann B. Dobie also observes that “Western culture has operated on the assumption that women are inferior creatures” (Dobie 105). Utoh-Ezeajugh asserts that women are regarded to have less socio-economic value than men. She notes that, “In operating within the sphere of social conventions and cultural restrictions, the woman is regarded as being less intelligent, less creative, less productive and of less economic value and by implication of less social value than men” (Utoh-Ezeajugh 136).

The gendering of rites of passage among the Igbo people could therefore be related to this socio-cultural perception of women. Making reference to Basden’s account on *uri* pre-marriage observances, Onyewuenyi, I. C. notes that:

Irrespective of the fact that some part of the dowry had been paid prior to these observations, it is not uncommon that some engagements are terminated as a result of unfavourable reports on the girl by one’s kinsfolk. When such is the case, the dowry and any other gifts are returned to the suitor by the girl’s parents (Onyewuenyi 442).

The fear and shame of rejection during courtships therefore keeps Igbo girls on their toes during this period and beyond. All her life, the Igbo girl lives to please the male in spite-of herself. The pre-marriage tutorials are thus, well-articulated and lived out all her life in order not to be seen or tagged a deviant and a failure. This is coupled with the fact that the girls grow up under the training of mothers who do not only instruct them on how to live as subjects in marriage,

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but equally live out the lesson they had themselves learnt during their own passage rites. Oha observes that:

There are thus two significant but conflicting orientations one notices sometimes in the parenting (especially in mothering) of boys in Igbo homes: in the first place, many Igbo mothers, filled with the pride that they have got sons, would like to encourage their sons to engage in activities associated with *nwokeness* (Oha 284).

So even when girls passage rites of most Igbo areas tend to be extinct, the modern Igbo girl still receives and imbibes the self-suppressing lessons of girls' passage rites under the tutelage of their own mothers. Having herself undergone the pre-marriage tutelage, the Igbo woman unconsciously becomes bearer and enforcer of androcentricism and gender roles. She passes on those androcentric values that she had imbibed to her daughters, who in turn continue the trend when they finally become mothers themselves. Igbo Females thus continue to live as subjects that are assumed to take on value only as wives. The conscious suppression of her will, self, talents and voice become her goals in order to attract and keep a husband to herself. Unfortunately, this value contradicts the attainment of the goals of the modern Igbo woman who has dually accepted androcentricism as well as gender balance due to her upbringing and the exposure that comes with the present times, respectively.

Although Oha while noting that the problem in Igbo cultural context is not sex, but gender avers that the problem lies with "...social or cultural values that are attached to being male or female. How we deploy distinctions of sex in our discourses in given contexts..." (Oha 274). The value of this

assertion might seem to make light the essence of traditional practices such as *iwa-akwa* male passage rites, the gendering of *iti-nmanwu* of the Igbo people which stipulates only male participation. The *Iwa-oji* – breaking of kola nut is also an exclusive reserve of the male. Sex thus plays a significant role in Igbo cultural practices. So, gendering in Oha’s term, is of less value among the Igbo people. Sex is a stronger force and a determinant of the privilege one enjoys in the Igbo traditional world. Bona Umeogu observes that, “...it belongs to the status of the eldest male to pray and break the kola nut in Igbo culture and tradition” (Umeogu 36). He reiterates that an elderly woman could only pray over and break kola nut when males are not present at the place. If a male (young or old) is present at the place, it behooves him to pray over and break the kola nut. So, whether a male is young, economically successful or not, his place in the Igbo socio-cultural context cannot be alternated with that of a woman no matter her achievements. The problem in the Igbo cultural context is, therefore, chiefly that of gender. Drawing his examples from what connotes masculinity in the Igbo culture, Oha notes that “When a man defeats another man in a wrestling bout and beats up another, he is also congratulated for having proved to the other fellow that he is truly a man. Masculinity is thus constructed as an ability to subdue the other... (Oha 275). He reiterates that:

Young boys growing up in the traditional Igbo are taught the ways of curing their fears through initiation into groups like *mmanwu* cult, *Ekpe* society, etc. They are taught to grow up to become men who can confront anything in their environment that threatens the survival of their communities” (Oha 275).

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The Igbo traditional world stipulates the performance of different rites to mark or prepare a person for the various developmental stages of life – from birth through death. Male rites of passage are thus designed to prepare boys for manhood, while female rites of passage are fashioned to structure girls for marriage. But while the process for male rites of passage appears to be suicidal, their rewards are fulfilling. Through them, strength, power, resilience and confidence are inculcated and reinforced in the participants. Boys' rites of passages are thus extensions of home-training, which appears to be aimed at the subjugation of females. Utoh-Ezeajugh notes to this end that, "In the social structure of African societies, men are groomed from birth to imbibe an attitude of supremacy over women, who are then nurtured to feel and act inferior to men" (Utoh-Ezeajugh 136).

Recounting the realities of pre-marriage observances among the Igbo people, Basden, G.T. referring to the pre-marriage observance termed *uri*, maintains that:

As soon as matters can be arranged, the custom of "uri" must be observed. This consists in the girl being sent to parents of the affianced husband, when she is introduced to all his relatives. It is somewhat of an ordeal, as some of the man's kinsfolk do not hesitate to comment freely on the debutante into the family. Her general demeanor is subject to close observation, and her domestic qualifications criticized (Basden 70).

This research therefore examines the contents of girls' passage rites among the Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria using *Ine-Ezi* of the Anam people as an example. This involved the reexamination of the contents and objectives of female rites of passage in Igbo society.

***Ine-Ezi* Female Passage Rites of the Anam People**

Female rites of passage in Igbo society such as *Ine-Ezi* of Aman, *Igba-Nja* of Awka and *Igba-mgbe* of the Imo people, all of Igboland prescribe the inculcation of traits that are expected to mould women for marriage. Anam is an Igbo community located in the Omambala area of Anambra State of Nigeria. The community comprises of eight towns namely: Umuikwu-Anam, Umuem-Anam, Mmiata-Anam, Umueze-Anam, Umudora-Anam, Iyiora, Oroma-Etiti and Umuoba-Anam. Apart from Umuoba-Anam which is located at Otuocha the Headquarters of Anambra-East Local Government Area, the other seven towns of Anam are geographically situated across the Omambala River from which the state derived its name, Anambra.

As it is with other Omambala communities, the Anam people are famous for farming and fishing. Unlike most communities in Anambra State who were quick to abandon their ancestral religion in favour of the Christian religion, majority of the Omambala people still practice the Igbo traditional religion termed *Igo-mmuo*. *Igo-mmuo* literally translates as the veneration of spirits. It is therefore not uncommon to see miniature houses (shrines) built for the deities enclosed in most compounds in the Omambala area. These mini houses that appear to be almost isolated from the main buildings are usually marked with stripes of yellow, red and white cloths. The adherents of the Igbo traditional religion believe that colour has a strong force in their communing with the spirits. So, they strictly stick to the usage of the colours mentioned earlier. Sometimes the coloured stripes of cloths are attached to a string of white cloth and wrapped around the *ogilisi* trees which are usually planted remarkably close to the shrines within the compounds.

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Ukpuru.org notes that “Trees are important in Igbo spirituality as symbols of life and channels to the earth force... and are often at the centre of shrines” (n.p.). The *ogilisi* tree is among the many trees ascribed with ritual symbolism by the Igbo people as noted by Ukpuru.org (n.p.). The coloured stripes of cloths used in accentuating the shrines and sacred trees thus become pointers to a household’s religion.

Another religious sect common among the Anam people and the other Omambala communities is the mermaid worshippers’ sect called *Igbe*. As a rule, the *Igbe* religious sect forbids its members from acquiring any kind of charm or talisman. Members of the sect believe that the mermaid spirit whom they worship will provide all they need. They therefore seek for protection and blessings from her instead of acquiring charms to that end. The mermaid spirit of the *Igbe* religious sect, popularly called *Mammy-Iwota* (water-goddess) by the members of the sect is portrayed in a portrait hung on the wall inside the *Uno Igbe* (the *Igbe* shrine). The portrait bears a woman with an exceedingly long hair carrying a python which is wrapped around her neck. As a rule, members of the sect bow to the portrait on entrance into the shrine before taking a seat. Although the members of the sect are dressed in white cloths during worship, they are neither Christians nor traditionalists. Most Omambala communities are bounded by rivers and streams, the people thus, have affinity to the worship of water goddess. Other areas of Igboland that are situated near rivers also tend to have similar affinity with the water goddess and appear to still cling to the people’s traditional religious practices, despite the wide spread of Christianity and the proliferation of churches in Igboland.

Phases and significance of the *Ine-Ezi* Rites

Ine-Ezi was a festival used to mark the passage of adolescent girls into maturity. It was a fattening ritual used specifically to prepare girls for marriage by the Anam people of Anambra state. Though the festival was performed for adolescent girls, the role of men was not over-looked, for they played very crucial role during the performance of the passage rites. For instance, the *Nzire-Ani* ritual, a segment of the *Ine-Ezi* festival which was used to mark the beginning of the farming season was performed by males. During the feast, sacrifices and prayers were offered to *Ani*, the earth goddess. Thanksgiving offerings were offered to the goddess for bountiful harvest in the previous year. The people also use the opportunity to pray for a bumper harvest in the current year. The *Ine-Ezi* female passage rites had many stages and took almost a year to be round off. The phases are as follows:

Opanja: This is the phase at which a girl joins the *Ine-Ezi* girls' group at her first step into adolescence. During this phase, her parents changed her wardrobe to enable her to look her best in order to attract a male suitor. The female aspirant of *Ine-Ezi* eventually got a suitor and immediately began courtship with him. Sexual intercourse is however kept out of the relationship at this stage. Then the festival was declared opened while the girls to undergo the *Ine-Ezi* rituals of that year were also publicly declared eligible. These girls were then brought to town for the feast from their various settlements. The girls could socialize once they come into town. At this stage, the would-be *oyi* (boyfriends) formally chose their girlfriends. The boyfriend-girlfriend affair of the *Ine-Ezi* passage comes in three different levels of friendship: The *oyi* was compulsory and more popular than the other two called the *akpa-ive* and the *akpa-ime*. Although *akpa-ive* boy-

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girl relationship was not compulsory, the *akpa-ive* boyfriend had the privilege of associating freely with the girlfriend's parents. The *akpa-ime* relationship was a secret affair and was also not mandatory.

Relationships were usually consummated at the *Nta-Azu* phase of the rites. The girl's boyfriend from then on took responsibility over the girl's fashion expenses. Then follows the *obodo-eke* phase of the rites. At the phase, the girls were allowed from that time on to come to town on every *eke* market day. The essence of the *obodo-eke* phase was to accord the aspirants of *Ine-ezi* the opportunity to mingle, associate and enjoy themselves.

Ime-Oba: During the *ime-oba*, an aspirant's boyfriend and her parents collaborated in preparing her for *Ine-ezi*. Her boyfriend contributed his quota by providing for her material needs. While her parents saw to her physical wellbeing by providing her with good food to nourish her. The next phase of the rituals was *Ije-Okwu*: An *ine-ezi* aspirant is allowed at this point to visit other villages apart from her own in order to mingle and socialize with her peers.

Ije-Olu-Oyi: An aspirant's boyfriend accompanied by his friends engaged in farming in his girlfriend's parents' farmland at this stage. The girlfriend was usually made available to keep them company while they worked in the farm. The *Ije-Olu-Oyi* is followed by *ije-olu-ndi-ezi* which is the time when the girl visited her relatives and family-friends in order to offer her labour in their farmland's work. While at the ninth stage which is the *ina-ubi-oyi*, the girl can cohabit with her boyfriend for a marked time.

Ine-ezi, the festival proper, was the tenth and the last of the rites. It lasted for four days. The essence of *Ine-ezi* in Anam according to Nnachor, Iwoba E. was "...to declare to eligible bachelors that an age-bracket of young maidens had

matured to be joined in marriage with men” (73). The *umuotu*, (the women age grade that were responsible for the regulations of *ine-ezi*), fixed and announced the day for the festival. As soon as a date was fixed for the ceremony, the girls who were eligible for the passage, would be kept in isolation in a fattening room. While in the fattening room, the girls were well-fed and nourished with traditional skincare materials such as the *uvie* powder.

In addition to physical nourishment given to the girls in the fattening room, every participant in the fattening room also received pre-marriage instructions under the tutelage of an *umuotu* member assigned to her. As it is obtained in the girls’ passage rites of other parts of Igbo land, the pre-marriage instructions are usually centered on moulding a good wife. The facilitators explain and tutor the girls on how to be submissive wives. That means that the girls are taught to assume behaviours that are akin to what Igbo tradition demands of a wife. These include their absolute obedience to the husbands and their absolute silence at the husbands’ rebukes. The Igbo wife is expected never to retort while being reprimanded by her husband since it is believed that a man can never be wrong. Hence the popular Igbo saying *nwoke adi njo* (man cannot be wrong). So, in accordance with the sublime qualities generally ascribed to male by the Igbo tradition, the participants of *ine-ezi* were taught and encouraged to be totally submissive to their husbands who as soon as he takes her as wife assumes total ownership of her. Rebellious acts from the wife could therefore be met with a corresponding punishment from the man. Punishment usually comes in the form of sending her back to her parents. This comes with its own humiliation and shame. No Igbo girl wants to be seen in her father’s house as a divorcee. Granted

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that she could still be seen in her father's house even after marriage, especially during festive periods. Her presence in her father's house is almost forbidden especially if it is occasioned by a divorce. Divorce is greatly frowned at by the community and usually becomes a cause for disparaging the female divorcee. Any girl who was sent back to her parents by her husband is likely to be sneered by neighbours and family members, both nuclear and extended. To avoid the shame and humiliation that accompany divorce in Igboland, the participant of the female rites of passage takes in everything she is taught during the tutelage session. Thereafter, she maintains the expected reserved and subservient demeanour even if it contradicts her instinct.

Immediately after the fattening room experiences and trainings, the girls celebrate around the town singing and dancing. On the second day, they go to cohabit with their boyfriends. Nnachor notes that, "...the girls...had each of them, suitors or boyfriends... "oyi" ...food and fish were abundant, in addition to the free sex the boys enjoyed with their girlfriends" (74). After this stage comes the *ibi-aka-n'udu*. At this stage, each of the participants are expected to embark on the ritual of dipping her two legs into a pan filled with water. Once her legs were inside the pan, she began to confess to the hearing of the public the names of all the men she had ever had sex with.

A major example of the demeaning aspect of female rites of passage besides the tutelage section is the performance articulated in the phase of *Ibi-aka-n'udu* of *Ine-Ezi*. As it has been noted, this phase required that each participant publicly confesses all her sexual relations. The female confessor mentioned to the hearing of the entire community gathered at the village square the names of all the men she had ever slept with. The people believed that any

attempt by the girl to conceal any of her lover, has the consequences of bringing a mysterious death upon her during her first childbirth. Such unwholesome observances go to demean the girl psychologically and emotionally. It inculcated in the female participant a notion of low-self-esteem and-worthlessness. Such demeaning cultural constructs limit the participants not only to being appendages to male husbands but also means to males' ends.

Conclusion

This research has re-examined the cultural contexts in which female rites of passage were produced in Igboland. Passage rites as practiced by the Igbo people demand that the participants are inculcated with the qualities that will aid them through the next phase of their life. They, however, accentuate gender differences in their mechanism and ultimately enforce androcentricism in the Igbo society. While male's passage rites among the Igbo people are structured to form a bold and confident man, the female rites of passage are engendered with practices that suppress her confidence and eventually obstructs her attainment of self-actualization.

It is to this end therefore that men's vision of supremacy is structured into in the contents of the pre-marriage grooming of the Igbo girl. The female pre-marriage tutelage of the Igbo girl which emphasizes the moulding of a submissive and domesticated woman appears to be aimed at forming a female whose worth could only proceed from her husband. The tutelage session of the Igbo female rites of passage have thus served as a highly effective tool in the stifling of the female potentials.

Given that pre-marriage tutelage among the contemporary Igbo people appears to be officially extinct in

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many areas of the Igboland, Igbo mothers who had been formed under the same tutelage in the past have unconsciously aided in its reinforcement. Igbo mothers have been agents and enforcers of the patriarchal aim of pre-marriage tutelage. Like the traditional pre-marriage tutelage, the Igbo mother as an unconscious enforcer of male supremacy also stresses gender differences in the mode of raising her children. While her daughters are inculcated with traits that are related to subservience, her sons are constantly reminded of their need to be strong and courageous as “men” should. This might make the pursuit of gender balance among the Igbo contemporary people almost an impossible venture to achieve. In the same vein, female rites practices such as the *ibi-aka-n’udu* observances of the Anam people’s *ine-ezi* female passage rites also appears to have been viable at demeaning and suppressing the female ego through guilt and shame that come with the confession of her sexual relations.

The study concludes that such cultural attitudes to femininity as the Ine-Ezi rites showcase contributes to the subordination of women. Having hinged the analysis on cultural consumption and existing gender theories, the study has unmasked the gender biases underneath Igbo people’s rites of passage that create gender imbalances rather than equity. This research is therefore of the opinion that the gender-prejudiced contents of rites of passage among the Igbo people tend to advance and strengthen the supremacy of the content formulators who are the males and the major beneficiaries of such observances.

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