

## **SECTION B: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES**

## Chapter Seven

# GENDER COMPLEMENTARITY IN IGBO TRADITION AND CULTURE: THE IDEAL AND THE REAL

J. Obi Oguejiofor

**Abstract:**

*Contrary to the almost universal cultural oppression or subjugation of the womenfolk some scholars attempt to interpret gender relationship in Africa in terms of complementarity between the two genders. This essay critically examines gender relationship among the Igbo. While accepting that complementarity between the two genders in Igbo tradition and culture may be idyllic, it argues that this does not entail equity and fairness in terms of real life. Gender relationship in traditional and to some extent contemporary Igbo society is very complex and ambivalent. While a wife is generally taken to be under the authority of her husband, and not his equal, the valuation of the same wife changes as mother and especially as grandmother. The female folk actually bare the economic burden of the Igbo society; still the men are regarded as the holders of political power even though women are given roles to play in exceptional circumstances. This complex gender relationship was negatively impacted by such event as colonial subjugation of the Igbo, but recent developments like the spread of modern education appear to bring favorable changes to the status of women. Still gender discrimination against women in Igbo society has shown uncanny resilience and needs to be constantly brought to the awareness of the society.*

**Keywords:** Gender, Complementarity, Igbo Tradition, Culture, Colonialism, Western Education.

Tradition and culture are dynamic. This means that their specific aspects never remain the same for long. New realities emerge to supplant what was known in the past, and if they are not replaced wholly to tilt them to produce different faces. Sometimes older attitudes or values are modified; sometimes they are jettisoned completely or when they remain, their valuation is completely altered. This is a constant feature of the human world. Traditions emerge and to some extent assume another form. All so often appeal is made to tradition when the reality being defended is far from being traditional. Sure the culture

of any people is heavily marked by some elements of their tradition but indiscriminating appeal to the past is often tainted by the disjunction between this past and the currently accepted practices in the particular society. Culture which can be taken to embrace both continuity and change in any society appears to be of more import. But again what is even more significant is the interpretation of the institutions, the practices, the convictions, the values and counter values of the very particular culture.

It is in this regard that the work of the intellectual becomes of utmost relevance, both to trace continuity and change, and uncover the hidden meaning that may not quickly come to the fore or may even be thwarted to the detriment of proper understanding and thus progress in the cultural life of the people. It is under this consideration that this short paper examines what we have called gender complementarity in Igbo tradition and culture. Our view is that often the ideals of such complementarity are projected while the real is much more complicated than meets the eyes. We shall briefly highlight the ideal of complementarity, examine the special example of the Igbo women, draw attention to the ambivalence in gender relation in Igbo culture and tradition; while noting the undeniable gender superiority and inferiority between different gender side by side with economic and political equality. The essay also briefly pinpoints how contemporary time rubbed the Igbo women of their glory as well as how gender relation is currently being changed. The conclusion will highlight how current educational and professional advances are fast changing the status of Igbo women while observing how strictly their domestic burdens continue to be enlarged.

The question of gender complementarity in Africa in general is very well discussed by Oyekan Owomoyela in his book *The African Difference*. He denounced the depiction of the African women by such authors as Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta, Ngugi wa Thiongo and Mariama Ba. He presents their image of the African woman in the following statement:

Beginning from the domestic domain, females are at a disadvantage even before they are born, male children being preferred by all parents. The preference ramifies into the differential treatments children of the two genders receive as they grow: the male is groomed to become a responsible family head in the future, assured of inheriting his father's property and status, while the female is simply held in waiting until she is old enough to be delivered to a husband, in return for a paltry bride price. Not only has she no inheritance from her father, she also shares her husband with other women. Further, as a wife she must bear and rear her husband's children, do his laundry, keep his house clean, cook his food, and generally pamper him, quite often to be rewarded with different varieties of physical abuse. (Owomoyela 128)

Added to the above is the public sphere where men occupy the most powerful and most rewarding public positions and functions. He goes at length to argue against this presentation of the African woman pointing out that it is a view which is overly influenced by Western feminism. For him several societies in Africa were classless, and in these societies everyone had equal access to food and material possession, "and every woman or man was considered to be of equal importance." He presents the oft used example of a man and his wife walking home from the farm:

A person who sees women carrying heavy loads to the farm or home from the farm while their men walk nonchalantly behind them carrying nothing but their cutlasses, and who concludes from the sight that men use their women as slaves, forget that long before the harvest the man has had to clear the farm, make the heaps, weed the farm and harvest the yams. The person also does not realize that the cutlass the men carry is a weapon to defend themselves and their families in case of any danger. (Owomoyela 135)

This defensive presentation of gender relation in traditional Africa has certainly something to recommend it. It should be seen from the author's analytic principle which states that "criticism of gender relations in traditional Africa impose today's standards on the past, making little attempt to explore the explanation for what we see." (127). Still the ideal being presented is much more complicated than Owomoyela presents it. In the first place, it is not in all of Africa that a woman carries heavy burdens while her husband takes the rear with a cutlass. That scene is a less likely scene in many parts of the Igbo society. Very often the man carries his much heavier yam basket (ukpa) after harvest and the wife and children carry their smaller baskets of yam behind him. Secondly, the author appears to imply that while the man was clearing the farm and making the heaps, the woman was idle. Certainly that does not represent traditional Igbo where all hands are on deck. Again, to say that the man presented above is made free in order to secure his family may amount to stretching the explanation too far. If that is the case, what happens when the family comes to a secure environment where there is no fear of any danger? Does the man then help his wife to bear the burden of harvest?

However Owomoyela's interpretation is taken, it goes without saying that in traditional Igbo, the woman works very hard, not just in the farms where she tends and weeds the husband's farms, planted corn and other plants beside the yam, cultivated and cared for her own cocoyam farm all alone (without the husband's assistance); then engaged in the famous market that held the economy of traditional Igbo, and still took full care of their husband's home including ensuring the cleanliness of the compound, scrubbing of the mud walls and huts, cooking, water fetching for the family, etc. It goes without saying that the burden was heavy with little leisure. The men certainly had

their own responsibilities, but in general they are not exactly as taxing or as persistent as that of women. In 1921 G. T. Basden writes: In the domestic affairs of life it works out that the men-folk hold themselves responsible for the yam supply, whilst the women provide all the extras, fish, oil, peppers, and other luxuries; they are the purveyors of the salt and savour of the men's lives!" (G. T. Basden 90). Thus the dual "dual-sex division of labour in Igboland" which Ezeigbo and other authors talk about may be true but comparatively this is weighed heavily against the women folk in favour of the men.

It means that the "complementarian arrangement" which Owomoyela used to describe the gloating of a husband over his wife may not apply without further ado so long as traditional Igbo is concerned. Michael Muonwe takes gender complementarity to the political sphere of Igbo tradition and culture and for him the "dual-sex attribute of Igbo politics is based on the principle of complementarity and shared political power between the two sexes." (Muonwe 72). But even here we shall see that the idyllic presentation of even political relationship does not tell all the truth.

One should however not neglect some special features of the Igbo woman, especially in their traditional, but now very much reshaped culture. While we intend to look at their economic and political powers in more details, let us suffice it to say that there is strong ambivalence in the position of the Igbo women, first with reference to their importance vis-à-vis their husbands and in general in the family setting, and secondly as members of organized female institutions in the political setting.

In general the Igbo express in their sayings, proverbs and idiom the fact that the male is the superior gender. One word that expresses masculinity is *Oke*. This word is also used in Igbo language as a prefix for superiority or excellence. Thus in order to describe a superior, beautiful, special house for instance, one only needs to prefix the word *Oke* to the word *Uno*. *Oke uno* thus stands for a house which is special or superior. It is the same with all objects *Oke osisi* means big tree; *Oke mmadu* means a special or important person; *Oke nwanyi* means a superior or important woman. The extension of the adjective *Oke* to stand for superiority is derived directly from Igbo conception of the superiority of the male gender. It can also be argued that the use of *Oke* to designate the male gender originally derives from the adjective for superiority *Oke*. Thus a child is *Nwa*. *Nwa oke* is simply the male child and by implication also the superior child. The superior conception of maleness also extends to many Igbo sayings, idioms, proverbs and folktales. It is remarkable that this conception of superiority is so consistent that there is hardly any saying or proverb in the Igbo language which adjudges the female gender as such to be superior to the male.

Gender superiority becomes institutionalized in marriage relationship. In the first place, marriage and the raising of children are generally regarded as necessary rites of passage for all normal human beings. For the woman however, it is so determinant that without marrying and begetting children life appears to be useless, it is like cutting oneself off from the cycle of life, and the "greatest evil is to be thrown out of life-cycle." (E. Metuh154) But in some Igbo communities, it was not necessarily through marriage that one can fulfill this function since it was permissible in these communities for mature women to beget children without necessarily getting married, especially after circumcision rites. The same expectation of marriage and child rearing applies to the menfolk but theirs is not as strict as that of women. It is recognized that the woman has much shorter period to fulfill her roles as wife and mother than the man, but a man who refuses to marry and beget children was also viewed as irresponsible.

The importance of marriage for the female gender is expressed in many sayings about the importance of *di* (husband)! *Di bu ugwu nwanyi* (the husband is the dignity of the woman); *di bu ndo* (the husband is shelter). *Di bu uno* (the husband constitutes the household). The word *di* is used as an adjective that expresses mastery: *di nta*, *di ugu*, etc. (Muonwe 6) Again it is noticeable that there are hardly expressions that give similar value to the wife vis-à-vis her husband. The Igbo take it that a good wife should obey her husband. It is understood that such expectations are like general precepts that are not always practicable in particular contexts, but it would sound like a taboo even to imply that a husband should obey his wife. The acceptable relationship is that it is the man who should be in command. It is in fact regarded as shameful where the wife is in control of her husband irrespective of whether she has the natural capacity to exercise such control or not:

The Igbo men who are more egalitarian in their attitudes and behaviors towards their partners are ridiculed and taunted by those hegemonic males as not being able to 'control their wives.' In such a case, therefore, an ideology of male domination, the ability to dominate and 'control a woman,' becomes the criterion and definition of 'maleness' and 'manhood.' (R. Uchem 17)

However the ambivalence on the issue of superiority of maleness is very evident in Igbo adulation of motherhood. Motherhood is praised to the sky as if it is not the same female gender adjudged to be inferior to the male that becomes mother. A very common Igbo name is *Nneka* (mother is greater). The reference of this name is not always clear, but what is noticeable is that the name *Nnaka* (father is greater) is in comparison very rare among the Igbo. There are other names in praise of motherhood: *Nneamaka* (mother is very beautiful); *Nnedimma* (mother is good); *Nneji* (mother is the sustainer), etc. Since the reference of most Igbo names is specific and not general, it is obvious

that at least in some cases the contrast that *Nneka* points to is between fatherhood and motherhood. So at least in some cases in Igbo culture, motherhood is proclaimed to be more important than fatherhood, and by implication the female gender more important, more useful in life in different circumstances than the male.

This contradictory valuation of the female over the male gender presents some common patterns. It is usually in the very general sense that maleness is taken to be superior in Igbo traditional and cultural conceptions. The conception changes once it comes to specific circumstances which are more in touch with the reality in general. It is easy to proclaim the superiority of the male gender due its social advantages, but life experience in which the overwhelming role of the mother or motherhood is so prominent imposes another consideration or judgment. In fact the so called control which the Igbo male folk are expected to exercise over their wives is usually practiced when the couples are young; when the man is often the bread winner of the young family. With time the children grow to adulthood, become responsible and become more involved in decisions about family matters. Their mother gains more respect both from their children and from the neighbours. Thus the respect or deference enjoyed by older women in Igbo society tends to contradict the vaunted superiority of the male gender. In his short depiction of old women in traditional Igbo society Basden writes: "As a rule their declining days are spent in leisurely quietness, for they are generally respected and are seldom in danger of losing the affection of the younger members of the family circle." (. G. T. Basden 96).

Over and above all these "changes of fortune" of the female gender in Igbo society however, women obviously play very strong economic and political roles. This awareness came to British colonial power after the famous Aba riot (Ogu umunwanyi), where on account of some misunderstanding and suspicion, virtually the whole of the womenfolk in Igbo land rose to protest some perceived injustice of the colonial government. The systematic manner in which the women organized the protest was a massive shocker to the colonial administrator who understood for the first time that they had neglected the public strength of Igbo women. Aba riot led to the funding of the researches of two anthropologists M. M. Green and Sylvia Leith-Ross to study Igbo women. In all, their researches and those of others lead to the conclusion that "Igbo women have imbibed a great deal of egalitarianism, competitiveness, independence, hard work, and a democratic attitude for which the Igbo are known." (J. O. Oguejiofor 36). For Leith-Ross "The women economically and politically, are at least the equal of men." (19).

It seem that Leith-Ross' conviction is that in some aspects the women can be said to be superior; that is one possible interpretation of the phrase "at least." We have mentioned above how the women really carried the economy of the traditional Igbo society on their shoulders through their engagement in the

farm, petty trading, and care of their families. It is so much that as Miss Holbrook attested "one seldom finds them at leisure." (cf. E. Isichei 207) Thus in addition to their dominance of the village markets, they also provided most other condiments for the family sustenance apart from yam.

The women are the great petty traders, spending much time and energy for what must often be a very small profit ... the time and energy involved are considerable, and already the women have much arduous work with their farming, cooking and palm oil making. (M. M. Green 39)

The political role of the traditional Igbo women is also very prominent. The example of the *Omu* society among the Umuezechima clan is very well known. (P. Ejiogor 234) This is a society which is headed by a woman specially chosen and installed, a position akin to that of a queen, the membership of which is not restricted to women. Another well-known Igbo institution is the *Umuada* society which is the highest decision making institution in the town when the assembly of men failed to reach a decision. As C. K. Meek says, "anyone repudiating their authority would be regarded as guilty of sacrilege, and would be punished by the priests and titled officials to whom the *Umuada* would report the offence." (33-34). That they are given this role is on account of perception of Igbo women as being more endowed for better adjudication than the men:

They (men) seem also to think that the women have a greater sense of abstract justice. They would not be biased by personal prejudice and longstanding feuds as much as men, and even when they decided to 'spoil' a man's or a woman's property as punishment for some offence, they would not do so in anger but in righteous indignation, a difference of motive the women often make. (S. Leith-Ross 107)

Needless to say, much of what is presented above has to do with what can be called traditional Igbo women and their world. But this world has not been left intact by the natural dynamism of culture and other earthly realities in general. What is clear is that there is no clear demarcation between the traditional and the actual, but also the mutation of the traditional is never sudden or complete. The famous article of Simon Ottenberg, "Igbo Receptivity to Change" which discusses what remains of the Igbo culture and tradition and what has been jettisoned for other cultural innovations remain very relevant in this regard:

Paradoxically, of all Nigerian people, the Ibo have probably changed the least while changing the most. While many of the formal elements of the social, religious, economic and political structures, such as lineage, family groups, age grades, and secret societies have been

modified through culture contact, many of the basic patterns of social behavior, such as the emphasis on alternative choices and goals, achievement and competition, and lack of strong autocratic authority have survived and are a part of the newly developing culture. But basic patterns of social behavior, of interpersonal relationships, have changed little, though new symbols of success replace old ones and new goals appear. (S. Ottenberg 142)

Thus by 1959, Simon Ottenberg was talking about a “newly developing culture.” Today, sixty years after the Igbo culture has retained a lot of the characters he wrote about. But also many things have changed, been lost completely or modified. What of the political clout which the Igbo women wielded in the governance of their different towns? The *Omu* society and the *Umuada* may still be present in some societies, but it goes without saying that much of their roles are hardly ever called upon in most Igbo towns and villages. Today, town unions have been formed in every community in Igbo land to take care of development project and general governance of the towns. Each town is divided into wards and the collectivity of the wards form the town unions with their elected president generals and other officials. Indigenes of these towns who sojourn in faraway townships are united under the branch of the town union, with their branch officials. What is interesting for our purpose here is that each of these town unions and their branches has its women wing with the overarching aim of assisting development and also paying special attention to women affairs. But it is clear that it is the town union constituted by men which has the power to initiate serious projects, and represent the town at the state government levels. We are far from the influential *Omu* society or the *Umuada* of yore. The vaunted political power of the Igbo women has therefore been greatly whittled down by contemporary realities.

Economically, there have been early trends that also reduced the economic significance of the Igbo woman. The formation of urban areas at the inception of direct colonialism seems to have aided this reduction. Urbanization drew young men from Igbo villages to the new urban areas, initially to work as artisans, and with later evolution to replace foreign managerial officials supplied by colonial government. Women who went with their husbands to the new urban areas were suddenly deprived of their farms and their village markets. They were largely unprepared for the new reality since they were not artisans and initially had little or no Western education that could enable them to seek gainful employment in the urban areas. Still many Igbo women did not completely lose their trading capacities. There was ample opportunity to continue petty trading in now more expansive urban markets; and up till today it is still the women who are occupied with grocery and there are several types of trading still reserved for women in urban towns in Igbo land.

The persistence of resilience can also be seen in the area of education. At colonial time, Igbo societies, like most other African societies saw the education of their women folk as secondary. It was understood that they were to be married off to distant climes or at least into other families. The male child would remain in the family given the exogamy which was the practice. So it was more useful to ensure the acquisition of Western education by male offspring instead of the female ones. It was partly on account of this that the earlier generation of women who moved into the colonial urban areas were largely uneducated in the modern sense. Today however this tendency has been almost completely reversed. If accurate statistics of gender representation of enrolment in education is furnished, it would be surprising to observe how fast Igbo women have caught up with their male folk with respect to modern education. In 1986, Professor Peter Ejiofor who was commissioner for trade in the then Anambra State (comprising present Anambra, Enugu and part of Ebonyi) convoked different segments of Igbo leadership class to sensitize them about what he regarded as a frightening tendency of the Igbo society. Lambert Ejiofor observed that there were more girls in schools in the then Anambra State than boys and bemoaned the consequence of such a trend – that the menfolk would be less educated than the women folk.

While more than thirty years ago Lambert Ejiofor was sounding alarmist over the greater female enrolment in secondary schools than boys in Anambra State, the trend has continued unabated. Several areas of higher or tertiary education have been taken over by Igbo women. The percentage of our young men who are students in faculties of education are today very minimal. Consequently, it is also more and more unlikely to see elementary and secondary school teachers in Igbo land who are male. No doubt part of the reason for this is that the profession is very poorly remunerated and the man who is still expected to be the bread winner of his family naturally feels he cannot fulfill that function when he chooses the profession of teaching at the elementary and secondary school levels. This is proven by the fact that the overwhelming majority of university lecturers are still men. Still that our numerous basic schools have virtually almost female teachers points to an important trend in the education of females in Igbo land.

Still Ottenberg's paradox of changing the least while changing the most remains largely true in regard to gender relationship. Today in the Igbo society, due to comparatively wide access to education by the female folk, there is noticeable increase in the number of Igbo women who are highly qualified professionals, university lecturers and professors; medical doctors and nurses; engineers; managers, social scientists, etc. But no matter how highly qualified and knowledgeable they may be, they still cannot be participants in the meeting of *Umunna* which still remains the most basic organizational structure of the Igbo society outside the nuclear and extended family. Furthermore, it is still regarded as a taboo for a husband to assist the wife

with her kitchen chores talk less of doing such chores himself. It is widely accepted without any argument that the kitchen and all the hard work required to provide food from it belongs wholly to the woman irrespective of her professional attainment. Men who depart from this 'norm' are ridiculed and regarded as being enslaved by their wives. That such attitudes still persist in the Igbo society speaks volume about gender complementarity in that society.

This ideal of gender complementarity among the Igbo depicts an Eldorado where in the past the two genders shared the burdens of life almost equally; where everyone has access to the available resources, and where there is perfect equality between the two genders. The real is much more complex and presents a situation where the female gender is paradoxically taken to be inferior to the male but motherhood is taken to be superior (Nneka). It is an idyllic situation where women are equal to the men economically and politically still the most advanced women are not welcome to the meeting of umunna and not to the currently powerful town union of today. Thus gender relationship in Igbo tradition and culture is like all that is human where the real always trumps the ideal.

#### Works Cited

- Basden, G. T., *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*, University Publishing Co., Lagos, 1983. Print.
- Ejiofor, L., *Igbo Kindoms*, Africana Educational Publishers, Onitsha, 1982. Print.
- Ezenwa-Ohaeto. Ngozi (ed.), *Power, Gender Relations, Charater and Nation Building*, Fab Anieh, Awka, 2015. Print.
- Green, M. M., *Igbo Village Affairs*, Frank Cass, London, 1964. Print.
- Isichei, E., *Igbo Worlds*, Macmillan, London, 1977. Print.
- Leith-Ross, S., *African Women*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1939. Print
- Meek, C. K., *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe*, Oxford University Press, London, 1937. Print.
- Metu. E. I., *God and Man in African Religion*, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1981. Print.
- Muonwe, Michael, *New Dawn for African Women: Igbo Perspective*, Xlibris, Bloomington, 2016. Print.
- Oguejiofor, J. Obi, *The Influence of Igbo Traditional Religion on the Socio-political Character of the Igbo*, Fulladu, Nsukka, 1996. Print.
- Ottenberg, S. "Igbo Receptivity to Change," in Baskom and Herskovits, *Continuity and Change in African Cultures*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1959. Print.
- Owomoyela O., *The African Difference: Discourses on Africanity and the Relativity of Cultures*, Peter Lang, New York, 1996. Print.
- Uchem, R., *Overcoming Women's Subordination in the Igbo African Culture and in the Catholic Church: Envisioning an Inclusive Theology with Reference to Women*, Graduate Theological Foundation, Michawaka, 2001. Print.