

Excavating gender inequality in Igbo culture

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Abstract

Anthropological studies done during the colonial times depicted Igbo women as socially, politically and economically very influential in their societies. This article highlights some of these studies but departs from the point that the Igbo society is patrilineal and that colonial realities succeeded in witting down the pristine powers of women. It explores some of the factors that today surreptitiously reaffirm the cultural denigration of women including language, proverbs, music, marriage process, inheritance rights and widowhood practices. The hermeneutics of these factors leads to the conclusion that unless these and other factors are correctly read in terms of their uncritical assumptions in favour of patriarchy, it becomes more difficult if not impossible to bring them to consciousness and to strive for the necessary improvement attendant on the negative implications of gender inequality in Igbo culture.

Keywords: *gender inequality, language, proverbs, music, inheritance, and widowhood practices*

Introduction

There are events in recent times that constantly remind us that if gender equality is a generally agreed ideal, the world as a whole still remains too far away from the attainment of such ideal. The return of the Taliban with their extreme suppression of the rights of women may easily come to mind (Fetrat, 2023). But that was

not an isolated occurrence because a number of recent happenings around the world show that “if America is not yet ready for a woman president” as Hillary Clinton would reflect in 2016, our world is not yet ready for gender equality. In December 2021, Jordanian lawmakers descended into a free for all fight over discussions on women’s rights (Omari, 2021), rights that one would otherwise take for granted as belonging to all human beings by virtue of their human personhood. Around the same time, Nigerian lawmakers withdrew a bill that pushed for gender equality (Umoru, 2021) This bill that had been thrown out after several attempts includes the clause for automatic citizenship for foreign marriage partners of women just as it applied to those of men. It was reported that some senators complained that the bill was, among other things, against their religious beliefs. On the global level, the UNDP Gender Inequality Index designates the last decade as “a decade of stagnation” because there was no significant improvement on the elimination of biases against women within the period. In a shocking report, the GII confirmed that 90% of men harbour gender-based biases against the women fold. Statistics of such biases show that 50% of people world-wide believe that men make better political leaders than women; 40% assume that men are better as business executives; 25% believe it is acceptable for a man to manhandle his wife (UNDP, GII, 2023).

These biases naturally have tell-tale effects on actual life environments. One of such is that since 1995, women occupy only 10% of government and state leadership positions. In the labour market, women occupy less than a third of management positions. This dismal situation is not helped by the often-significant progress of women in education. The UN body noted that in 59 countries where women are more educated than men, the income gap remains 39% in favour of men. All these statistical realities have

their roots in what can be called the retrogressive social norms of different societies of the world. Hence the UNDP report affirms that “Without tackling biased gender social norms, we will not achieve gender equality or the Sustainable Development Goals.” (Conceicao, 2023)

While the above sustained study of the UNDP is very revealing, it is observable that all so often such noble efforts do not go much more than highlighting statistical data. While these data help to inform about the seriousness of gender discrimination and marginalization it does not go deep into the factors that sustain them in different societies and cultures of the world. It is our view that the factors that impinge on gender inequality are deep and difficult to tackle, and all such factors go to reinforce the presumptions of patriarchy which stands on the pillars of gender inequality.

The focus of this paper is on the Igbo culture, and the ambivalence that Igbo women, acknowledged even at colonial times as very powerful, are today also suffering under the weight of patriarchal discrimination. Our effort is to highlight some of the factors which sustain or deepen inequality and which have their root in Igbo culture and are therefore generally taken for granted. We will briefly highlight the depiction of Igbo women in colonial times, explore the circumstances that led to the emasculation of their rights, and excavate those that up till today hinder the amelioration of gender inequality in the Igbo society and culture.

Gender parity among the Igbo in colonial times

The historical incident of the uprising of Igbo women in 1929, variously called Women Riot or Women’s War, Ogu Umunwanyi (Davies, 2021) led to unexpected and widespread mayhem among a wide section of Igbo women in Eastern Nigeria. The specific

issue concerned taxation, but how the disagreement between a local chief and a local woman led to such apparently highly organised demonstration and eventual massacre defied the frameworks of understanding and the preconceived notions of the then colonial masters regarding the Igbo woman. Anthropological studies were undertaken apparently to investigate the real and hitherto unknown social powers of the Igbo woman. Among the anthropological reports that emanated from these studies were those of Sylvia Leith-Ross (1939), C. K. Meek (1937), M. M. Green (1964). In general, their reports on the status of women vis-à-vis the men were very positive if not surprising.

Leith-Ross remarked that “The women, economically and politically, are the equal of men,” (p.19). This is on account of their serious engagement in various economic areas of the traditional society. They planted their own crops within the yam farms of their husbands. They engaged in crafts like spinning, mat and basket making, pottery, etc. The Igbo women were the masters in petty-trading. They traded in the four market days in their various villages and as G. T. Basden says, these trades were the affairs of women: “Seldom in the old days did men concern themselves with market affairs; they were regarded as pertaining to women rather than to men.” (1966 p. 334) Green observed how the women put in so much time and labour to make what she regards as tiny gains, (p. 39). The economic engagement of Igbo women is in addition of home shores which are almost wholly reserved to them. Thus, as Miss Holbrook remarks, “one seldom finds them at leisure,” (quoted in Isichei, 1977 p. 207).

Politically we may just mention the Omu society in Umuezechima clan, whose members are both male and female but which is traditionally headed by a woman. The Umuada society is found in more Igbo communities. In addition to many other duties,

Umuada sometimes have judicial powers where the male authorities have failed to settle a case. In such circumstances the decision of Umuada is final and as 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. (p. 160)

The women played significant roles in maintaining the life of the community in general. Their areas of control included streams and market arena where they made laws binding on all. Their influence in traditional religions is also not minimal. The most powerful deities in Igbo religion are goddesses. The famous and all-powerful Ana/Ala/Ani cannot be overlooked. In Awkuzu the Inembala deity is female with wholly nondescript husband, Odogwu. In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the famous Chielo the respected priestess of the Agbala goddess exercised her priestly role with authority and received the respect of all as was exhibited by her encounter with Okonkwo. The Igbo had medicine women (dibia afa, dibia ogwu) who often inherited the art from their families and were as effective as their male counterparts, depending on their competence. That is why Nduka and Nwamah affirm as follows:

The women are religious leaders in diverse areas of the Igbo religious culture. They are medicine women, priestesses, mediums, rain-makers, diviners, etc. They share these positions with their male counterparts ... the patrilineal based Igbo society that is laden with totems and taboos accommodates the place of women as sacred personages and religious leaders (p. 278).

Colonialism and reversal of women status

Still, it must be emphasized that the Igbo society was basically patriarchal. The elevated status of women in such patriarchal tradition points to social contradiction that requires more sustained explanations. However, it is good to note that over time the lofty status of women in Igbo tradition made a turn for the worse. Specifically, this exalted status did not wholly survive the effect of colonialism.

Under British colonization, Igbo women lost their rights to participate in government and the economy in their traditional ways ... the British interfered with the traditional fluidity of Igbo gender and the balance of power provided. The introduction of male deity in Christianity further alienated women from religious practices.
(robyrne.healey)

With more urbanization attendant on colonial restructuring young men moved to newly created or enhanced urban areas for livelihood. Most of the new jobs as artisans were reserved for young men who in turn brought their wives to the urban communities. It means that the traditional settings in which the women cooperated and exercised their economic and political role and influence in the society were gone.

The new political order was also genderized. The British colonial powers introduced Warrant Chiefs in Igbo societies that did not have such structures. But in all cases, these chiefs were males, and they operated in the new colonial environment where there was no notable role for women. Consequently, the new political order effectively emasculated the women folk.

Formal education which was introduced by colonialists was also initially discriminatory against women. Igbo families saw it as bad investment to spend on educating women who would eventually be married into other families and import the benefit of formal education to the marital family. As a result, formal education was initially almost reserved for male children. And that is why disproportionately the first crop of educated Igbo were males. These educated ones sought their marital partners from the generally less educated females who, removed from the traditional settings, became mainly house wives in their new urban locations.

The new religion (Christianity) was not very helpful. While Igbo society could boast of powerful female Gods, Christianity was very much genderized. In traditional religion women could be priests of very powerful Gods. They could be experts in different aspects of traditional medicine with strong link to the religious beliefs. On the contrary, the priests and other agents of the different Christian groups were all male, and hence Christianity became an additional setting for the emasculation of Igbo women. The fast growth of this religion bespeaks of the rate at which Igbo women lost much of their social, economic and political influence.

Enduring inequality

The human society is always dynamic, and today much has changed in Igboland especially with regard to the aspect of educational opportunity for Igbo women. But the improvement in such areas as education does not entail automatic significant change. UNDP latest report shows that improvement in education does not necessarily entail commensurate improvement in valuation. It is our view that there are strong socio-cultural presuppositions embedded in different aspects of Igbo culture that constitute a hindrance to the erasure of inequality and subjugation

of women. Because these factors are cultural, they are hardly brought to the awareness of the members of the particular cultural group. They are usually padded by axiomatic acceptance.

Let us define culture as the way of life of a people, a community or a society. Two characteristics of culture are significant for our purpose. First, cultural beliefs and practices are generally not reflected upon. In his *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, Henri Bergson asserts that the normal society is guided by uncritically accepted assumptions. *Il faut parce que il faut* (it must be because it must be) (1915) For Bergson, in contradistinction to inspired people, most humans are mainly guided by the presumptions of their societies. These beliefs and practices are simply imbibed without question and put into practice to fit into the society as it actually operates.

The second feature of culture is its dynamism. Every culture is constantly changing, but the changing aspects of culture are rarely noticed. It is a big question to what extent a culture can change and still remain the same culture. But since a culture is here understood as the way of life of a people, it appears merely academic to inquire whether it is the same culture or not, since whatever turns out to be the result of the change remains the culture of the people concerned. Kwasi Wiredu's paradox of culture change may be an acceptable guide here. A culture that changes only its kernel (necessary features) remains the same culture, while one that changes its contingent aspects has changed fundamentally.

A culture can shed many of its traits and gather foreign accretions without sacrificing its identity, provided that it does not lose its contingent features. The contingent is normally contrasted with the necessary, but in this case the contingent becomes the necessary. ... Since it is not necessary

to give up such components in preference to foreign substitutes, to do so is a sure sign of the loss or diminution of cultural self-identity. (1985, p. 218)

While recognizing significant changes in Igbo culture, especially as regards its contact with European colonialism, our efforts in the following pages consist in briefly raising a few aspects of the enduring Igbo culture that promote gender inequality, especially the denigration of women and the presumptive glorification of masculinity.

Language structure and proverbs

Language is a very important aspect of culture. It is sometimes described as the vehicle of culture because it is mainly a means of communication and what is not communicated is not known. The force of language is overwhelming. It encapsulates the ideals, the values, the prejudices of a culture. It thus plays important roles in the day-to-day existence and well-being of a society. For G. J. Warnock (1971) it is the biggest cooperate undertaking of human beings. Language in a way enforces its rules on its users. The individual is virtually powerless before the force of language and the ideas and prejudices encoded in it. It communicates values, communicates the decisions of the power holding echelon of each society. In a patriarchy like Igbo culture, it communicates its presuppositions most of which are hardly critical.

The Igbo language is not morphologically structured for gender differentiation (Ezeifeke, 2017, p. 102). Its pronouns do not distinguish male from female. He is coming and She is coming have the same translation in Igbo: *O na abia*. In the same way, Igbo depiction of roles or profession is not genderized. A medicine man is depicted by the word *dibia*, and so is the medicine woman. But

Igbo language, like many other languages remain “a site for sexual politics played by the male to female disadvantage.” (Oha, 1998: 88) That is why there are many aspects of the same language that reflect the denigration of the female.

One obvious gender prejudice in the Igbo language is the use of the adjective *Oke* (male). Igbo language has various adjectives to express superiority, but one of the most prevalent is the word *Oke*. Whether used as a prefix or a description, the word *Oke* stands for superiority. Thus, to express the special, positive value of almost any material thing it is described by the addition of *Oke* before it. Of course, the usual meaning of the adjective is “male.” *Oke Okuku* is a cock. But the same word is used to express superiority of almost anything: *Oke ugbo* (superior vehicle), *Oke uno* (magnificent house), etc. Thus, when used to describe living beings, the reference is to maleness. The superiority presupposed in the idea of maleness is thus directly transposed to refer to all other things judged to be special or simply superior: *Oke ebo* (superior district); *Oke obodo* (superior town). It is however remarkable that *Nwunye* (female) is hardly used in any direct way to designate inferiority. Rather, a description of a great woman will read *Oke nwanyi!*

Another important aspect of the Igbo language is the use of proverbs. Proverbs usually convey accepted ideas in a society even though such ideas are not always true or correct. Like culture generally, languages are dynamic, and so are proverbs. New ones are invented; old ones are forgotten or slide into disuse. But when they are in use, they carry the authority of the language and tradition. A well-known Igbo proverb about proverb is that it is the palm oil with which one eats words. The major staple foods of the Igbo include yam and cocoyam. In the olden days, one available simple menu includes boiled yam and cocoyam eaten with palm

oil. This proverb means that proverbs embellish word and lubricate meaning. It also means that they are readily available to the average Igbo speaking community or conversation group. In Igbo, they are understood to convey certain concepts and meaning and wisdom. Their force comes in their ability to convince without justification and explanation. Thus, another Igbo proverb is that the dowry paid on the mother of a person who needs the explanation of proverbs is wasted money. Given its force, proverb has been employed as an instrument for denigration of womanhood. “In the male-dominated Igbo culture ... proverbs are appropriated by the men to uphold themselves as producers and custodians of knowledge which women are thought to be incapable of.” (Oha, 1998: 88)

Ezeifeke refers to the essay of Obododimma Oha to express the force of proverbs in their negative presentation of women in Igbo culture:

“Women are construed as foolish, weak, jealous, evil, unfaithful, dependent, frivolous and seductive; while men are construed as rational, independent and superior; and that this devaluation is face-threatening to women. He claims that proverbs imbue a kind of permanence to the negative image constructed but is silent on how to subvert it.” (Ezeifeke: 2017, pp)

With all their convincing force in the Igbo language, so many proverbs are purveyors of gender prejudice. Some are directly aimed against women expressing their inferiority. *Elee nwoke ito kobo eweli umu nwanyi isii kpoo aka ya.* (If a man is sold at the price of three for a penny, then six women will be used to complete the deal!). It is common practice in Igbo markets to complete a trade deal by the seller freely giving some additional bonuses to

the buyer. For instance, an orange seller prices his orange at three oranges for 200 Naira. When a buyer comes and purchases arranges for 1000 Naira for example the seller decides freely to give him some additional oranges as *mmezi* or *ikpo aka* (bonus). Thus, what this proverb expresses is that if the value of men descends to the level that they can be bought at three for one penny, then six women will be required as this free *ikpo aka*.

Another proverb against women generally is “*eri ago ekweghi umu nwanyi gbaa afo onu*” (consuming and denying is the reason why women cannot grow beards). This proverb makes affirmation about a biological feature of women, making certainly false and negative statement about them. For the proverb, women are adept in consuming food or wealth but are also known to deny what they have enjoyed. The connection of this presumed attitude to the growing of beards, is not clear but goes to show how uncritical some of the negative proverbs can be.

Yet another proverb is: *onye nwanyi na enye nri, ngwe na egwu ya n’afu* (the person fed by a woman suffers from belly ache). This is another way of highlighting the prejudice that women are not generous. They are only available as liability, as consumers. Hence if a person happens to be at their mercy, and depends on them for his/her feeding, such a person is bound to suffer belly ache on account of hunger.

There are also many proverbs that tend to link the status or the being and importance of women only to their function as wives. Such proverbs proclaim that women indeed have no value as human beings, but acquire whatever value they can only as wives. Thus, just like the adjective *Oke* designates superiority, a woman only shares in the superiority of her husband and is nothing without this. For example: *nwanyi ezubeghi oke rue mgbe ogadoro nwoke aka* (a woman is not complete (as a human being) until she acquires

a man). The same concept is expressed by the proverb: *Ogori enweghi di enweghi olu uka* (a woman that has no husband has no say!). In actual marital relationship, it is the woman who is deferential to and dependent on her husband that can act with some confidence and assurance: “*Ogori dabere n’ahu di ya ji mma egbuwa okwu*” (the wife that leans on her husband speaks with confidence).

Music

We cannot overemphasize the importance of music as an aspect of almost every culture, but more especially in Africa. Suffice it here to refer to the statement of Michelle Szikszai:

African music is a vital part of everyday life in Africa. It is part of the religious ceremonies, festivals, and social rituals. Songs are used for important events in a person’s life (birth, coming of age, marriage, and death). They are used for curing the sick, bringing rain and religious dances ... music is ultimately tied to the things that are most important to the welfare of the people. (www.bell.kyschools.us)

To speak specifically of Igbo culture let us take the words of Nkechi H. Okpala: “Igbo people are endowed with numerous dance music performance which portray the culture of the people,” (2016, p. 1).

Music is ubiquitous in Igbo culture and life. Individuals sing loudly at leisure. Labourers sing in order to align their work to the rhythm of their music. Children sing when they play or dance. There are also formal and important events which hardly ever hold without music. In modern times this presence of music may appear to have been attenuated by culture change. The changes affect the

frequency of employment of music, the instrument employed and the lyric of new music. Still the role of music in Igbo life and culture cannot be overemphasized.

It is noticeable that much of the gender prejudices that are replete in Igbo proverbs also find their way in the lyrics of Igbo music. Some of the lyrics express the discomfort that the changed realities of modernity appear to give the womenfolk better opportunities leading apparently to their empowerment. Just a few examples of the portrayal of the modern women Igbo lyrics will suffice for our purpose of highlighting gender prejudice.

One music group that we can regard as Highlife Music with the name Peacocks International Band reigned very shortly in the 1970s. In one of its best-known pieces, it describes the rising profile of women:

Iguma paper leme anya n'elu iga ama, na
umunwanyi na nde bu nwoke na e esime agumagu
Mana umunwanyi si na nwoke aga ikwuokwu
n'akwukwo, ufodu police ufodu kilaki o, noboobo
akukwu.

It is stated here that anybody who reads the newspapers will realize that women and men are now in a strong conflict. The band decries the rivalry between men and women. The origin of this rivalry is that women are now occupying several positions on account of their education. Some are doctors, others are lawyers, police and clerks. The piece goes on to remind all that in the olden days, their fathers were so powerful that it was usual to tell their mothers to run away because their fathers were coming, but never the contrary, to tell their fathers to run away because their mothers were coming.

Another musical artist that decries the education of women is Ezigbo Obiligbo. He specialized in Egwu Ekpili that used to be

common among the Omambala people. The lyrics of one of his songs is as follows:

Nekwani ka unu nazu umu nwanyi n'akwukwo
Amam akwukwo n'emeni umu nwanyi awamanya.
Nwanya mali ive nwoke mali ona eseokwu.
Iya agwaya okwu osuva oyibo.
Osua oyibo mgbe n'abo akwali ayia nava.

Here Obiligbo re-emphasizes his strong conviction. He warns against sending women to school. For Obiligbo the education of women is antithetical to peaceful household. This is because when a woman knows what a man knows, quarrelling is the assured result. The woman reverts to speaking English whenever the husband talks to her and the quarrel that ensues leads to her departure from her family. Needless to say, the warning of Obiligbo was not heeded, and today Igboland is one region of Nigeria where women have caught up with their menfolk in the field of education. But this strange idea is constantly song to music lovers who may not be critical enough to realize that what is being propagated by the lyrics is hardly backed up by any evidence.

Marriage process in Igbo culture

Another cultural practice that highlights the inequality of the genders in Igbo culture is the process of traditional marriage. The process of getting married is very diverse in African societies. In some Northern African cultures women are rated by camels. In other places it is the number of cows required that makes the rating. Among the Igbo, it is mainly the bride price and the lavish ceremony that follows the wine-carrying that is important. The bride price is an agreed sum of money paid to the family of the young woman which stamps the marriage agreement. It is usually

given many interpretations but there is a sliver of general agreements:

The bride-price is the transfer of physical cash or money from groom to the parents or the family of the bride at the time of marriage agreement which signifies the acquisition of the rights by the groom of the bride labour and reproductive ability (Nwabude, 2022).

Very often the symbolic importance of the bride-price is highlighted without specific reference to the actual amount that changes hands:

The bride-price is the only marital right which is generally accepted in all Igbo tradition to solidify marriage. It is such a symbolic element of the marriage constructs that if peradventure, there are children, (without bride-price!!) such children are not recognized by the groom's family. (Nwabude, 2022)

The symbolism of the bride-price is of utmost importance. It is the aspect of marriage expenses which must be reversed for divorce to be recognized. But there are other elements which are much more costly than the bride-price. However, what is important here is that all these are the responsibilities of the groom. It is the groom who pays the bride-price and other expenses irrespective of how rich the prospective wife and her family are. Socially this fact gives the man the sort of right or power that makes the woman to be subject to the man. It is indirectly a cultural means of determining the marital relationship almost wholly in favour of the men who in times of open quarrel are often head to say: "*Okwa nwanyi mu ji egom nu?*" (Is this the wife I married with my money?). A funny proverb about an Onitsha man is that when he

was prevailed upon to apologize to his wife averred that those who made the demand should put themselves in his position (*nwoke Onisha ka asili nya yoo nwunye ya mghaghali osi onye obuna sikwa obulu ya*). The point is that the process and the demands of marriage is like an official and concrete affirmation of the superiority or headship of the male partner, sometimes with many negative implications.

Inheritance

Another area where Igbo women are seriously challenged is the issue of inheritance. The question of inheritance is multipronged in Nigerian legal provisions. But over time the current legal decision is that the heirs of the bereaved are all his/her children: The Nigerian supreme court ruled in 2014 “that female children have as much right as their brother to partake in the distribution of their father’s estate” (Onyemelukwe: 2015) However, in practical terms this provision is often very strongly challenged and is far from being generally accepted. The operative logic is that women inherit from their husband’s family and not from their father’s family. In her marital family another logic steps in: the bride-price basically make the wife the property of the husband and his family and so “how can property inherit another property.” (Onyemelukwe, 2015). So, what really happens is that all so often a woman is disenfranchised from her natal home and also disenfranchised in her marital home. This happens especially where the husband dies young. In many instances the siblings of the husband take it as their right to share or scramble over the property of the dead man not minding that he has a family that should be cared for. In such situations the practice is often fluid or indeterminate depending on the circumstances around the bereaved family.

Where the woman or wife of the deceased is childless, the extortion is complete. She is usually taken as somebody without any stake at all. It is almost similar where they have children but no male children. In this later case, it is assumed that the young girls will later be married off to other families and therefore should not be considered serious inheritors of their father's property. But even when they have male children who are still very young, there are constantly efforts to scramble over the inheritance by the siblings of the deceased. In fact, it is usually only when the children, male and female are grown up to a certain age that this scramble is less practicable. It means that what is operative in matters of inheritance where a woman or a widow is involved is what the relatives are able to do given the state of the family of the deceased. As long as the relatives are able to usurp the property of the deceased, there is increased possibility that they will do so and disinherit the woman and her young offsprings. A typical case is what Chief Obafemi Awolowo recounted in his autobiography, *Awo*. At the demise of his father, the males of the extended family gathered after the burial, and shared all that his father left behind. He as the first son of his father received only an agbada as his inheritance.

On the question of inheritance, the Igbo tradition is somewhat not really clear. It remains a trauma for many widows when the relations of their late husband insist on having a share of what he left behind. It is not clear that the tradition mandates the siblings of a dead man to have a share of his inheritance even when he has a family and especially when that family is young and in need of assistance. But all too often appeal is made to the Igbo tradition which does not clearly defend such exercise of greed.

Widowhood practices

Inheritance and widowhood are linked since in pristine Igbo tradition “the widow becomes an object of inheritance rather than subject of inheritance” (Onyemelukwe, 2015). Widowhood therefore becomes another area where arbitrary and sometimes very irrational practices and “regulations” that depict the subjugation of Igbo women thrive. But what must be noted for a start is that these practices are divergent and are constantly changing. Few years ago, a widow must mourn her late husband for one full year. Today most towns have cut it down to six months and others even further to three months. Again, it was earlier mandatory to dress in thick black clothing. Today only white is adorned for widowhood. But within the period of mourning the widow is encumbered by so many regulations many of which are really not traceable to anybody or any group of people; and are wholly bereft of any *raison d’être*. Among these are the following:

- A widow will not eat of the food cooked in the house during the burial of her husband.
- She is to be confined to a room or corner of a room during the burial ceremonies and for the first three Igbo traditional weeks after the burial.
- A widow must not greet people by hand shake at least during the period of burial and also during the three weeks that she must stay put at home immediately after the burial.
- She should not directly accept a gift during burial. One who wants to give her any gift directly must drop the gift on the floor to be picked up from there.
- She must shave off her hair completely during the whole period of mourning. She must not plait the hair until the mourning is over.

- She must dress completely in black/white during the period of mourning whenever she wants to leave her house or to appear in public.
- She must not stay out beyond 6.00 pm without returning to her home.
- She must not overnight anywhere else except at her family home or homes.
- A widow should not be seen at joyful events like wedding, and if she attends should not partake of the eating and drinking.
- If she attends the burial of a man she should not eat at the burial. She may do so if the person buried is a woman.
- A widow should not attend group meetings in the church or town.

It is not easy to provide rational and critical justification for these practices. It is also not easy to know how they originate and how they spread or gain strong adherence among women. What is important is that these practices are epiphenomenal of the subjugation of women in the Igbo society. Widowhood in Igboland can be described as a nightmare: “Widowhood is a period of grief and pain, marginalization of the women, accompanied by emotional deprivation, forceful seizure of property and cultural seclusion,” (Mezieobi, 2011, p. 74).

Hardly any of the rules about widowhood applies to widowerhood. In fact the Igbo language has no word for widowerhood. The men who lose their wives usually do a few things for short period of time and go on with their lives. So many of these practices are taken extremely seriously where women are mourning their husbands while there are little or no commensurate regulations for men mourning their wives.

Conclusion

The purpose of this essay is to highlight some aspects of Igbo life and culture the consequence of which is the affirmation of inequality between men and women. It is clear that many of such cultural practices are taken for granted and sometimes the implications hardly come to the fore. It is our view that the more these issues are raised the more the negative impression they leave behind are exposed; then the more likely there will be improvement on the negative side effects of gender inequality. That the issues raised are cultural points to the fact that the problems consequent on them are not mainly moral problems. It is all too often the women themselves who are the enforcers of unequal practices or beliefs. That makes it imperative that taking them for granted is by far not the right way to improve the situation. Igbo women were lauded in the past as powerful socially, politically and economically. But we note that the Igbo society is a patriarchal society and there are till date many aspects of the culture that entrench gender inequality.

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